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Using digital qualitative diaries to understand how socioeconomic disadvantage shaped young people's academic experiences and mental health during the COVID-19 pandemic

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Abstract

School closures during the COVID-19 pandemic amplified inequalities in academic attainment and contributed to a heightened risk of mental health problems in young people in challenging circumstances. We used a qualitative digital diary design and post-diary interviews to explore how socioeconomic disadvantage shaped the experiences of thirty-eight adolescents during this tumultuous period in their education. This innovative method provided rich insight into participants' thoughts and feelings as they occurred, in their own words, allowing an unfolding narrative to develop over time. Drawing on an educational stressors hypothesis we see how the social change caused by the pandemic impacted young people's ability to perform at school and exacerbated the importance attached to academic success, therein, creating intolerable pressures. We present three key themes that demonstrate how socioeconomic disadvantage contributed to the cumulative impact of educational stressors on mental health, via a process of meaning negotiation: 'All that matters is work' reveals how the COVID crises heightened awareness of social inequality and instability, reinforcing the perceived role of education for determining future success; 'Mounting disadvantage' demonstrates how stressors at home accumulated and undermined young peoples' confidence and ability to perform at school; 'Keeping your head above water' captures experiences of acute distress arising from the pursuit and prioritisation of academic success in the context of perceived social and educational inequalities. We propose examining targeted support strategies that could help adolescents with competing responsibilities to achieve at school, and in parallel, promoting inclusive education systems that alleviate the stakes attached to academic success.

Word count of abstract: 250 words

Key words: Qualitative digital diary methods; socioeconomic disadvantage; young people; mental health; educational stress

Introduction

Educational Inequalities and Stressors and Adolescent Mental Health and Wellbeing

The COVID-19 pandemic brought widespread social and educational disruption to the lives of young people and families across the world. Research suggests that the huge disruption to the education experience of this cohort of school pupils has impacted academic attainment and resulted in the widening of educational inequalities (Betthäuser et al., 2023; Marmot et al., 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic also occurred against a backdrop of already rising levels of mental distress among children and young people, associated with societal changes such as the dominance of social media, rising levels of inequality and poverty, and increased pressure to succeed academically (Högberg, 2021). A systematic review of the mental health impacts of the pandemic on adolescents and children found evidence of even more depressive and anxious symptoms compared with pre-pandemic rates. Another key finding was that older adolescents (15+) appeared at greatest risk of experiencing negative mental health outcomes, with studies reporting a fear of not being able to cope with academic workload and a concern that COVID-19 would have a negative impact on schooling and their future plans (Samji et al., 2022). While the longer-term impacts of COVID-19 are still emerging, education professionals and academics around the world have warned of widening inequalities contributing to a 'lost generation' (Cowie & Myers, 2021), with intersecting factors like socioeconomic status and ethnicity exacerbating the mental health and wellbeing impacts felt by adolescents from vulnerable backgrounds (Lemkow-Tovías et al., 2023).

The focus of our research is on the UK where school lockdowns were extensive. Children and young people were expected to be schooled online at home, with learning provided at pace by schools that were ill equipped to teach in distance learning modes. For the majority of UK students, home-based learning took place in March-September 2020 and in January-March 2021, interspersed with access to school but with new regulations for mask wearing and social distancing that interfered with the usual social integration and interactions of the school day. Students from socioeconomically

disadvantaged backgrounds appear to have received fewer hours of online classes and private tutoring than their less disadvantaged peers during both periods of school closures and been disproportionately affected by intermittent school closures and the self-isolation of teachers and other pupils when schools reopened, due to the higher rates of COVID-19 in poorer communities (Blundell et al., 2022). The 2023 round of examination results and university enrolment figures in the UK confirm a growing disparity between the most and least well-off young people, and between private and state schools (Sutton Trust, 2023), impacting a cohort of students whose schooling was heavily defined by the COVID era. Longitudinal evidence of adolescent mental health trajectories over the pandemic indicates that young people from low-income families were at greatest risk of experiencing persistent or increasing mental health difficulties (Guzman Holst et al., 2023). Our own qualitative study conducted with a sample from the REACH project ('Resilience, Ethnicity, and Adolescent Mental Health'), a population-based cohort study investigating mental health problems among adolescents in inner city London (Knowles et al., 2022), confirmed that schoolwork and lost learning were prominent sources of distress for young people from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds who often felt that they had been left on their own to teach themselves. Participants struggled with a lack of access to technology and to a quiet work environment, but also with COVID-19 challenges that extended beyond schoolwork, such as parents' insecure employment, food insecurity, and worries about the health impacts of COVID-19, particularly on vulnerable family members (Esponda et al., Submitted).

There have been international calls to improve our response to adolescent stress and for targeted interventions for young people identified as vulnerable to address negative mental health trajectories resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic (Yeager et al., 2021). To do this, we first need to explore how socioeconomic disadvantage contributed to the experience of education and mental health problems in young people during the pandemic, a time when the pressures on many of them were exacerbated.

Disadvantage, Educational Stressors, and the Social Origins of Meaning Making

The educational stressors hypothesis highlights the potential negative impact of increasing academic pressures on mental health, specifically attributing a rise in mental health problems in adolescents to the increasing significance that educational performance holds in their lives (West & Sweeting, 2003). On this hypothesis, school stressors occur through the interconnected hierarchies of educational performance and social prospects (Elstad, 2010): students are sorted and ranked based on their academic performance; and, their educational achievements determine their future opportunities in higher education and / or the labour market. The increasing prevalence of these school stressors contributes to the increasing mental health problems seen in adolescents (Högberg, 2021).

The educational stressors hypothesis can be contextualised as highlighting a particular aspect of the broader stress process model, which has long been used by sociologists and psychologists to explore the role of acute and chronic stressors in contributing to psychological distress (Pearlin, 1999). Viewed within this framework, childhood stressors such as negative peer relationships, household poverty and exam pressures represent risk factors for mental distress, while personal resilience and positive social environments and supportive relationships act as buffering resources. Research in this field has tended to focus on individual level determinants of adolescent mental health problems rather than societal influences (Högberg, 2021). Where sociocultural differences in distress have been identified they have been traditionally attributed to group differences in objective stressors and resources. For example, when applied to childhood experiences, low income has been conceived as a primary stressor that can proliferate stressors in multiple areas of life (Pearlin et al., 2005), including undermining learning and academic achievement and increasing the risk of poor mental health (Nurius et al., 2020).

