

What expectations do sixth-form students have of their learning and their teachers and what expectations do teachers have of their students? Stage one of the action research cycle

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Action research is an invaluable resource, which can be utilised by those involved in teaching and learning as a reflective tool enabling a person to make informed decisions about their working practices. Developing and improving teaching skills is an essential part of the teacher's role so this method was used to explore concerns that were evident around two main issues. The first issue centred around how best to explore difficulties that may be experienced by sixth-form students in their learning, especially when making the transition between GCSEs and A-levels, and secondly what teachers and learners expected of each other in their respective roles. Insights gained from these issues could then be used to inform and address intervention strategies to deal with the concerns highlighted. This study is, therefore, a first stage of the action research cycle and it is hoped that the findings and conclusions that emerge from this study will inform future research to address these matters.

Keywords: Action research; school teachers expectations; GCSE/A-level; students expectations; transition; interventions.

AS AN A-level psychology teacher with several years of experience working with sixth-form students, it has been interesting to observe the different strategies students have used to help them to juggle the demands made of them by their teachers and in the same way the methods educators have employed to encourage students to meet these ends. This transitional period for students between GCSE to A-levels is fraught with difficulties and so it was decided to employ action research as a starting point to explore this further. In so doing it was hoped that insight would be obtained about what the students and their teachers felt about the issues that arose during these transitional phases. In addition it is envisaged that this will in turn provide a starting point, which will inform strategies that could be incorporated into future interventions to address the matters raised.

The purpose of this research is two fold: to gain an insight into the difficulties that exist for sixth-form students with regards to their learning, especially when making the transition between GCSEs and A-levels; and to explore the expectations that teachers and learners have of each other and their respective roles. In the last decade these issues have become more important as research indicates that there is a growing need to understand how teachers and students view each other, how their respective epistemologies differ (Kinchin, 2004) and to what extent the educational policies impacts the way teachers work (Braun et al., 2014). Yet research that has been conducted on students aged between 16 to 19 years which takes into account the views held by them as to how they learn is not prolific (Broad, 2006), presumably this results in educational policies failing to incorporate their opinions (Kinchin, 2004). This will be

studied by exploring how sixth-form students cope with the transition from: GCSE to AS, from AS to A2, and how prepared these students feel for university studies. All the AS students in this study are studying psychology as one of their subjects. Some of these students hope to continue studying psychology at university as either their main subject or as a subsidiary subject.

Context for this research

School life for young people consists of a series of tests and assessments. Students are tested in reading writing and maths at the end of years 2 and 6 (SATs). These tests are compulsory under the National Curriculum Assessments (NCA) (Withey & Turner, 2013). The General Certificate of Education (GCSE) exams are taken in years 10 and 11 in schools in England and Wales (Denscombe, 2000). It is arguable the extent to which these public exams can be regarded in the same light by those within the teaching profession. SATs do not test all subjects and so is dismissed by teachers as it does not present a complete picture of a child's abilities in all subjects but instead is regarded as a way in which comparisons between schools can be made (*Educational Guardian*, 2014). SATs is, therefore, of more interest to educational authorities than to the individual pupils themselves.

GCSEs results act as indicators of how students have performed, because it is perceived as a way to monitor the 'learning and educational effectiveness' within that establishment (Paris et al., 1991, p.12; Williams et al., 2004) and presumably it is hoped that students who are successful at this level will continue in their studies and excel at A-level. For the individual student, therefore, these exams are regarded as being more important as it determines whether or not they will be able to proceed to take a more advanced level of study. A schools level of success at GCSE in particular, but also at A-level is also regarded as a reflection on the teachers' ability to teach and engage with learners.

There is no agreed definition as to what an independent learner is, however, the term is used to denote learning by the student which is managed and self directed by the learner who is not only motivated to develop their own learning skills, but who actively seeks out and works with others to achieve these ends. In other words learning is driven by the student and not by the teacher (Broad, 2006; Chan 2001; Miri et al., 2007). Teachers expect students to grow in independence when they enter into the sixth-form and students also realise that they are expected to become more autonomous in their learning (Broad, 2006). However, the educational culture of teaching is performance driven whereby students are taught to pass exams and so are often given the information they need to achieve the desired results (Hernandez-Martinez & Williams, 2013). This does not foster an environment that promotes independent learning and leads to contradictions as to how to achieve a learning environment that produces an independent learner within the constraints of the educational system.

