

ENGAGING LEARNERS IN GCSE MATHS AND ENGLISH

Charlotte Robey and Emily Jones

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FOREWORD

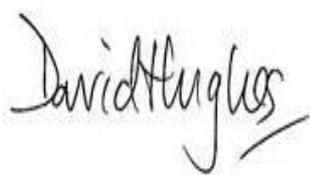
It is hard to underestimate the importance for our society of helping young people to become proficient in maths and English. The benefits of achieving good grades in GCSEs as a young person are well-documented and well-understood; they are a gateway to further learning, to work, to being an active citizen and to being a lifelong learner. Without those skills and abilities, people are less likely to be able to maximise their talents, less able to achieve their ambitions and less able to make the contribution they want to.

All of that makes it even more worrying that we have a severe and longstanding problem in England of too many young people leaving school lacking proficiency. This report is important because it sought to learn more about this issue from young people who themselves had not achieved good GCSEs in maths and English. We wanted to find out from them why they thought things had not worked out and to try to learn from that what needs to change.

As one might expect, there is no easy 'solution'. The findings are complex and in some ways almost contradictory. What the report provides, though, is a thoughtful piece of research which will help every teacher and school to think through how they can improve the support they give to young people. I hope that this will be read and used widely, to provoke discussion and debate in schools, colleges and independent providers about what more can be done.

I have always believed that one of the key issues for all learners is that of motivation and this report supports the sense that many young people have that their learning of maths and English is not relevant to their lives. This is an issue which can be addressed within the classroom, but it also has to be addressed through better engagement with the world of work. That engagement will often help young people understand how critical maths and English are to finding work and being able to progress at work.

The report also provides further evidence of how diverse the needs are of different groups of young people and should help reflection on how best to tailor learning in different circumstances and settings. That diversity, is of course part of the reason why improving maths and English achievement amongst all young people is so challenging.



David Hughes
Chief Executive, NIACE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In November 2014, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned and funded NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) to carry out research to explore why learners leave school without GCSE grade A*-C in maths and/or English. The overall aim of the research was to contribute to an evidence base to support the Foundation in its work to upskill the FE workforce and increase the number of young people gaining Level 2 maths and English.

The project adopted a practitioner research approach to capture learner voice on attitudes towards learning maths and English and how learners feel they could have been supported more effectively. This approach proved highly effective in enabling practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of learners' individual needs and learning journeys in relation to maths and English. NIACE has therefore included the guidance documents and research tools developed for practitioner researchers in Appendix 1 of this report, in order that other providers can carry out their own practitioner research to gather learner voice and inform their future work and delivery.

Findings

The findings from the research demonstrate the importance of high quality teaching and learning, access to timely support and peers in supporting learners to engage with, and have a positive attitude towards, maths and English learning at school and post-16. The findings suggest that most learners respond well to practical and interactive teaching methods which relate learning to real life situations. Learners appear to respond best to teachers who have strong behaviour management skills, are supportive and approachable, and respect and view learners as young adults.

Many learners felt that they received good support at school from teachers and learning support staff. This included having additional support in the form of one-to-one tuition or extra sessions outside of school hours. However, other learners believed they did not receive adequate support at school, or that additional support was put in place too late for it to make a difference to their achievement in maths or English. Learners welcomed the smaller class sizes and additional one-to-one support in their post-16 learning.

It was found that peers can be both a positive and negative influence on maths and English learning, both at school and post-16. Many learners, particularly those in lower sets, were distracted by their peers' poor behaviour at school, demonstrating the importance of strong behaviour management skills on the part of teachers. However, other learners felt well-supported by their friends and classmates.

Key messages for the sector

Below are 10 key messages for the sector, drawn from the findings of the research.

Learners are more likely to engage and have positive attitudes to maths and English when:

1. Learning is **fun, interactive** and **practical**;
2. There is a strong understanding of the **purpose** and importance of holding these qualifications, relating them to real life situations;
3. Learning has a personal **relevance** which is explained to learners and feedback on their performance relates the activities to the qualification they are studying for;
4. Appropriate **time and support** is given to individuals to practise challenging topics, in and out of the classroom;
5. There is a **clear assessment process** with clarity on marking schemes, enabling learners to adequately prepare for exams and coursework assignments;
6. **Timely initial assessments** are carried out to identify support needs, and any additional support learners require is put in place as soon as possible;
7. **Class sizes are kept small**, enabling teachers to have sufficient time to support all learners. Larger classes are perceived by learners as a barrier to effective teaching and learning;
8. Teachers have strong **behaviour management skills** to reduce the impact of peers distracting learners during lessons;
9. A supportive environment is fostered in the classroom and learners are **encouraged to ask for help** from teachers and peers. Embarrassment can be a strong factor in learners not asking for support when they need it;
10. Practitioners listen to learners' needs and tailor support and learning accordingly. **Practitioner research** is an effective way to **gather learner voice** to inform future work and delivery. It can enable practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of learners' individual needs, allowing them to tailor support and learning programmes accordingly.