More recently, however, attention has turned to the process of meaning making within this model, building on principles of symbolic interactionism to situate meaning as a social product that is constructed in interaction with others and the broader structural and cultural context (McLeod, 2012). Here, social context does not just influence an individual's material life circumstances and the resources that they have access to, but also the significance that stressful events hold for people. McLeod argues in the Expanded Model of the Stress Process (2012) that meaning negotiation, where objective circumstances and interpretations meet, is an important path through which social conditions affect distress. The educational stressors hypothesis to some extent reflects this line of reasoning, emphasising how societal shifts and economic factors contribute to heightened stress related to school, further amplifying mental health vulnerabilities among socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents. As countries transition towards knowledge-intensive economies, education plays an increasingly crucial role in determining life trajectories, particularly for young workers (West & Sweeting, 2003). Growing demand for higher education, especially via prestigious programs and institutions, additionally intensifies academic competition (Högberg, 2021). Added to this is a socially pervasive belief in a meritocratic society that positions higher education as the answer to individual upward mobility (Sandel, 2021). Heightened competition within education and longer-term dependence on education for socioeconomic mobility leads to increased school stress and susceptibility to mental health problems (Högberg, 2021). Consequently, the pressure to excel academically could become a chronic stressor for socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents, exacerbating mental health issues. But more than this, the significance of academic performance for socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents could be heightened, reflecting the perceived role of education in their social mobility. Within this social context, the interplay between objective stressors and subjective interpretations of these stressors, could contribute to the increased mental health vulnerabilities they experience. In this sense, the meaning making process serves as a crucial link between the educational stressors hypothesis and the mental health outcomes observed among socioeconomically disadvantaged adolescents.

The present study

This study sought to answer the research question: how did socioeconomic disadvantage shape young people's academic experiences and mental health in the UK during the COVID-19 pandemic? We employed digital qualitative diary methods (QDMs) to gather rich, context-based opinions and experiences directly from adolescents over the course of a tumultuous period of school openings and closures. In centring the voices of adolescents from disadvantaged backgrounds we acknowledge the equity gap in previous research, which has neglected perspectives from marginalised and minoritised groups, and relied predominantly on the use of quantitative online surveys (Dewa et al., 2024; Jørgensen et al., 2022). In doing so, we address the need for more inclusive and nuanced research approaches when examining the experiences of disadvantaged young people during the pandemic.

Method

We present this study as an exemplar of a digital qualitative diary method (QDM) study, building on our own scoping review and guidelines for conducting and reporting QDMs in mental health research (McCombie, Esponda, Schmidt, et al., 2024). A summative table is presented in the Appendix summarising the design decisions and reporting items for this study following these guidelines. In line with those guidelines, we define qualitative diaries in this study as “any diary kept by participants detailing their experiences, thoughts, or feelings, beyond completing surveys with short-form answers or questionnaire scales” (McCombie, Esponda, Schmidt, et al., 2024).

Suitability of Qualitative Diary Methods

The *Research Aim*, *Suitability for Participants*, and *Ethical Considerations* were key considerations in determining the suitability of QDMs for this research.

QDMs offered a means to track in-depth experiences over time, enabling us to explore how adolescents interacted with the mounting stressors that they encountered, in the context in which they occurred, consistent with our contextualist epistemology that recognises that knowledge is created and should be understood in the circumstances of people’s lives (Braun & Clarke, 2013).

QDMs were chosen to support inclusivity and agency, putting young people in control of how they shared their personal experiences. Young people have described feeling comfortable using digital technologies to communicate in this way (Flanagan et al., 2015), with digital QDMs providing an alternative to the formality of traditional data collection methods, which may have felt too restrictive, intimidating, or burdensome for our vulnerable participants during this stressful period.

Ethical considerations were paramount when designing this study. Informed consent was sought from all participants, including parental consent where applicable (i.e., for any participants under 16). Participants (and their parents/carers) were reminded that the consent process was an ongoing discussion throughout the research study, recognising that feelings regarding involvement could change, and that they were free to withdraw from the study at any time. Participants were advised of the need for privacy to make recordings without risk of being interrupted or overheard. Researchers have cited the potential benefits of diaries for children and adolescence through providing a space to think (Karisalmi et al., 2018). However, it was possible that in some individuals the process of recording diaries could evoke negative emotions and thoughts. To mitigate this risk, we emphasised that all questions were optional, provided details of an experienced member of the research team that the adolescents and/or their carers could contact directly if they wished, and provided information on national and local sources of help, support, and guidance. It was also possible that young people might use the diaries as an opportunity to seek help in relation to events occurring within their homes or inadvertently describe circumstances which would give cause for concern about their immediate risk of harm. Therefore, once submitted, all diary entries were sent directly to the research team via the mobile app and reviewed for risk/safeguarding issues within one week. This process was clearly described on the information sheet and reiterated at the baseline interview. Participants were assured that all information would be treated confidentially, but that the school's safeguarding lead may be informed if any diary entry raised concern for the participants' welfare, and a trained researcher would call them to discuss options for getting the help they might need. Participants received a £40 voucher for taking part. The study was given ethical approval from the Psychiatry, Nursing and Midwifery Research Ethics Subcommittee (RESC) (reference: HR15/162320).

Diary Design

When designing this study, careful consideration was given to the *Diary Format, Administration, Interval and Time Period, Sample Size & Composition, Diary Structure and Guidance*, and interaction with *Additional Data Collection Methods*.

The diary format aimed to support preferences for self-expression and utilise the respective advantages of different modalities, with participants given the option to submit a written, audio, or video diary. For some, audio diaries offered an immediate outlet and means of capturing thoughts as they occurred, while written diaries provided young people with space to think through their diary entries, and to record them privately without fear of being overheard. A mobile platform was chosen to support diary administration. Digital data collection provided participants with a convenient method of recording experiences and allowed researchers to communicate prompts, schedule regular reminders, and access data with ease. At the end of the initial interview, participants downloaded the experience sampling app Metricwire to either their own smartphone or one provided by the research team for the duration of the study. Decisions about the diary interval and time-period were made in collaboration with our Young People's Advisory Group (YPAG), comprising six young people from ethnic minority groups. The study was designed to generate rich data while minimising the risk of burden, participants were thus asked to record a diary entry for approximately 5-10 minutes once a week. We provided flexibility in how and when the entries were recorded, providing a weekly reminder but allowing participants to submit an entry at any time, to give them as much control as possible over how they shared their experiences. Data were collected for a period of 8 weeks, a timeframe that allowed us to capture change over time, but was not so large that the volume of data prevented us from examining them in sufficient depth

Prompts for the diary entries were agreed with input from the YPAG and provided via the app, inviting reflections on the personal impact of the pandemic on daily lives, mental health, and

wellbeing (see Supplementary Material A for a list of diary prompts). Pre- and post-diary interviews were conducted to contextualise and interpret the diary data. At the study outset, young people were invited to participate in an initial online interview to review lockdown experiences (Esponda et al., Submitted) and to discuss the detail of what taking part would involve. In line with our scoping review and guidelines, post-diary interviews were conducted at the end of the 8-week period to reflect on the diary data, provide complementary insights into participants' experiences, allow us to check researcher interpretations and seek feedback on participating in the study. Closing interviews were conducted by the same researcher that undertook the initial online interview (GLE, AT, LD), using a broad topic guide that was used flexibly in response to the diary data (see Supplementary Material B). All members of the research team kept a reflective diary throughout the study, examining thoughts on data collection, analysis, and their relationship to the research data.