Developing autonomous students necessitates that teachers adapt and incorporate learning strategies that allow students to explore the meanings underlying the issues they are being exposed to (William et al., 2004). Since 2005 schools adopting this philosophy are increasing in number. There are over 55 schools in the UK that are accredited as 'Thinking Schools' from the University of Exeter. 'The Thinking Schools' initiative aims to foster:

'an educational community in which all members share a common commitment to giving regular careful thought to everything that takes place. This will involve both students and staff learning how to think reflectively, critically and creatively, and to employing these skills and techniques in the construction of a meaningful curriculum and associated activities' (Burdon, 2006).

However, the educational system in the UK is 'teacher-centred' and 'exam-orientated' with the aim of teaching being 'to prepare students for the exam'. It is, therefore, understandable that changing an established way of delivery is very difficult to implement (Koh et al., 2012, p.141). Teachers regard their main role as being able to demonstrate their knowledge to students, adopting a new way of doing this could lead to concerns that they would risk not being able to fully cover the content of the syllabus for the exams, but in addition to this, leaving the learner to manage their own learning is uncomfortable for many practitioners (Fahraeus, 2013).

In the UK research suggests that despite their being a constant stream of policy initiatives governing the educational system, and what happens in the classroom, little appears to have changed (Priestly, 2011). Teachers are reluctant to change their teaching strategies to enable the learning environment to be directed by the student (Fahraeus, 2013; Koh et al., 2012). So the question is, what explanation could account for this situation?

One factor that might have a bearing here is that schools have to comply with educational policies and these policies are sometimes contradictory in nature and this is exacerbated by the fact that it is left to the schools and the teachers to determine how to translate, interpret and put in place these guidelines (Braun et al., 2010, p.547). This presumably adds to the many difficulties teachers already face in how to balance the delivery of their work within the constraints of ever changing policy initiatives.

The challenges facing the teacher and the students seems in many respects insurmountable, how do educators teach students to become independent learners with the skills to develop higher order skills in an educational climate that is in constant flux, that seems resistant to change and which is driven by the exam culture (Koh et al., 2012) and what insight can be gained about the expectations that students and teachers have of each other in this unsettled climate?

This action research arose out of some of the concerns raised. It was felt that little was known about how students coped as learners and what difficulties if any, they experienced with their workload and their studies. In addition to this, this study provided an opportunity to demonstrate to other members of the teaching staff the beneficial effects for the whole school of undertaking research of this nature.

Teaching often feels like a balancing act: should the information be given to students, just to ensure that they have a decent set of notes to use for the exams, or should they be taught the skills to enable them to make their own notes? No student is the same and for that matter neither are their teachers. So the question that needed to be addressed was what did students expect their teachers to do for them, what in turn should their teachers' expect of them as A-level students and what can a teacher do within the framework and constraints of the educational institution, to help ease students through these transitional phases. In order to answer these questions gaining insight from students and teachers seemed like a good place to start.

Aim of the research

This first action research cycle aims to explore some of the issues that students and teachers have in relation to the expectations they hold of each other in other words, how the teacher teaches and how learners learn. The expectations of the teachers and learners were explored around issues to do with how well students make the transition from studying GCSEs to A-levels and what factors impact on this. The study was conducted on sixth-form students ($N=27$) in the Surrey area. It is, therefore, not possible to make generalisations from this study, however, the issues raised here will no doubt encourage dialogue with others in similar situations.

The aim of action research is to focus on difficulties of a practical nature that relate to issues or problems from within the work environment of this particular school.

In other words, it has its meaning within the context that it has emerged from (Norton, 2009). The difficulties that arise from this study centres around the expectations that students and teachers have of their respective roles. The implications of the concerns raised were explored to determine what further action could be taken to address these issues.

Methodology

Students studying AS and A2 courses in the sixth-form of the school volunteered to take part in focus groups. Three focus groups (F1 to F3) consisted of students studying AS courses ($N=23$) and one focus group (F4) consisted of A2 students ($N=4$). The page referencing is given below each quote, for example, the reference F3:5 means that the quote came from focus group 3 and is on page 5 of the typed transcript.

The focus groups with the AS students aimed to explore what their experiences were of being students at GCSE level, what they felt their teachers expected of them as learners and how they coped with the transition to their AS courses. The A2 students who took part in the focus group also reflected back on their time at the two transitional stages between GCSE to AS studies and from AS to A2, having just completed their exams.

The questions that were used in the focus groups (as exemplified in the Appendix) were used to explore the main themes to do with student expectations in relation to their learning and their teachers and the skills they felt they needed in order to do well in their studies. The focus groups were very informal and were held in a psychology classroom at the school. Each group lasted between 40 to 50 minutes. The author was present in each of the focus groups and acted as a facilitator, in that the author raised the questions for discussion and encouraged the members of the group to participate. Each group started with the students being invited to introduce themselves and state what A-level subjects they were currently studying. The focus groups were recorded

and later transcribed and the data was coded using thematic analysis (see Appendix 1 for a list of some of the questions).