1. INTRODUCTION

In November 2014, the Education and Training Foundation commissioned and funded NIACE (the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education) to carry out research to explore why learners leave school without GCSE grade A*-C in maths and/or English. The overall aim of the research was to contribute to an evidence base to support the Foundation in its work to upskill the FE workforce and increase the number of young people gaining Level 2 maths and English.

The project adopted a practitioner research approach to capture learner voice on attitudes towards learning maths and English and how learners feel they could have been supported more effectively at school. This was complemented by four focus groups conducted with young adult carers, care leavers, young offenders and learners with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND)¹.

This report presents the findings of the research.

1.1 Context

Maths and English skills are widely regarded as being the crucial, underpinning skills required for people to succeed, both in work and their wider lives. However, concerns have long been expressed about low achievement in maths and English qualifications in England. In the academic year 2013/14, 69 per cent of pupils achieved a grade A*-C in maths and 72 per cent achieved a grade A*-C in English; only 63 per cent achieved these grades in both subjects²³.

The Programme for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC) is a survey of adult skills, including literacy and numeracy, led by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). The findings from the 2012 survey show that 16.4 per cent of adults (5.8 million) in England score at the lowest level of proficiency in literacy (at Level 1 or below) and 24.1 per cent of adults (8.5 million) score at that level in numeracy⁴. The survey also shows that England is below the OECD average for numeracy and literacy, ranking 17/24 and 12/24 respectively.

In addition, the OECD's Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), a survey of the educational achievement of 15 year old pupils, found that 'pupils in

¹ A learner is considered to have special education needs (SEN) 'if they have a learning difficulty or disability which calls for special educational provision to be made for him or her... Post-16 institutions often use the term learning difficulties and disabilities'. Department for Education and Department for Health (2015) *Special educational needs and disability code of practice: 0 to 25 years*, pp.15-16.

² Department for Education (December 2014) *Provisional GCSE and equivalent results in England: 2013 to 2014*. London: DfE.

³ These figures include only those learners who attempted GCSE maths and English. 46 per cent of all pupils achieved GCSE grade A*-C in both maths and English.

⁴ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2013) *The International Survey of Adult Skills 2012: Adult literacy, numeracy and problem solving skills in England*.

England performed similarly to the OECD average in mathematics and reading' and that England's performance has not changed since the 2006 survey⁵. It also showed that the difference in the performance of the highest and lowest achievers is greater than the OECD average. Consequently, the need for the education and training sector to improve literacy and numeracy skills, particularly of young people, is considered to be urgent and is a Government imperative.

In response to both OECD international surveys, the latest Skills Funding Statement asserted that 'we must improve the quality of provision and ensure that it embraces all who should benefit, so that everyone who needs to can improve their maths and English to at least GCSE A*-C'⁶. In order to help achieve this, maths and English provision is now embedded in many of the Government's major programmes, including Traineeships and Apprenticeships. Since September 2014, all learners aged 16-19 who did not achieve A*-C GCSEs in maths and English at school must continue to studying these subjects as a condition of funding, applicable to providers in receipt of funding from the Education Funding Agency⁷.

Driving up standards in maths and English is a key ambition for the Government and to support this reformed GCSE qualifications will be available to be taught in schools and colleges from September 2015. The new GCSEs have been developed to be more academically stretching and the examinations will be linear (content will not be divided into modules), with no internal assessment. A recent call for evidence on the how these qualifications can be successfully implemented in post-16 education concluded that while the sector broadly welcomed the Government's ambition to promote GCSEs as the national standard of maths and English qualification, stakeholders will need to support to do this⁸. Specifically, stakeholders called for flexibility in the implementation and delivery of the qualifications, as well as Government's continued support for providers in raising the standards of teaching.

Ofsted identified the quality of teaching in maths and English as a 'key challenge for the sector' in their early evaluation of the implementation of 16-19 study programmes. They concluded that 'too much provision, particularly for those learners who need to gain a Level 2 qualification, was not good enough' and that there is a shortage of good teachers, particularly in maths⁹. In addition, research undertaken on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation found that some

⁵ Department for Education (2014) *Achievement of 15-Year-Olds in England: PISA 2012 National Report*, p. 9.