The diary design necessitated a decision about sample size at the study outset, in contrast with the iterative approach to sampling that is more typical in qualitative research. Given our broad research question, open method of data collection and exploratory cross-case analysis, we aimed to recruit a large qualitative sample of 40 participants to achieve sufficient information power (Malterud et al., 2016). Participants were recruited from the REACH study, comprising socially and ethnically diverse cohorts drawn from twelve high schools in two densely populated inner city London boroughs, which consistently rank among the 20% most deprived boroughs in the country. Adolescents taking part in the mid-pandemic waves of REACH (Knowles et al., 2022), and who gave permission to be contacted about possible involvement in future research, were sent information about the nested diary study via email. One hundred and sixty young people requested further information about the study aims and procedures (via email, phone or text) and 62 agreed to participate. Purposive sampling ensured that at least half of participants were currently in receipt of Free School Meals (FSM) an indicator of low household income, though many who did not meet the high threshold for FSM were nonetheless experiencing financial hardship. At least half were at high risk of

experiencing mental health problems (according to the Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ) (Goodman, 2001) conducted as part of the online survey). We sought a spread in terms of gender and ethnicity (self-identified based on UK census categories). We present data from 38 young people that completed the diary entries and closing interview (see Table 1).

Table 1: Participant characteristics

Gender		Age (UK Year group)				Free School Meals		Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire	
Male	Female	14-15 (Year 10)	15-16 (Year 11)*	16-17 (Year 12)	17-18 (Year 13)**	Yes	No	Low risk	High risk
17	21	1	14	15	8	19	19	23	15
Ethnicity									
Arab	Black African	Black Caribbean	Chinese	Indian, Pakistani, Bangladeshi	Latino	Mixed	Other Asian	White British	
2	16	3	1	3	1	7	1	4	

* Year of sitting General Certificate of Secondary Education exams (GCSEs), standardised exams marking the completion of compulsory education

** Second year of Advanced Levels (A-Levels), more specialised qualifications used to determine university admission, in which exams are taken

Analysis and Evaluation

The longitudinal design and volume of data, typical of a QDM study, necessitated a systematic and transparent *Analysis Method*, which we outline below. The lack of consistency in conducting and reporting QDM research also requires reflection on the study-specific *Challenges* and *Strengths* of our design.

Prior to the analysis of the diary data focussing on young people’s return to school, we analysed the baseline interviews, which explored experiences of COVID-19 lockdown. As part of this analysis, four

members of the study team (all with psychology backgrounds and including two female researchers experienced in research with young people (AT, LD), and two female researchers experienced in applied qualitative research (GME, VL)) independently familiarised themselves with the first five baseline interviews, before meeting multiple times over a two-month period to create and refine a framework around participants' priorities and concerns. At this stage the data were organised according to six broad themes and sub-themes: (a) education/school life (schoolwork, work environment, exams), (b) use of time (time for non-education related activities, pressures/lack of time, changes in routine), (c) family/home life (relationships with family inside the house, relationships with family outside the household, stress in the house), (d) friendships, (e) COVID-19 worries and impacts (impact on physical health, government policies, impacts on the future), and (f) mental health (changes/impacts on mental health, coping mechanisms, understanding of self). In this data management phase, themes and sub-themes remained descriptive and grounded in the data, avoiding the imposition of prior analytical concepts (Ritchie et al., 1994).

Written data and transcribed text from the audio and video diaries and post-diary interviews were anonymized and then analysed using the Framework approach (Ritchie & Spencer, 1994), drawing on elements of thematic narrative analysis (Reissman, 2008) to focus attention on what was said over time. VL reviewed the entirety of the text for each participant to familiarise herself with what the individual stories were about and how the narratives developed over time, thereby encouraging a case centred approach. Time ordered sequential matrices (Grossoehme & Lipstein, 2016) were created for each participant in which data summaries were written for sub-themes at each diary entry point to provide an overview of the chronological flow across the themes and sub-themes identified in the baseline interviews. Whole case summaries were created in the final column of each matrix in which changes, continuities and turning points were summarised over the two-month period (Lewis, 2007). See Supplementary Material C for an example case summary (with redactions to protect confidentiality).

VL then undertook a between-case analysis, transposing whole case summaries to a master matrix to identify the elements that were present across the responses and the underlying dimensions that characterised them, which were subsequently organised into higher order conceptual themes (see Supplementary Material D for an example). In developing these themes, we examined young people's experiences through the lens of the educational stressors hypothesis, exploring the significance of socioeconomic disadvantage for objectively existing conditions and subjective interpretations of educational stressors, and their association with mental distress. Notes on tone, core narrative and analytical reflections aided this process of interpretation, which was recorded in an analytical diary and regularly discussed within the research team. During this process, VL scrutinised her own assumptions and beliefs concerning the challenges facing young people during the pandemic, which were influenced by media reports and the experiences of her own nieces and nephews. The resultant framework was sense checked and refined in discussion with the YPAG and used to guide the coding of data on NVivo. Here, we represent participants' interpretations and meanings as faithfully as possible. See Supplementary Material E for the full coding framing. We return to the study specific challenges and strengths of using a QDM design in the discussion but present a summary of these points in the Appendix for ease of reading and completeness of reporting guidelines.

Results

Diary entries were collected between September 2020 and February 2021, which spanned the reopening of high schools in the UK in the Autumn term, followed by a second wave of school closures in January 2021. The total period of data collection lasted six months allowing us to explore narratives at different points on this timeframe. Of the 38 participants: 18 submitted audio and written diary entries; 8 written only, 8 audio only; 3 audio, video, and written, 1 audio and video diary entries. The average number of entries across the 8-week period was 8, with the lowest 4 and

the highest 19 per participant. The transcripts for each diary entry tended to be between half and one page in length. Pseudonyms are used for the presentation of findings.

The analysis presented here uses the educational stressors hypothesis to highlight how socioeconomic disadvantage contributed to the cumulative impact of educational stressors on young people's mental health. We present three key themes: *'All that matters is work'* reveals how the COVID crisis and its management exacerbated the importance young people from disadvantaged groups attached to academic success; *'Mounting disadvantage'* explicates how the accumulation of stressors at home undermined their ability and belief in their ability to perform at school; *'Keeping your head above water'* captures experiences of acute distress arising from the pursuit and prioritisation of academic success in the context of perceived social and educational inequalities. See Table 2 for an overview of how the themes and sub-themes relate to the educational stressors hypothesis.