A-level teachers were interviewed (T1 to T3) using semi-structured interview questions ($N=3$). The interviews took place at the school in various locations. The author conducted the interviews and the format of the interviewing was open to allow the teachers to concentrate on the issues they felt were relevant to the research aims (see Appendix 2 for a list of some of the questions). In addition to this, the teachers were interviewed in between running the different focus groups. This enabled additional questions to be asked which addressed issues that were raised by the students. The interviews were tape-recorded. The recordings were later transcribed and coded around the main themes raised by the questions. All the participants in the focus groups and the interviews were encouraged where necessary to elaborate further on the questions and this sometimes resulted in additional questions to help them to clarify the points they had made.

Results

The results from these findings represent the concerns that were raised around the questions asked of both the students and their teachers and it was, therefore, felt appropriate to present a mixture of students' and teachers' views under each of the main sections.

Studies at GCSE level

Many students prior to commencing their AS courses had secured very good grades at GCSE and so were very confident of their ability to cope with their AS courses. Students generally felt that their GCSEs were relatively easy, demanding little more than to follow the instructions given to them by their teachers.

'...I didn't have to work too hard for them and still got decent grades...' (F1:2)

'...you could do quite well with GCSE without trying very hard...' (F3:3)

Some students did admit to finding the GCSEs stressful because of the number of subjects they were studying, but the overall consensus was that they felt they were very easy, in that good results could be achieved with minimal effort from the students themselves. When questioned as to why they felt they were so easy again there was agreement that as long as they did the homework set and attended lessons, they were given all they needed to pass the exams.

‘Well it wasn’t as bad as this year (doing A-levels) because the teachers helped you. It was more spoon-fed than this year’ (F2:2)

‘...in GCSEs it’s definitely just regurgitating information that they tell you and then those exact answers will get you the marks...’ (F2:26)

The students’ perceptions were that teachers were not allowed to let them fail their GCSEs and so would do all they needed to do to ensure this did not happen.

‘...I think you could fall behind in A-level easier, cause I know people that have fallen behind cause they haven’t been pushed by the teachers. In GCSEs they wouldn’t let that happen. They would get your parents involved more and push you.’ (F1:4)

‘I think it’s cause you actually need GCSEs to get, like, to move on in life whereas A-levels aren’t as necessary’. (F1:3)

The students felt that it was imperative that they received good GCSEs and felt that teachers offered the support, by way of ‘spoon-feeding’ them to ensure they were well prepared for the exam. The issue of whether students should be allowed to fail throws up an interesting question, namely is it always a bad thing?

‘And if, if you do fail, it teaches you that you need to motivate yourself... it would teach you more to fail than being pushed through by your teachers.’ (F1:4)

This posed problems for the teachers too as highlighted here,

‘...At the end of the day that’s the only way that the students are judged on the

exam, as are we of course as teachers’ (T1:4)

‘...you know we take an E as a failure. We take a U, as we haven’t done our job properly and actually sometimes students need to fail’ (T1:8)

Both teachers and the students agreed that sometimes students needed to fail in order for students to develop as learners. The students were able to appreciate that at university they would not have teachers ‘pushing them’ though their work and it was, therefore, better to fail at school and learn this lesson here than at university. However for teachers the repercussions of student failure often involves teachers themselves feeling as if they had failed, not only themselves but also the school. The latter feeling may be borne out of legitimate concerns about the way they would now be perceived by their colleagues.

Transition from GCSE to AS level

The ease with which many students perceived their GCSE studies as evidenced by their results left many feeling over confident about doing A-levels and that they would have no difficulties coping with the demands of the course.

‘And you sort of think, ‘Oh I’m good at GCSE, I’ll be fine at A-level...’ but you don’t, I mean it doesn’t work like that.’ (F3:6)

‘The jump between GCSE and A-level is massive.’ (F2:7)

The teachers also were in agreement that there was a marked difference between GCSEs and A-levels.