⁶ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) *Skills Funding Statement 2013-16*, p.9.

⁷ <https://www.gov.uk/16-to-19-funding-maths-and-english-condition-of-funding>

⁸ Robey, C. Jones, E. and Stevenson, A. (2014) *New English and maths GCSEs in Post-16 Education and Skills: Findings of the call for evidence on behalf of the Department for Business, Innovation and Skills, and the Department for Education*. NIACE.

⁹ Ofsted (2014) *Transforming 16-19 education and training – the early implementation of 16-19 study programmes*.

teachers face difficulties in delivering maths and English, which may be linked a lack of subject qualifications at the appropriate level and a lack of confidence in teaching maths¹⁰.

The new FE Workforce Strategy¹¹ sets out the next steps to improve the quality and quantity of specialist teachers to support the delivery of maths and English GCSEs. The Government is investing £30m over two years to improve the quality of maths and English teaching; this includes bursaries for new teachers, grants to support providers with recruitment, maths and English CPD enhancement programmes, funding for Special Educational Needs training and a £10,000 Golden Hello scheme for graduate maths teachers. The Education and Training Foundation is leading much of this activity and has also published a set of Professional Standards for teachers and trainers in the education and training sector¹².

The research presented in this report gives a voice to learners and presents their views of working towards GCSE maths and English, both at school and in post-16 provision. This complements previous research and provides insights into learners' attitudes towards maths and English and the support that learners need to achieve qualifications. The Education and Training Foundation will be using the findings of the research to inform its ongoing professional development offer to the sector, with a view to improving outcomes for all learners.

¹⁰ Frontier Economics (2014) *The qualifications of English and mathematics teachers: Report prepared for the Education and Training Foundation*.

¹¹ Department for Business, Innovation and Skills (2014) *Further Education Workforce Strategy: The Government's Strategy to Support Workforce Excellence in Further Education*.

¹² <http://www.et-foundation.co.uk/our-priorities/professional-standards/>

2. APPROACH

The research adopted a mixed methods approach, working with providers and partner organisations to collect qualitative data from learners.

2.1 Methodology

NIACE identified three providers – two general FE colleges and one independent training provider – to take part in practitioner research. Each provider received a grant payment of £1,000 to cover staff time and learner incentives.

Two practitioners from each provider were invited to attend a one-day training session run by NIACE researchers¹³. This provided practitioners with guidance on: sample selection; conducting research interviews; confidentiality and anonymity; data use and storage.

To support their research activity, NIACE provided practitioner-researchers with:

- a briefing sheet on the aims, methods and outcomes of the work;
- guidance on requirements;
- a participant information sheet explaining the project to interviewees;
- a schedule for learner interviews;
- consent forms;
- digital audio-recorders;
- support materials for undertaking semi-structured interviews with the target group; and
- access to ongoing support (from NIACE and each other) through a Yammer group.

Copies of the research tools and guidance documents can be found in Appendix 1. These have been included to enable other providers can carry out their own practitioner research to gather learner voice and inform their future work and delivery.

In total, providers undertook 48 interviews with young people (aged 16-24) who did not achieve GCSE grade A*-C in maths and/or English at school. The interviewees were current maths and/or English learners – or had achieved grade A*-C since leaving school – and were therefore able to reflect on their experiences of learning at school and as an adult. Providers were required to ensure that their sample of interviewees included:

- an equal number of learners discussing experiences of maths and English;
- an equal number of learners that achieved a D in maths and/or English and learners that achieved an E-U grade;
- an equal number of men and women; and

¹³ This is with the exception of one provider who joined the research later.

- a range of learners, including apprentices, trainees, those on 16-19 study programmes and young people with SEND.

Providers gave learners a £10 voucher for participating in the research. All of the interviews were digitally recorded and providers returned all audio files to NIACE for professional transcription.

All interviewees completed a background questionnaire, which included questions related to maths and English GCSE grades achieved upon leaving school, GCSE qualifications gained since leaving school and the type of provision learners were currently accessing.

Upon completion of their interviews, practitioner-researchers completed an online questionnaire, to reflect on what they had learned from their experience and what they planned to do differently as a result. The findings of the survey are included at Appendix 2.