Table 2: Overview of themes and sub-themes in relation to the educational stressors hypothesis

Timeline of COVID-19 events for UK Secondary Schools

24 August 2020: Pupils return to school.

Students and staff advised to wear face coverings in communal areas. Support bubbles created. Remote learning provided to self-isolating pupils.

9 September 2020: Cases of COVID-19 confirmed in 64 schools.

19 October 2020: 1500 confirmed cases of COVID-19 in schools between August and October.

19 October 2020: Schools closed for 2 weeks, extended mid-term break.

31 October 2020: UK Government announces 2nd national lockdown.

9 December 2020: Announcement that GCSE and A-level examinations would take place in 2021 after previous indication they would be cancelled.

4 January 2021: UK announces 3rd national lockdown. Schools closed to most

18 March 2020: All schools are closed to all children except those whose parents are front line/ key workers.

19 March 2020: Summer 2020 examinations cancelled with grades based on a range of evidence e.g. prior attainment, centre estimated grades.

13th August 2020: A-Level results published prompting protest around downgrading of teacher predicted grades, the eventual withdrawal of published grades and their replacement with the higher of teacher predicted grades or standardised grades.

1	All that matters is work	Findings in the context of the educational stressors hypothesis
1.1	New focus and determination	Young people pleased to be back in a more equitable learning environment where they can perform well academically. Many had a stronger appreciation of the role of education for improving social prospects, reinforced by awareness of social disadvantage and wider uncertainty around education and the future.
1.2	Prison of learning	School characterised by rigid rules and fewer opportunities to socialise. Pressure from teachers, insurmountable workloads, and a perpetual sense of being assessed compounded the notion that the future rests upon good grades, placing a relentless strain on mental health.
1.3	The battle to keep up	Motivation an ongoing battle for all. Exam success and future prospects felt tightly enmeshed in this disadvantaged group. Mental health dependent on perceived work effort, causing many to work long hours; others at risk of disengaging with their studies.
2	Mounting disadvantage	
2.1	The weight of additional responsibilities	Social disadvantage manifested in additional stressors relating to household responsibilities, financial worries and the health of vulnerable family members, that created obstacles to performing at school.
2.2	Increasingly out of reach	Accumulating feeling of being behind (especially in relation to peers in more privileged circumstances) contributing to disengagement and / or despair that opportunities for the future were disappearing.
3	Keeping your head above water	
3.1	Feeling overwhelmed	Widespread work-related stress, in which participants doggedly pursued academic success in the context of competing demands and perceived educational inequalities, associated with headaches, poor sleep, low energy levels and panic attacks.
3.2	Sharing distress with others	Reassurance from family could help to challenge fears around the all-consuming importance of academic success for the future and alleviate distress.
3.3	<i>Efforts to prioritise mental health</i>	<i>Only a few succeeded in prioritising mental health over academic success. For most, distress felt inevitable in their circumstances given the importance of succeeding at school for their future social and economic prospects. Efforts to take time out to protect mental health helped but conflicted with the need to work longer and harder to safeguard their future.</i>

All that matters is work

New focus and determination to succeed

Returning to school after the first lockdown provided a structure and a sense of purpose that had been missed during lockdown. School is viewed with new eyes, representing a more even playing field than home learning, in which they can pursue their goals. Fifteen participants felt they had become more aspirational during lockdown and recognised the importance of working hard to achieve their goals. Nala, like others, described a shift in attitudes and behaviour, *“I am actually focused on doing well, instead of trying to have fun and doing all of that.”* (Nala, Y11, Closing Interview). Almost all valued being in an environment where they felt they learnt best with opportunities to ask questions and discuss work within the classroom. For instance, George, who shared a room with his younger sister, looked after her each morning during lockdown, and struggled to work in a noisy home environment without direct input from teachers: *“I feel relieved to go back to school...I really hated online learning as I felt I wasn't getting the support needed.”* (George, Y11, Week 1).

The first lockdown had provided many with time for critical reflection on themselves, their place in broader society, and their own future. Many felt more self-aware and more aware of social disadvantage in the world around them, for instance, through engaging with Black Lives Matter and other social movements. Feelings of uncertainty about the future of education and the economy contributed to a sense that a lot was at stake for young people. For many, this was accompanied by an awareness that their family had experienced greater financial, employment and health precarity during the COVID-19 lockdowns than those from wealthier backgrounds. Around half of the participants described themselves as ‘growing up’ during the lockdown period having found ways to look after themselves and withstand the stresses of lockdown. Starting sixth form in a new school acted as an opportune turning-point for some, as epitomised by Melissa, who reported that her

schoolwork had improved since starting a new school after a fraught lockdown in which she argued with her mum and briefly ran away from home:

“It’s kind of opened my eyes to, like, how other people think, and I suppose, everyone likes new schools, like, a completely different, like, group of people, like, a different class, like, different background [...] I mean, I feel like my motivation for school was very up and down at some point, but I feel like it’s motivating me more, I guess, to do better and be more, like, not competitive, but kind of competitive, because...well, not, like, in a malicious way. I want to do well for myself.” (Melissa, Y12, Closing Interview)

Taken together, we see how the pandemic has heightened young people’s awareness of their social disadvantage and the consequences of educational attainment for improving their prospects and security.

Prison of learning

Initial relief at returning to school was tempered by the changes encountered. COVID rules around social distancing, wearing masks, handwashing, being confined to class or year bubbles and certain parts of the school, felt restrictive but necessary. Yet having fewer opportunities to socialise or participate in extracurricular activities altered what school meant to many:

“It’s hard to enjoy the experience of being young and in education still. Everything is fixated around work and there’s no time to just have a breath of fresh air.” (Antara, Y12, Week 2)

The diaries often described a different style of teaching in which teachers kept their distance and lessons felt rushed and less interactive. Many felt that the aspects of school that they valued most had been stripped away: *“It’s no longer school, it’s more like a prison of learning.”* (Ameilia, Y11, Week 8).