‘...The leap between GCSE to A-level... is so much harder, because you need those thinking skills. And that’s why the student who gets the A* at GCSE is not necessarily going to perform as well at A-level, because they might be very good learning their stuff but they’re not very good at making judgements about it. And I think that is why some students have unfair expectations of them when they get to A-level because they’re very good at the

demands of GCSE. And rightly have their good grades at GCSE level, but A-level is a higher order thinking skill...' (T3:3)

'so for me expectation wise... my expectations are slightly higher than their capabilities certainly at the beginning of AS.' (T1:2)

'I don't massively expect them to be independent. I don't feel at that age that's fair on them necessarily because they might not have the ability to cope with that and I feel that perhaps I would by being more teacher led, it would help them more...' (T2:2)

All the students agreed that the GCSE did not prepare them for the rigours of the A-level course and despite sampling A-level courses by attending taster sessions (which gives an overview of the subject for new students) they felt ill prepared for advanced level study. The taster sessions they felt failed to reflect the difficulty and the amount of the work they were expected to do.

'...it was more... trying to get you to do their subject... so they'd show you the fun side and the easier side, ...whereas they didn't really mention all the theory that goes behind it. So they'd say it's a lot of work, it's very difficult A-level, but they never showed you...' (F3:5)

'Don't try and sell the subjects... be realistic about it cause this is the future. It's more than just their statistics of how many students they get.' (F1:8)

One teacher, who realised the dilemma such sessions presented; wanted the sessions to be fun to attract students but also tried to ensure that the students were aware of the amount of work that was involved.

'...It's a slightly difficult balance, ...you don't necessarily want to scare them off... their fun taster lessons... (my sessions) have got some relatively, not dry theory but some relatively challenging theory in there just to ensure that people do have an understanding that this will be the case.' (T2:4)

Both teachers and students agreed that the transition from GCSE to AS was difficult

hurdle to overcome. Students felt over confident in their abilities to undertake advanced study, but also felt that they were ill informed about the requirements and content of the subjects chosen. However, the teachers had little confidence in the students' abilities at this stage to cope with the demands that would be made of them and realised the difficulties that the taster sessions presented for them.

Support with study skills

The question of the support received by students was a recurring theme throughout the discussions. The students thought they received a lot of support at GCSE level but very little at A-level. But what did they mean by support? Support amounted to methods to help them to learn as they felt that they did not know how to revise or how to study. Students felt they were better prepared or groomed for the GCSE exams and that their lack of study skills seemed to have no bearing on how well they did in the examinations. At A-level, however, the impact of not having these skills was evident.

'...I had to basically learn how to revise in A-level... cause I'd never needed it before.' (F2:5)

'The problem is in A-level, they don't teach you any methods of revision, and they just expect you to find your way to revise.' (F2:6)

Teachers' expectations of what students at AS level were capable of were quite low. They did not expect them to be able to cope with AS study at the beginning of the course and so prepared their lessons to deal with this reality. However, the perceptions students had of their teachers was that they expected them to know how to study and so the demands made of them felt unreasonable. The disparity of views here is exemplified by the expectations held by teachers' of their students study skills.

'At AS level I am expecting them to record some of the things that are said verbally in class. I am expecting them to record things that are written on the board with headings and in a fashion that they can

then go back to without me saying ‘Now, put this heading, put this date.’ I would expect them to understand that it is not enough at A-level to say ‘I’ll copy up’ because much of what we do at A-level, it’s not the notes, it’s the talking about the notes and understanding the significance of what is learnt.’ (T3:2)

The support that these students needed to cope with the demands of the A-level course were the study skills that teachers assumed they were already equipped with, but which students felt they had not needed nor had acquired during their GCSE course. This was certainly the expectation that this teacher had of new students.

‘...so really what I’m expecting them to be able to do is... those study skills.’ (T3:5)

Those students, however, who studied an optional AS entitled Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) appeared to be at an advantage with regards to developing those higher order cognitive skills. When teachers were asked what they could do to develop these skills in students? They agreed that this course was really beneficial in helping students to achieve these skills, and similarly students also realised the benefit of taking this course, even though not all universities gave students credit (in terms of points or lower offers) for embarking on this course of action.

‘The EPQ... prepares them brilliantly because they have to set their own targets, they have to get themselves organised, they have to do research... that’s good because at university they will need all those analytical skills...’ (T3:7)

EPQ was highly rated by all the teachers and the students who took this course. However, the course is an optional subject and despite the fact that these higher order cognitive skills are required at university level study, many institutions do not award extra UCAS points or offer lower grades to those students who have demonstrated skills in this area. Thus for many students the extra work required to succeed in obtaining an EPQ award is not worth the effort.

Independent learning

Independent learning demands that the student knows how to manage their time and organise their work, learning different strategies to learn and revise (Broad, 2006).

‘Right, at GCSE they’re still very much your teacher: you’re just there to learn; whereas at A-level you’re there to discuss and make relationships with them.’ (F1:5)

Those who were not ready or didn’t want to be treated as independent learners, talked in terms of needing a transitional period to help them to develop the skills needed to enable them to cope with the A-level more easily.