To complement the individual research interviews, NIACE conducted focus groups in partnership with third sector organisations who work with young adult carers, care leavers and learners with SEND. NIACE also undertook a focus group in a Young Offenders Institution. In total, 24 young adults participated in the focus groups. Each of these participants (apart from the young offenders) were given a £10 voucher for taking part in the research.

Data from the interviews and focus groups were analysed thematically by NIACE researchers. The analysis considered gender differences as well as differences in experiences of and attitudes towards maths and English teaching and learning. From September 2015, all learners aged 16-18 who achieved a GCSE grade D in maths and English must be enrolled onto GCSEs as a condition of funding. Therefore, the analysis also considered differences between learners who achieved a D grade and those who achieved an E-U grade in maths or English at school.

2.2 About interviewees

Participant information forms were received for 46 of the 48 learners involved in the research. The majority of interviewees were aged 19 years or older (31), with around a third (15) aged 16-18 years. Just over a third (17) of interviewees were female and around two-thirds (29) were male.

Four interviewees considered themselves to have a disability. Three of these learners indicated that they had learning difficulties and the fourth said they had multiple disabilities, including Asthma, Attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), Tourettes, Epilepsy and Autism.

As Table 1 below shows, interviewees were most likely to hold 1-4 GCSEs at any grade (or equivalent). Around a third of interviewees held qualifications at NVQ Level 2 or equivalent. Only two interviewees held no qualifications.

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Table 1: Qualifications interviewees held at time of interview

Qualification	Frequency
1-4 GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma	34
NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/General Diploma, RSA Diploma	15
NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills	9
NVQ Level 3, Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds advanced craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National RSA Advanced Diploma	6
5 or more GCSEs (grades A* to C), School Certificate, 1 A level/ 2-3 AS levels/VCEs, Higher Diploma	4
Apprenticeship	2
Other vocational/work-related qualifications	2
Non-UK qualifications	2
No qualifications	2
Prefer not to say	1

The majority of interviewees (43) were currently learning at the time of their interview. Table 2 below shows the subjects learners were studying at the time of their interview. Learners were most likely to be doing Functional Maths. 'Other' subjects included:

- Level 3 Health and Social Care
- Level 3 Sport
- BTEC Health and Social Care
- BTEC Public Services
- Level 3 Access to HE
- Level 2 Access to FE
- BA Performance

Table 2: Subjects interviewees were studying at time of interview

Qualification	Frequency
Functional Maths	19
GCSE Maths	13
GCSE English	13
Functional English	12
Apprenticeship	11
Other	8

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As Table 3 below shows, the majority of interviewees (38) mainly attended a non-selective state-run or state-funded school between the ages of 11 and 16.

Table 3: Type of school interviewees mainly attended between ages of 11 and 16

Qualification	Frequency
A non-selective state-run or state-funded school	38
A selective (on academic, faith or other ground) state-run or state-funded school	4
Independent or fee-paying school	3
Attended school outside the UK	1
I don't know	1
Other	8

Just over half of interviewees achieved a grade D in English or maths at GCSE (see Table 4 below). Only one interviewee did not take GCSE maths or English at school; the remaining interviewees achieved an E or lower.

Table 4: Grade interviewees achieved in GCSE English or maths at school

Grade	Frequency
D	25
E – G	17
U	1
N/A	1

Around a quarter of interviewees (11) had retaken their maths or English GCSE since school, but none of these learners achieved a C or higher in their retake.

3. FINDINGS

The research findings below describe the evidence collected from both the learner interviews and focus groups under five themes: teaching and learning; access to support; peers; and attitudes towards maths and English learning. Key differences in responses from different groups of learners are highlighted throughout.

3.1 Teaching and learning

3.1.1 At school

A quarter of interviewees made positive comments about their teachers or the teaching they experienced at school. In both subjects, learners appreciated teachers who used practical and interactive teaching methods (such as games or role playing activities) to make their lessons fun and engaging. This was a key motivator for interviewees to engage with maths and English at school.

'Then finally I had [teacher], which was - he was my favourite teacher, not just because of his age, just because how he taught you as well. At the start of every lesson he came up with a maths game that you could do, because it warms your brain up in the same time as well as it being fun.' (Maths learner)

Interviewees also emphasised the importance of ensuring that everyone was comfortable engaging with the learning activities carried out in class. English learners in particular spoke about their reluctance to participate in activities which involved them reading out loud or doing presentations to the class. While for some this may be seen as an interactive or engaging approach to teaching, many interviewees felt embarrassed about participating in this kind of activity.