This reframing away from connection and toward attainment, by the government, school and teachers, accentuated the importance attached to academic performance and was accompanied by pressure to catch up on lost work that emanated from teachers and students alike. The diary entries suggested unrelenting workloads that dominated the lives of almost all participants, though this was especially acute in Year 11 and 13. Work related stress permeated the diary entries, pausing intermittently, but building in intensity and placing an increasing strain on participants' mental health over the 8-week period:

"The last couple of weeks have probably been my worst. Christmas exams finished and I was so happy, I could not wait for a break, the amount of stress and anxiety school brings me right now is indescribable." (Brielle, Y12, Week 9)

Classroom tests and mock exams assumed additional significance, with the possibility that they could be used to determine grades in lieu of exams, as seen the previous year, creating insecurity and a perpetual sense of being assessed. Muna found the stress unbearable as she struggled to perform at school while also supporting her recently divorced mum and being stuck in a house with five siblings, her aunt and uncle (whose job as a taxi driver compounded concerns around family health and finances):

"I told my teacher – 'We are getting too much work', and she was like, 'Oh, well exams are uncertain; I don't know what we're doing', I was like, 'Same, but you don't have to give me that much work. Figure it out; talk to the government; I don't know, you do you; but don't please stress out me because I have enough on my shoulders; please figure it out'." (Muna, Y13, Closing Interview)

Ameila described feeling *"mentally drained"*, endeavouring to tune out family noise, stressors, and strains to succeed at school and safeguard her future:

“No one really knows what’s going to go on and happen with GCSEs, I’m kind of just like hanging in there and I kind of just feel like I’m in the dark when it comes to it, so there’s always lurking some sort of pressure and stress and it’s become really problematic and it’s really been hanging over my head and it’s been affecting my mental health and my wellbeing because I’ve been kind of just always stressed out and always felt like there’s tonnes and tonnes and tonnes of pressure on me because I don’t know what’s going to happen to my future, basically.” (Amelia, Y11, Week 8)

The battle to keep up

Most participants dealt with multiple and compounding uncertainties around life in the pandemic and adjustments to how their school grades would be determined by striving to work harder. In Week 1, Fatima explained that not knowing what was expected of her had caused stress headaches, but that immersing herself in her schoolwork helped her to feel purposeful and in control. For these participants, exam success and future prospects felt tightly enmeshed, and both hung in the balance, creating cumulative pressure to achieve that impacted negatively on their mental health. Neil, for example, described how overwhelming concern for how his schoolwork would impact his future led to severe emotional distress that began to taint his social interactions:

“I would think about what I have done this week that is going to benefit me in the future and if I have done nothing then I end up crying really hard and long in front of people and not being able to explain why because I feel like it’s a dumb reason to get so upset. When I’m out with my friends and there’s a split second where I’m not in a conversation and I don’t have my phone to distract me I would think of the same things and I would look so sad my friends would always ask me if I’m ok then I feel this guilt that I just ruined the positive energy.” (Neil, Y10, Week 1)

The need to motivate oneself existed as a thread throughout the diary entries with striving to perform academically and/or get back on track the dominant narratives, on which their mental

health depended. Motivation became an overwhelming concern from January to March 2021, during the second UK lockdown. Live online lessons were considered an improvement on the previous offer, but participants became increasingly discouraged and pessimistic about their ability to work sufficiently. Most felt under enormous pressure to work harder: *“I’m always revising and studying. I’m getting like seven hours of sleep a day, and sometimes I wake up really, really tired but you just have to push through the day.”* (Amelia, Y11, Week 3). Ethan also set his alarm for 5.45am to work for an hour before school and worked in his evenings until 11pm.

The diary entries suggested that the way schooling was managed in the COVID crises, not only made school feel like a prison of learning but amplified the significance of academic success for students from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds, resulting in a broader prison of learning that engulfed them. The confining and inescapable environment that academic pressures created was a space in which young people engaged in constant self-evaluation about how much they were able to work and worry about what impact this would have on their future. As they struggled to manage their motivation and emotions, as well as trying to navigate social interactions within these confines, their mental health suffered under the weight of these academic stressors.

Mounting disadvantage

The weight of additional responsibilities: worrying around family finances and health

Social disadvantage manifested in additional stressors at home that created obstacles to performing at school. Increased responsibilities within the home, such as looking after younger siblings and additional household tasks competed with additional demands at school. For Irene, who lived in a small house with her aunt, cousins and grandparents, schoolwork came last and often began at bedtime. Ava described how difficult it was to keep up with work whilst also helping to care for her disabled parent: *“Honesty, the time isn’t enough. Especially if you have to cook the food, help your*

parents, things that I do, which take more time, so then I find myself rushing to my lessons, making sure I'm not late.” (Ava, Y13, Week 7)

Nine participants spoke about financial stress within the house with parents or other family members losing income during the pandemic. Irene explained that the whole household felt the loss of her aunt’s job when her nursery shut down: *“If one adult isn’t making any money, then it affects everyone, including down to the last child.” (Irene, Y12, Closing Interview)* For the majority, the weight of these financial circumstances, and their prominence in the diary entries, grew over time. For example, Alex, who gradually elaborated on what his mother’s redundancy meant for him, from his initial discomfort at having to accept free schools to his recognition that he needed to contribute to the household finances:

“I went out last week to get the food thing, the free food for ... there was a breakfast bag and there was some stuff in it, but it felt kind of weird when I was collecting it, because there was ... it kind of felt like I was almost poor, and I needed that help, or my family needed help, which legally that is the only reason we are having it, but even so I didn’t like that feeling”. (Week 9) “My mum hasn’t been working because of everything, so it’s kind of put some stress like on our house. Maybe like we’ll have to keep the fridge half full for a week instead of full[...] I just try to help where I can isn’t it? Like when she [his mum] drove me to see my girlfriend the other day, like I paid for half of the petrol, and I also paid for dinner on the way back as well because I had some money for my birthday.” (Alex, Y12, Closing Interview)

Alex and John were among a handful of participants that committed to finding part-time jobs during this period to help with the household finances. John explained that he found it tiring but necessary to earn money where he could:

“If there’s a shift on Saturday and I’m tired and stuff, like, I’ll literally be, like, ‘Oh let me do it,’ so I can get that money when I get it, you know, just help out and just do my part. Obviously, it’s not really my responsibility but I kind of made it my responsibility, you know, to just try and earn money also, like, £100 can make a difference, you know, £100 could cover a bill, you know, £100 could buy groceries this week [...] Their stress became my stress, plus my school stress, so it was just stress, stress, stress and stress.” (John, Y12, Closing Interview)

Schools were initially praised for implementing COVID measures, but many felt increasingly at risk, as inconsistencies in the rules became apparent and social distancing declined. The bus journey to and from school felt fraught with risk due to overcrowding. Eleven participants discussed their fear for vulnerable members of their households and their strategies to reduce risk. For instance, Elizabeth who characterised her intensifying anxiety as “germophobia” and Tania, who lived with her grandma and avoided eating at school, travelled extremely early and distanced herself from friends to reduce risk. Both experienced high levels of stress endeavouring to catch up with work and stay safe. Muna, whose mum was categorised as vulnerable, articulated the distress that this conflict could cause:

“To be completely honest I’m losing myself a little every day...I feel like I’m fighting war on many fronts...fighting with myself to not let the fear of COVID consume me, fighting myself not to cry every given moment because I feel like the sky is falling on me, fighting for my grades against other people that may be better off.” (Muna, Y13, Week 7)

Participants were alert to the comparative advantage of others. Many suspected that children from wealthier backgrounds were subject to fewer disruptions in their home environment or schooling. Melissa contrasted her old and new school: “I feel like their school [her new fee-paying school] are going to be ahead, because they’ve done some of their courses in the summer, or, well, people in my

school have, they've had those courses and, like, they're all, like, have just had better quality, more personal education." (Melissa, Y12, Closing Interview)

For most participants, the sense that they were competing against other young people in more privileged circumstances accentuated their distress. Participants recognised that their circumstances made it difficult for them to succeed at school and feared that this would determine their life trajectory in a way that it wouldn't for others, solidifying inequality in their social prospects.