‘And even though I know you’re supposed to be independent in A-level, that doesn’t mean you should be given no support whatsoever... they would always have after school sessions even when it was nowhere near the exams at GCSEs (however, at A-level... they weren’t allowed to).’ (F2:3)

Independence for students not only meant taking ownership of their work, because they had chosen to do the A-level subjects they were taking, but also being treated like adults in other ways.

‘...I don’t always feel the teachers treat you like adults... I still hate how you have to turn up for form (tutor sessions)... which is the most pointless thing ever...’ (F2:8)

‘I think, um, the teachers need to treat me with respect, as well, because if they treat you like you’re kids then you’ll probably act like kids and not be so mature.’ (F1:5)

The registration period for the teachers, however, was a time that the teachers could find out how the students were coping with their studies and to provide the teacher with information about the student to enable them to write their UCAS references. For the students, however, such sessions felt like a waste of time and served no useful purpose.

‘...Generally I don’t think they understand the purpose of it a lot of the time... So whether they’ve got the maturity at that stage to see (this)?’ (T1:13)

Students felt that registration was for the younger students in lower school and so by expecting them to attend, these sessions felt to them as if they were still being treated as children. These feelings were exacerbated by the fact that sixth-formers in a nearby college do not expect their students to attend registration sessions.

Teacher and student relationships

The expectations that teachers and students had of their roles as teacher and learner were compared. Students expected their teachers to teach them, show them respect and to care about their progress. Teachers on the other hand expected their students to be motivated to learn and to be committed to the subjects they had chosen to study.

‘To teach... and that they should give you help... if you come in and say I don’t understand this... they shouldn’t sort of just say well look at this text book... (they should) sit down with you, help you work your way through it.’ (F2:19–20)

‘I think it’s fair for the student to expect the teacher to be a professional and actually have knowledge of the subject... to have actual interest in the students’ progress instead of just being there because they’re getting paid for it... and I think teachers can expect students to actually be motivated to do the subject because in the end it’s their future and take ownership of it because I think, I think they’re just there to help you, but it’s your decision at the end of the day.’ (F1:12)

Surprisingly students had zero tolerance for disruption caused by others in the classroom as they felt the teacher’s attentions would be distracted from teaching them and diverted to having to managing the situation. The teachers, however, appeared to be more relaxed about the behaviour of students’ in the classroom.

‘...the teachers should not take any distractions or trouble from the students at all; just send them out... they don’t have to be here. They can be at other

places. They can be doing an apprenticeship or whatever, so send them out...’ (F1:12)

‘I’d be in a class where people didn’t want to be there... and it would be a really horrible learning atmosphere. And I’d want to learn and I didn’t achieve my best because people wouldn’t let me.’ (F4:1)

Teachers realised the difficulties caused by students whose behaviour was deemed disruptive and dealt with such incidents in different ways.

‘...what I use at all levels is humour, I’ll take the mickey out of them in a nice way... I’m just consistent about the rules but the rules also apply to me... I think although you might need to shout at some point, be it GCSE... not really A-level, but I don’t really think it often achieves a lot. I would personally normally try one on one intervention. I’m more of a let’s have a conversation with them.’ (T2:9–10)

‘...I put up with cheekiness, I quite like cheekiness, I like repartee, I like them to question what I’ve said, I like them to spot where I’ve gone wrong or typos in my work. Because they’re at least engaged and looking. What I do not tolerate is them not doing the work, if they don’t do it then I’ll treat them like a Year 11, they’re in detention, they come back at lunchtime, you know whatever.’ (T3:10)

There appeared to be a difference of opinion over how to deal with disruption in the classroom. Students felt strongly that such behaviour should not be tolerated, whereas teachers appeared to adopt a more relaxed approach; Teachers perceived such behaviour as acceptable within a defined framework, whereas for students it was unacceptable behaviour, which they felt, should not be tolerated.

Transition from AS to A2

For the A2 students they were able to reflect on the different phases of transition from GCSE up to A2 level and what their hopes were for the immediate future. They like the AS students remembered the atmosphere in

their GSCE classes as not always being conducive to learning because some students were not committed to being there. However, at AS and A2 they felt that they had matured a lot and similarly like the AS students they felt that the transition from AS to A2 was massive.

'I found there was a huge difference in terms of difficulty. It was exactly like GCSE to AS, it was a big jump...' (F4:3)

'...there was a definite change in the writing style between the two years and I did struggle with that...' (F4:4)

Teachers at this stage also expected much more from students and expected their students to seek them out when they needed help and to engage in more self-directed study.