'We had some stuff where it was a presentation in front of class and stuff, where some people like that, I don't like talking in front of people.' (English learner)

Interviewees spoke about the need for teachers to explain the relevance of learning activities and to contextualise them where possible. Many learners felt that they were told to complete activities which had little relevance to their maths or English learning. For example, learners did not find filling in worksheets or mock exam papers engaging or useful unless their teacher explained why they were being asked to complete them and gave them feedback on their results.

'To be fair, my teacher wasn't that bad. He did support me and did try to do practical lessons so we could have an understanding for what he was actually talking about and what he was trying to put forward to us. I think that's what helped me a little bit with this subject, which I really didn't enjoy.' (Maths learner)

Learners in the focus groups in particular said it was important for maths and English learning at school to be related to real life and for learning activities to have a practical application. Where this was done well, learners enjoyed their maths and

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English learning at school; where it was not attempted, learners disengaged from the subjects.

'Yeah, because if it more related to real life you want to do them. You want to try and get them. Like for example there was interest question, the banking or the car, anything to do with that real life question you wanted to do them because you know that that was going to come up in your life.' (Learner with SEND)

It was also important for learners that teachers took the time to explain things fully and in different ways, particularly if they were finding a topic difficult to understand. Some interviewees felt that their teachers at school had been unable to explain concepts in ways that they understood.

'She'd literally just stand in front of the board, just talk you through the exercise books but she wouldn't actually help you if you needed any help. She'd say, that's up to you to sort it out and she wouldn't help explain anything any more, any clearer. But she used to just expect you to know it anyway.' (Maths learner)

Interviewees who were in lower sets at school spoke about teachers not taking the time to explain or revisit aspects of maths or English which they struggled with. These learners felt that their teachers had low expectations of them because they were in a lower set at school.

'It went from set one to eight and obviously eight's lowest. I think I was in seven but then I got put into eight, but then once you're in that set no one really helps you, so we didn't really understand it... If you wanted help they'd help you, but say if you still didn't understand it they'd just get fed up and then just tell you to go and just get fed up and send you out of class, so you didn't really learn anything.' (Maths learner)

A small number of interviewees felt that teachers did not adequately explain the way they would be assessed, and as a result they were not adequately prepared for their exams or coursework assignments. English learners in particular felt that they would have benefited from teachers explaining how to structure their answers in order to get the marks and achieve a C grade.

'I think being told and explained a bit more what it actually meant to get a C, for example, or just to work that little bit harder or have a little help, [shown] books or places where you could have been helped and to just show if making that little bit more work made a difference. So I never felt like I was pushed to revise or shown what I needed to do to revise, for example.' (English learner)

This issue was echoed by learners with SEND, who spoke about the importance of knowing how to structure their answers in both maths and English so that they got marks, even if their final answer was incorrect.

'If you get the wrong answer but you do all the correct working out you will still get the marks. So it's a good idea to actually say where you're actually getting your marks from. So you're not hesitant about actually getting the right answer all the time... It's just about making sure you understand how to actually get the right answer if you know what I mean.' (Learner with SEND)

It was also important for interviewees that teachers were strict, but not overly intimidating. A supportive and approachable attitude towards the class seemed to get better results in terms of behaviour and learner attitude.

'In Year 9 there was a particularly good teacher who I had, everyone listened to him, there were hardly any disruptions... He was very relaxed, there wasn't always constant shouting, there wasn't anything like that. Also at the end of the week he would set us a test and then we'd just play games at the end as a whole class.' (Maths learner)

In contrast, learners admitted that they often misbehaved when their teacher was seen as either being too lenient or overly strict.

'The supply teacher, he was the complete opposite. He was always shouting. There was just no calmness to it. Other people thought if he's just going to be shouting at us we're not going to do the work, so just mess around.' (Maths learner)

3.1.2 Post-16

A third of interviewees made positive comments about the teaching they had experienced post-16 and the majority of these learners felt that the teaching was better post-16 than it had been at school. For example, interviewees felt that teachers explained topics and activities in more depth and used more engaging teaching methods, such as group discussions.

'I think it is better. Well, not think. I know it's better since school. At school we just used to get a lot of hand outs of paperwork, worksheets to work through and that was it. We wouldn't do much group activity to really get stuck into maths. That was it at school but now we do get to do more, say, like hands on interaction with maths.' (Maths learner)

Learners also appreciated teachers taking the time to give them feedback and go over any topics that they found difficult. One learner in particular liked the fact that their teacher gave them regular assessments so they could see their progress, again demonstrating the importance of this to learner motivation.