Increasingly out of reach

Almost all felt behind with their schoolwork when the schools reopened, which was compounded by subsequent periods of online learning, exam uncertainty, and teacher absences due to illness, isolations, or teachers leaving their jobs. A minority of these students indicated that they could, and should, have worked harder during lockdown, but most felt that they were constrained by their social circumstances, with a third of participants complaining that they lacked a quiet place to work, both then and now. The diary entries suggested that those participants that returned to school feeling most behind, became increasingly overwhelmed by educational stress and unable to catch up. For some, this introduced the prospect of dropping an A-Level, while for Alex it meant considering apprenticeships in place of university:

"I'm having doubts of what options I actually still have available when everything returns to normal. Like obviously I've heard some people can't get into universities because of the grades they've been given. It basically just shuts down certain pathways." (Alex, Y12, Closing Interview)

A handful of Year 12 participants expressed disappointment with the teacher assessed GCSE grades that had been awarded during the summer of 2020. For some, this restricted their choice of A-Levels and sixth forms, for others, it undermined confidence and deprived them of the opportunity

to prove themselves. Natalie, whose marks had been steadily improving in the lead up to GCSEs, explained: *“If I’d continued on that kind of trend, by year 12, I should have had a good level of motivation in some sense, and now I feel like when the lockdown happened, it was, like, what I’d been working towards has stopped right here, someone’s just cut the line, that I’d been, like, climbing a rope, and then the rope has been cut, so I’m just going to fall back down, I’m not going to continue, if that makes sense. And now I feel like I’m at square one, and kind of just, like, defeated.”* (Natalie, Y12, Closing Interview)

Fatima expressed similar distress when in January 2021 it was announced that exams would be cancelled: *“I feel like now my futures not in my hands anymore and it’s all up to my teachers. The life I wanted has been taken out my reach. The worst thing is that I’ve been working really hard over the past few months just to find out it was for nothing.”* (Fatima, Y11, Week 3). Here, optimism that formal qualifications would afford access to a successful career was replaced by a sense of despair that opportunities for the future were disappearing, underlining the perceived importance attached to educational performance in this group.

Keeping your head above water

Feeling overwhelmed

The impact of sustained work-related stress in which participants pursued academic success in the context of competing demands and perceived educational inequalities took its toll on mental health and resilience:

“I feel like just escaping but there is no escape and everywhere I turn there’s a reminder of my GCSEs or some work I have to do. There is never a moment since school has started that I have been

completely rested or content with myself. Every day and every lesson I feel drained.” (Halima, Y11, Week 8)

Over a half of participants reported distress, extending beyond those who entered the study with high SDQ scores. For some, this built up over the 8-week period, for others, such as Irene, it waxed and waned, but remained an ever-present challenge: *“It’s not a stable thing. It just... it’s like a rollercoaster. It goes up and down, spins you round.” (Irene, Y12, Week 3)*. Headaches, poor sleep, and low energy levels were commonplace, and explicitly attributed to high levels of work stress. For example, Elisa suffered from insomnia but continued to work long hours, desperate to regain some control over her future. Like a handful of participants, she described intermittent panic attacks in which she became overwhelmed by her anxiety: *“It’s just normally me, just sitting there, just overthinking things, or sometimes my heart starts beating really fast and I start shaking or feeling really nauseous, and it’s just my mind going everywhere. I start fidgeting. I find it hard to breathe, but it’s not really something that you can see normally. I feel it a lot, yeah.” (Elisa, Y11, Closing Interview)*

Sharing distress with others

Many of the participants who were struggling with their mental health described feeling lonely at home. A lack of intimacy prevented them from discussing how they felt with their families. John summarised this:

“But that’s one reason I struggle to cope with things like, just literally not being able to, you know, speak to my parents or come home and be, like, ‘Oh, I’ve had a bad day’. Like, I just come home and I just, you know, internalise it. I don’t speak about it. I would not speak about it, not speaking about it just gives me a headache, it does make me feel miserable, just tired, I want to sleep. And that leads to me being unmotivated, not bothering at school.” (John, Y12, Closing Interview)

Muna explained that her African family were “*not great with emotions*” (Closing Interview) and reinforced the notion that academic achievement should be prioritised in response to the societal uncertainty: “*Like my parents are like just study and that will fix all of this. Then you’ll have decent grades, it’s not that deep, this stuff happening outside shouldn’t affect you like it is.*” (Muna, Y13, Week 7) Conversely, some parents and siblings provided participants with essential support and reassurance, allowing them to talk about how they are feeling and challenge fears around the all-consuming importance of academic success for their lives. Though Riley and Freya differed in their ability to keep up, with Riley increasingly resigned to retaking his A-Levels and Freya putting herself under pressure to achieve high marks, both felt that close family relationships protected their mental health: “*My family has really been my coping mechanism as they help me overcome fears and any worries*” (Freya, Y13, Week 5). Amelia also made this point clearly: “*As long as I’m praying and meditating and talking to the people I love, I will be able to succeed and be more calm in certain situations.*” (Amelia, Y11, Week 7)

Being able to talk and have fun with friends was also considered invaluable, though social distancing measures, work pressures and lockdowns continued to restrict this. Finally, sympathetic teachers helped young people to feel less alone: “*It makes you feel like there’s hope in the dark because it’s...right now I feel like everyone my age feels like they’re just in a tunnel of darkness.*” (Amelia, Y11, Closing Interview)

Efforts to prioritise mental health

A small number of participants appeared untroubled by work pressures throughout the 8-week period. For example, Corinne submitted a series of cheerful diary entries that recognised the importance of working hard but also prioritised taking time out to do things she enjoyed. This

represented a different form of meaning negotiation, where mental health was put before academic success. These students recognised that their perspective was unusual:

“My mental health has been very steady over time, and I feel like the only reason it’s like is because of the support system I have around me and the different things that I do to relieve stress and stuff. Because most people just study and come home and study and I’m not that type of person. I would prefer to put my mental health above everything in my life. So, I feel like with me doing that I’ve felt more relaxed than most people [...] I like to just sit down on my own and think about how I’m doing, listen to music and just sit down and relax. And with school a lot of people stay up at night studying and that’s one thing I would never do.” (Corinne, Y11, Closing Interview)