'...just that almost extra level of connection... because they're only focussing on three (subjects), they're kind of living and breathing the subject... I find that they are very exam focussed by A2, therefore, if you can convey what they're doing is beneficial to them... that I would be expecting them all to be researching independently. I would be expecting them all to be independently seeking me out for areas and asking questions as opposed to just coming to lessons and doing their homework... I would be expecting all the bells and whistles by that stage.' (T3:5-6)

'I think commitment is the most important thing they have to be committed to the subjects and you have to be able to get the best out of them... you also need students to want it and I think that's one of the problems not just with A-level students but I think many students they don't seem to have the hunger'. (T1:6)

However, for the A2 students other factors impacted their learning experiences as they felt that some of their expectations of the teachers were not always met.

'...We had quite a lot of disruption with the teachers at our school... like we had to complain once because like we never

had a lesson... None of our teachers were there when we needed them... so whenever we were looking for them they weren't there... and as a teacher I think rather than just use power point I think they had to like explain stuff to us when we asked for help, maybe give us questions at the end of each lessons to kind of consolidate what we learned... And I suppose that's what A-levels are supposed to do, but surely you should have the basics of what teachers are supposed to teach...' (F4:4)

A2 students were much clearer in what was expected of them as learners and teachers relied on students to demonstrate and to commit to their subjects. Unfortunately students who felt that some teachers were not meeting their expectations also felt less supported by them. However, with the exams to focus their minds students had to come up with strategies to enable them to cope. They developed self-directed learning activities to help them to deal with these difficulties. They were however, also able to appreciate the teaching that did help them to develop their levels of independence.

'...at AS I think they try to gradually teach you how to become independent like the styles of homework you get set... and I'd say by the end of A-level I feel I am independent... If I was unsure of something I'd ask rather than the teacher saying do you understand that?' (F4:4)

A2 students were asked what advice they would give to new AS students about the work; what advice they wish they had received.

'And I think maybe had I... at AS I didn't go beyond what I was expected to do. I did what I was expected and I did it to a good standard but I didn't go beyond. But that wasn't enough, and now I realise that wasn't enough and so I had to re-take.' (F4:8)

'I think sort of set up the focus you need to start from day one, you need to be working hard, you need to actually make a commitment if you want to get the

grades that you would like to achieve. Working hard is the best way to start that and if you work hard hopefully rewards should come from it, sort of emphasising that at the start, at the beginning is most important.’ (F4:8)

These students thought it was necessary to be direct with new students about the demands of an A-level course right from the beginning and in addition to introduce students to the prospect of university so that they would know exactly what they would need to achieve. They were even able to identify times in their timetable when these issues or concerns could be addressed.

‘I think maybe they don’t utilise the citizenship lessons. And maybe if they got you to think about uni like straight away, because I kind of didn’t really, I just cruised along...’ (F4:11)

Students expected their teachers to support them and offer them support in their learning, however, students realised that developing this independence was a very important skill for them to have.

‘Someone who’s sort of willing to do their own work, research, take their own ideas and sort of build their own ideas and thoughts about the subject as a whole. And someone who’s sort of willing to ask the teacher for advice, ask for help and support, taking responsibility for their learning... I think it’s a passion and wanting to find out more about the subject’ (F4:13)

Being independent was valued as a study skill which would help them to gain a wider understanding of their subject, however, doubt was cast on the extent it would help them to pass their exams.

‘But I also think there should be a limit to like how independent you are... I don’t think that would help achieve the grades much.’ (F:14)

Transition after A-levels

Students felt that they needed more direction about their options after their A-levels. Although they received careers advice as AS

students they felt that the lack of advice in this area had left them uncertain as to what options were available to them after their results are known. This being the case whether they failed to achieve their desired grades or whether they performed better than expected.

‘...the thing is at Year 13 they (career advice) just stops and then you can make an appointment if you want to but actually you’re so busy trying to keep up with your work you don’t necessarily have time to. And everyone assumes that after March when you’ve had all your offers... that no one needs any more guidance. But actually you don’t know that you’ve got those, you haven’t got it in the bag and you do need to be told how you can sort it out. Cause it’s all very well for teachers to say oh, you know, on results day we can talk to you. It’s kind of a bit late then.’ (F:15)

‘They don’t say anything about clearing. If I need to do clearing I’ve no idea how, what to do.’ (F:15)

‘Same the other way, they don’t tell you about adjustment either... if you do better’ (F:15)

For the majority of students the relationship that they had with their teachers seemed paramount and underpinned all their interactions, for example, whether they felt able to approach teachers for help or how they would react to teachers pointing out that they were not coping with their studies.

‘I think it’s the relationship with people, sort of peers, sort of with teachers have changed a lot.’ (F4:16)

‘Yeah, I think teachers are more like friends now. They’re not, you don’t see them as teachers; you just talk to them.’ (F4:16)

‘...they just chat with you. They have conversations with you like they would another adult or teacher... which is important cause you create a kind of connection with them’ (F1:5)

Although teachers welcomed and enjoyed the relaxed informal relationship with

students, they felt that the teacher student relationship had to remain professional.

‘...to treat them as your friend because I don’t think that works either... but also to make them feel that they are different from the other school, that there is a difference in your attitude towards them...’ (T1:5)

So here it appeared that both staff and students enjoyed a more relaxed relationship with each other, which for the students was underpinned by feelings that the teachers cared about them and how they were coping with their studies.

Finally, the A2 students and teachers were asked if the school adequately prepared them for university and unfortunately the response was a resounding no. This was felt to be a key weakness with the school and which if rectified it was felt could actually set the school apart from other schools in similar circumstances.

Conclusion

This study formed the basis of the first part of the action research cycle, which aimed to explore the difficulties that sixth-form students experienced when making the transition from GCSE to A-levels. These difficulties arose out of the expectations teachers and students had in relation to each other and the roles they were expected to perform. The insights gained from these findings have highlighted some interesting issues and as a result of this there are a number of possible interventions that could be pursued.

One issue that arose centred around whether students should be allowed to fail their exams? Students studying their GCSE exams felt that the teachers would do all in their power to ensure that this did not occur, because of the impact that this would have on their future life choices. The teachers were also determined and worked hard to ensure that students did well, as GCSE results not only reflected on their teaching abilities but also act as indicators for the school. However, both teachers and students agreed that valuable lessons could be learnt

by failing; the benefits of hard work often results in success of exams and lack of application has the opposite effect. Teachers however, work within the constraints of their immediate managers and these managers’ in turn have to comply with the educational policies governing their establishment. In this exam-driven climate and a schools performance being driven by league tables, failure is construed as a negative construct that is in need of investigation not valued as a learning experience.

The students’ experiences of learning at GCSE level gave rise to other concerns that were highlighted. Their overconfidence in their own abilities to study at A-level was undermined by their lack of study skills, which they felt were not developed at GCSE as they were not needed to succeed in the exams. They also expected more directed learning from their teachers even though they wanted to be treated like young adults. Initially students at the beginning of their AS studies appeared to leave them unsettled and unsure as to what was expected of them. Students also felt that the taster sessions, which helped them to decide which course to choose, failed to fully inform them of the amount of work that was expected of them. In other words they did not feel prepared for advanced level study.

The students’ views were in stark contrast to the teachers’ expectations of them. Teachers appreciated the dilemma they faced in how to present their subject in order to attract new students in a creative way, whilst making it clear to students what would be expected of them. However, teachers did not expect students to have advanced study skills at this stage. The teachers accepted that many students only had rudimentary study techniques and so adapted their lessons in the first term to deal with this, so their expectations of them at the start of the course was very low, so it is interesting that they were perceived by students in the way described.

An area of intervention that could be investigated further is the extent to which

introducing the EPQ course for all students embarking on advanced level study could help alleviate the anxiety felt by students during this transitional phase. Ways in which this course could be incorporated into the timetable was even suggested by the students themselves. The students felt that the citizenship lessons were not utilised well and so this would provide time in their timetables to develop EPQ skills, but also it would offer a time in their timetable for other issues to be addressed; incorporate activities to help smooth the transition from GCSE to A-level study; to inform students of the amount of work they are expected to do, providing more in information on subjects introduced in taster sessions, provide learners with information about university and therefore, better prepare them for the transition to higher education. This would be an additional idea that could be explored further.

All teachers in the study and those students who were taking the EPQ course felt that it allowed them to engage in independent learning whilst studying a subject of their choice. The course provided them with the study skills they needed to manage and direct their own learning. However, some students will be reluctant to undertake an additional course, which is not recognised by all universities. The willingness of students to embark on another course that is not recognised by all universities would be another area that would warrant possible intervention.

A weakness identified by students and teachers was that the school failed to prepare all students for university. Students hoping to gain places at Oxford and Cambridge did receive extra input, but for the rest this was not the case. A possible area of intervention could explore how all students could be supported in this way.