More broadly, participants recognised the need to actively look after their own mental health, and many consciously employed strategies such as positive thinking, meditating, listening to music, and exercising. Those that had experienced mental distress in the past attached even greater importance to using coping strategies that helped them to relax and *“overpower the negative thoughts.” (Irene, Y12, Week 4)* Many exhibited palpable relief during school holidays, particularly during the winter break, as they gave themselves permission to rest and enjoy spending time with family. Outside of school holidays, however, the focus for most was work, and time away from work became detrimental to participants’ mental health if they felt that they had taken longer than they should. Freya, who was highly disciplined, appeared to regret granting herself even a brief break from her studies:

“My Uni application did go through yesterday, cos I’m an early applicant and I’m feeling a bit, don’t know, I feel a bit relieved. I feel like I should be stressed but I’m not stressed. So, the fact that I’m feeling a bit happy, I guess I’m a bit hopeful. Yeah, currently watching football with my brother. Not stressed at all. No anxieties today”. (Week2) [...] “So, how have you been today? Stressed. I’m

literally like worried cos my brain is just like, it's not the same.... I think I've been way too relaxed than normal." (Freya, Y13, Week 3)

Eight of the most distressed participants had accessed formal support, with two young people in contact with children and adolescent mental health services prior to the pandemic and four seeking help at school, via ChildLine and/or online networks for mental health support. Two participants had sought help for headaches and poor sleeping that they subsequently came to associate with stress. For example, Eliza who was being encouraged to attend an anxiety clinic by her GP: *"I didn't really find it the best when I heard it, because I'm not someone who opens up about things. So I was reluctant to do it, but then I was like, I'll just try it."* (Eliza, Y11, Closing Interview). Another handful of participants were struggling to cope with a high level of distress on their own, which appeared to arise from the severe and prolonged stress that they were under. They felt that stress/distress was inevitable given their circumstances and were uncertain that there was anything that they or others could do to alleviate their suffering:

"The thing is that teachers have made it challenging enough but like family as well. Like the amount of pressure everyone's putting on you to do well. It's really challenging. I haven't been doing anything to cope with it because I don't know what to do. I feel like stressing out is how I cope." (Nala, Y11 Week 4)

"I don't know if this makes sense to you, but looking into the future, into tomorrow, like, you know, what's life going to bring? For me, the water just represents everything, the pressures. Sometimes you just look at the water and you think of drowning and just everything's just on you." (John, Y12, Closing Interview)

Discussion

The study provides new insight into how the educational stressors hypothesis operates for young people from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. We see that the social changes caused by the COVID -19 pandemic impacted, firstly, on the hierarchy of educational performance, with these young people at a disadvantage in comparison with others in more privileged circumstances who faced fewer competing obstacles to succeed. And secondly, we see the meaning that this held for young people from disadvantaged groups who were acutely aware of the significance that their educational performance held for their prospects as adults, at a time when social inequalities in society were brought into sharp focus. Our participants recognised the strain that schoolwork was placing on their mental health but felt compelled to work harder regardless. Individually, they depict the intricate social and psychological challenges facing each participant. Collectively, they bring to the fore the lives and opinions of disadvantaged young people, which, too often, are underrepresented in the mainstream media and policy decisions. In going beyond the narrow focus on objective circumstances, and the tendency to view social origins of distress purely in terms of an inequality of structural arrangements, we provide a more comprehensive understanding of the process through which social arrangements affect personal distress.

Methodological considerations

We discuss the data in the context of certain methodological strengths and limitations. The longitudinal and contextualised nature of the data allowed us to examine how socioeconomic disadvantage contributed to escalating educational stressors and mental health problems. The number of diary entries per person suggests a high level of engagement with the digital qualitative diary method with all 38 participants contributing to the end of study interview. The themes that we present, and this discussion, were informed by our YPAG co-authors who provided insight into how the battle to motivate oneself was affected by personal circumstances and the stage of the pandemic. The diary method itself appeared to support self-expression, providing participants with

a space to reflect on events and make sense of their feelings. Participants were very positive about keeping diaries, and we direct interested readers to our full analysis of participants' values for taking part, and how best to support and involve participants in diary studies (McCombie, Esponda, Knowles, et al., 2024). Many had established trusting relationships with the REACH team through their ongoing involvement in the study and often gave the impression of speaking to them in the entries. This seemed to support open communication, yet certain omissions suggest that the format may have inhibited specific disclosures. For instance, the YPAG were surprised that participants had not spoken about school as an escape from unsafe home lives. They were less surprised by the absence of explicit discussion around ethnicity, suggesting that this was overshadowed by their shared social and economic disadvantage. It is important to note that the lead interviewer (GME, Mexican) and analyst (VL, white British) kept reflective diaries and aimed to be sensitive to issues of ethnicity but may have missed nuances in the data. Finally, though follow-up interviews aimed to be responsive to the diary entries, the framing of some of the questions on the topic guide may have prompted participants to focus on changes rather than continuities over the 8-week period.

The impact of socioeconomic disadvantage on educational performance

The COVID-19 pandemic, and its handling, both revealed and exacerbated social and economic disparities in the UK and elsewhere. It is well established that people in lower social economic groups, and particularly those from an ethnic minority background, were at a higher risk of mortality, and were more likely than those in wealthier groups to experience income loss and food insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic (Suleman et al., 2021). This disadvantage is reflected in the level of responsibility seen in our sample, which extended well beyond schoolwork, overriding the usual priorities of adolescence and interfering with their ability to perform at school. Many of our participants absorbed family stress about finances, helped to care for family members and worried about keeping them safe. The cumulative strain is evident, as young people fought to keep up with schoolwork despite lacking a quiet work environment, simultaneously taking on part-time jobs, and

distancing themselves from others at school and on public transport to minimise the risk of COVID-19. Participants recognised the path-dependent structure of the education system and the need to perform at school, regardless of their challenging circumstances, to be able to access future academic programmes and opportunities. The lack of confidence in teacher-assessed grades, which some felt did not or would not accurately reflect their academic potential, represented further disadvantage on this pathway. Notably, teacher-predicted grades have been found to discriminate against ethnic minority groups and low-income students in the past, a finding attributed to the stereotypes that can surround certain groups of students (Marmot et al., 2020). It is unsurprising that a perceived lack of parity in the evaluation of academic performance would increase the prevalence of school stressors and mental health problems among those affected.