Implications for further research

This research is the first phase of the action research cycle and the agenda in conducting this study was to look at some of the main issues those students and teachers had in relation to their respective roles and towards

each other. By exploring issues that are evident for students and learners in this school, the first step in Norton's (2009) approach has been completed. Thinking of ways to tackle the problems raised will form the second step in the cycle. Although many other issues could have been included here at this initial phase, it was felt necessary to highlight those issues that recurred throughout the different focus groups and with the teachers in the interviews.

The key limitation of this study was that as a teacher at the school I conducted the research and knew all the psychology students who volunteered to take part in the study. The usual ethical procedures were followed to ensure that only those who were fully informed about the research and signed the consent form took part. However, despite these precautions it is hard to know the extent to which this affected the flow of information. On reflection it would appear that the students were very open about their views and did not appear to withhold information, on the contrary, they were very keen that someone was willing to listen to their views and on reflection maybe this is another issue that needs to be dealt with on another occasion.

Another limitation is the timing of this research. It was difficult to determine the best time to recruit A2 students for this research; students were exam focused and so unwilling to spend time taking part in the research, however, directly after their exams were finished, it was hard to make contact with them, thus only four students volunteered. Despite this small number the insights gained corroborated the views of the AS students.

Supporting students to achieve their best is one of the key roles of the teacher in the classroom, the success or otherwise of professions in bringing about these ends is impacted by the constraints of the institutional framework within which they work and the demands placed on them by the education system and in particular the examination system which categorises how well

they are performing their role. Despite these difficulties, this research does raise ideas for future interventions that would enable students to better cope with the demands placed upon them and this also provides teachers with an insight of the issues that their students are concerned about. Some interventions that this study suggests are matters for the senior management in the school to consider: how to increase the use of and incorporate EPQ within the curriculum; how to make better use of timetabling to incorporate study skills sessions; how to change taster sessions to better reflect the reality of studying a particular subject. An added value, however, of this kind of research is that it highlights issues and concerns that both students and teachers have, which has provided insight into areas where intervention could enhance the quality of learning for students and which could easily be incorporated within the teaching sessions.

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- The next stage in the action research process is to decide how best to implement measures to deal with the above issues and then to evaluate it by conducting research in order to determine if the measures incorporated have been successful. Action research by its very nature will generate more research and, therefore, inform the way that those who are involved with teaching and learning constantly improve their work in the future.

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Appendix 1: Focus group questions.

- What was it like being a student at GCSE? How did you find the work?
- What did your teachers expect of you as students at GCSE and what did you expect of your teachers? Could you give me some examples?
- What is it like being an AS student and how is this different to being a GCSE student?
- Did your GCSEs prepare you for A-levels?
- How did the work at GCSE compare to the work you did at AS level?
- What were the main difficulties between GCSE and A-levels?
- What did teachers do to help with the transition from GCSE to AS?
- What do you think your teachers expect of you as GCSE students and how is this different when you're an AS student?
- What techniques did you use to help you bridge the gap from GCSEs to A-levels?
- What does being an independent learner mean to you?
- What do your teachers expect of you at A-level and is there something you would expect them to do for you that they did not do?
- What difficulties did you experience coping with the work at A-level?
- Do you expect to be treated differently as A-level students?
- How could teachers support you as an A-level student?
- What advice would you give to new A-level students based on your own experiences?

Additional questions for A2 students

- What was it like making the transition from AS to A-level studies? What difficulties did you encounter?
- What has it been like being an A2 student?
- What do you understand by the term independent learner?
- Do you think you are an independent learner?
- If you were a teacher what would you advice your new AS students?
- Do you feel ready for university?

Appendix 2: Interview questions.

- What is the difference between GCSEs and A-levels?
- What do you expect of your students at GCSE and at A-level?
- What do you think your students expect of you at GCSE and A-level?
- Do you think the GCSEs prepares the students for A-levels?
- How do students cope with this transition to AS level work?
- In what ways do you support students to enable them to cope? Could you give me some examples?
- Are your expectations of them different at A2 compared to AS?
- Do you think students are prepared for the transition to university? And if not, what more could be done?
- If you had to highlight the biggest weakness in students today what would you say that was?
- What do you think about the leap between GCSE and AS level work? Do 'taster sessions' accurately reflect the A-level course content and difficulty?
- What kind of skills do you think we can develop in A2 students that they can utilise at university level and how do we do it?
- How do you deal with disciplinary matters with A-level students and how is this different from when they were GCSE students?
- What do you think is an independent learner and how do you think the AS to A2 student becomes an independent learner?
- Is there anything else that you would like to add to add to what you have said or something that I have not asked you that you think is pertinent to what we have been discussing?