Socioeconomic disadvantage and pressure to succeed academically

The diary entries support existing evidence that worries around education dominated young people's concerns during the pandemic (Dewa et al., 2024). This was reinforced by the learning environment that young people encountered when the schools reopened with unrelenting workloads reflecting the UK Government priority of academic catch up, prioritising pedagogical over pastoral support (Maynard et al., 2023) and compounding existing societal trends that have already created a more competitive academic environment (Högberg, 2021). But our findings go further than this, suggesting that socioeconomic disadvantage exacerbated the importance attached to academic success. The pandemic amplified our participants' awareness of social inequality with many anxious about their families' financial precarity and wary that children from wealthier backgrounds were less disadvantaged at school and home. In a social context that feels both unfair and uncertain, young people from disadvantaged backgrounds could feel they have more to lose by failing to perform academically. This accords with the argument that girls are more sensitive to educational stressors than boys, which West & Sweeting (2003) proposed to explain the relatively greater increase in mental health problems for girls in an early application of the educational stressors hypothesis.

Högberg (2021) expanded upon this point, suggesting that the pressure to invest in education and perform at school may be felt more strongly by girls, as education reduces the room for gender discrimination and gives access to careers and high paying jobs that were previously dominated by men. For both groups of participants, doing well at school could represent security and success, and working as hard as possible what is necessary to achieve it.

The effect of educational stress on mental health and wellbeing

Returning to the concept of meaning making within the stress-process model (McLeod, 2012), we see how objective stressors, such as the pressure to excel academically, and subjective interpretations of these stressors within this social context, such as fear that academic failure would have long-term consequences (e.g. limiting social and occupational prospects and entrenching social disadvantage), place a huge burden on young people's mental health. A recent high-profile publication in Nature called for a shift in public narratives around the record levels of stress-related anxiety and depressive symptoms that have been reported (see Samji et al., 2022) in adolescents since the COVID-19 pandemic. It argues that stress avoidance is unrealistic and, instead, we should equip young people with stress optimisation skills through teaching them to reappraise the meaning of certain types of stressful situations. This included recasting educational stressors as opportunities to enhance their ability and their psychophysiological stress response as a controllable resource that can energise their work effort (Yeager et al., 2021). The intervention teaches a change of mindset, helping young people to believe that the ability to manage stressors is within their control. On the one hand, our data provides powerful testimony to the existing strengths of young people in the face of adversities, yet on the other hand, it also acutely reveals that the existing circumstances of the young people in our study would not benefit from reframing the stressors they face as yet another way to energise their work efforts. Rather than attending to the ability of individuals to withstand intolerable pressures, we propose examining targeted support strategies that could help

adolescents with competing responsibilities to achieve at school, and, in parallel, strive to reduce the stakes attached to performing well.

Finally, we recognise the role of parents, peers, teachers and others in negotiating the meaning attached to school stressors. We know that positive familial relationships were associated with better mental health outcomes during the pandemic (Samji et al., 2022), but these findings bring into focus the importance of close and supportive families for discussing related anxieties around school work and the future and for considering alternative points of view. Conversely, some family dynamics and circumstances appeared to intensify the pressure young people felt to achieve, reminding us that the role of other people in the stress process extends beyond the presence or absence of social support (McLeod, 2012). Our participants understood the importance of looking after their mental health but felt uncomfortable taking time away from their work to do so. The children's charity Barnado's has called for long-term policy changes that assist in rebalancing the education system so that mental health and well-being are on a par with academic achievement (Barnado's, 2020). In addition, young people themselves have reported the need for better access to mental health support and services (Dewa et al., 2024). However, our data suggests that expanding access to individual therapies and support is not in itself enough; they come too late; and they fail to acknowledge the wider contextual factors that impact on young people. What's needed is a multi-system / sector approach that addresses root causes, reduces inequalities, and enables all to thrive. Högberg's call for a more inclusive education system that offers greater access to higher education, alternative access routes and high-quality vocational education would play a critical role in this. Of similar importance is the expansion of Second Chance Education initiatives, not only to provide disadvantaged young people with the opportunity to return to school if they wish, but also to challenge the pervasive belief that failing today will decide their life prospects (Van Den Berghe et al., 2024). This is pertinent in the context of our own data showing that disadvantaged circumstances could cause young people to feel overwhelmed and despondent about their academic

future, and in relation to the high rates of school absences that continue to persist in teenagers from disadvantaged groups since the pandemic. (House of Commons, 2023)

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Appendix

Checklist of design decisions and reporting items for a QDM study (See (McCombie, Esponda, Schmidt, et al., 2024)).

Topic	Guide Questions
Suitability of qualitative diary methods	
Research aims	Is the use of diary methods clearly explained and justified? Yes. QDMs provided insight into attitudes and experiences over time and in context, promoting inclusivity and agency in young people.
Participants	Is there consideration given to whether diary methods will be acceptable and accessible to participants? Yes. Digital technologies, and informal and flexible methods, were considered suitable for young people.
Ethical issues	Are diary-specific ethical issues reported and accounted for? Yes. Detailed information given on the consent process, and measures taken to ensure confidentiality, avoid risk of distress, and safeguarding processes.
Diary design	
Diary format	Is the decision behind selection of the diary typed used explained? Yes. Multiple options given to support self-expression, utilising respective benefits of written, audio and video diaries.
Diary administration	Is the diary data collection method justified, and procedures clearly described? Yes. Digital app chosen for ease with recording experiences, scheduling prompts and accessing data and downloaded to the participant's smartphone.
Diary intervals	How frequently, and under what circumstances, will participants be completing and submitting diary entries? Guidance suggested recordings of 5-10 mins per week to generate rich data and minimise the risk of burden.

Diary time period	For how long will participants be submitting diary entries, and is the length of this time period clearly justified? Data were collected across 8-weeks to examine change and nuance in experience over the course of a chaotic period in education.
Sample size	How many participants were recruited, and how many dropped out during the study? Is the sample size explained? The study sought information power, purposively recruiting 38 participants from a cohort of 160 young people
Diary structure and guidance	What is the structure of the diaries, and are any guidelines or diary prompts clearly reported and explained? A weekly reminder but able to submit an entry at any time, supporting flexibility. Prompts were agreed with input from the YPAG.
Additional data collection	Are there other data collection methods in the study, and where do diaries fit in with these? Post-diary interviews used to reflect on the diary data, provide complementary insights into experiences, and check interpretations.
Analysis and evaluation	
Analysis method	Is the qualitative methodology selected justified and clearly described in methods and analysis with consideration given to how this method will work with longitudinal diary data? Framework approach using sequential matrices; themes developed through the lens of the educational stressors hypothesis.
Challenges	Are any challenges or limitations of the diary data or method reported and addressed? Yes. Certain omissions in the data suggest that the format may have inhibited more sensitive disclosures (e.g. unsafe home lives).
Strengths	Are the strengths of the diary data or method reported and considered? Yes. The design supported engagement and self-expression, generating longitudinal data on how young people interacted with accumulating stressors.