'It's not like school because you're - with this you can do it in your own time and you get time to do whatever you need to do.' (English learner)

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Learners with SEND particularly valued the clarity their tutors gave them on marking schemes and assessment schedules. This had helped them to focus their learning and prepare for their assessments.

'They're giving you the marking scheme as well. This is how I'm marking it. That's what you need to get. Simple as that. Straightforward. They're giving you the deadlines, the topics on it and what you need to achieve.' (Learner with SEND)

A key aspect of the teaching at post-16 that learners enjoyed was being treated like adults.

'In school there were various reasons why I didn't pass, but here I've got the support. I'm treated normal, I suppose you could say. I'm treated like a human being. I get on with the tutor.' (English learner)

'They treat us more like adults as well... They have more respect for us.' (Young adult carer)

For learners following vocational programmes, the more practical and embedded nature of maths and English learning was a positive aspect of their experience post-16.

'It was more practical because I think I work better at solving numbers and everything when it's a practical thing, counting bags upstairs when we've got all fried, whipped products with yields and everything else... it's enjoyable for me because I'm not sat down with a pad and paper in my hand all the time. Eventually, by me doing something practical, I can eventually turn that into paper, which is making it very easy for me to learn then.' (Maths learner)

However, some interviewees, particularly the learners in the young offender focus group, felt that their maths and English learning post-16 still needed to be more practical and related to the world of work.

'I'd prefer more practical lessons, like an English lesson about a book, with more talking, doing presentations. Maybe writing job applications.' (Young offender)

A small number of interviewees commented that their maths and English learning post-16 was better because their course was shorter and more focussed. This made it easier for them to remember things for their assessments and focus on passing their qualification. However, a minority of learners felt that this was problematic as their tutors had to move through material quickly and they did not get enough practice on some of the more difficult topics. Around one in ten interviewees said that they would have liked more maths or English sessions a week, or to have had a longer programme.

'I wish I had more sessions. It's hard to fit in [the] course... I could have more support and probably learn more then. I mean, I do revision at home anyway, it's just I've got a professional teacher there if I need anything.' (Maths learner)

3.2 Access to support

3.2.1 At school

Over a quarter of interviewees spoke positively about the support they had received for their maths or English learning at school. For some learners this was related to having teachers who they felt gave them the time and attention they needed to make progress. Other learners spoke about the benefits of having a Learning Support Assistant in the class.

'I got help with my phonics [from one of the teachers at school] which helped me with my spelling and the spelling aspect of it.' (English learner)

Some interviewees received additional support in the form of one-to-one tuition or extra sessions outside of school hours. Learners appreciated this additional time as the groups were often smaller which meant they could have more focussed support.

'We used to have a Friday session at maths where you could go and ask for some extra help and some lunchtime support sessions, which was quite good.' (Maths learner)

However, over a third of interviewees felt that they had experienced a lack of support when learning maths or English at school. This was often attributed to teachers being unable to support everyone in a large class. Learners who were quiet at school felt that they were often excluded from learning activities because they were in a large class.

'I think because I have trouble spelling and I'm not great at English I think I give up easy. In high school I just gave up and just did nothing. Because the class was so big the teacher wouldn't notice and it was like we could just sit there doing nothing all lesson.' (English learner)

Consequently, over a quarter of interviewees said they would have liked more one-to-one support or small group sessions at school. Learners felt that this would have enabled them to ask for more help when they needed it and therefore motivated them to stay engaged, even when they found the subject difficult.

'Maybe just some more one on one attention in a class. There were too many people in one class. So if someone's stuck, there's not enough time to explain to everyone that's stuck.' (English learner)

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Interviewees also emphasised the importance of teachers making learners feel comfortable to ask for help. They need to be approachable and make it clear that they value learners' opinions. This was particularly important for learners with SEND.

'The teacher is a mirror that reflects back on you. So it needs to be active. You can't just have a teacher sitting there, go and do this. So they have to be active, friendly, open-minded for opinions for example. If... he's open-minded the students will feel comfortable and they can - if they don't know something and they're quite simple sometimes a student can be shy to ask the teacher and be afraid.' (Learner with SEND)

Some interviewees also felt that their teachers at school paid less attention to them because they were at a lower level in comparison to other learners. Maths learners in particular felt that their teachers were only interested in helping those who were already good at the subject in order to boost their grades further.

'The teachers never really helped the subject either because they always seemed to just concentrate on the kids that knew what you were going on about, rather than helping the kids that didn't understand as much.' (Maths learners)

As a result of this perception, almost a quarter of interviewees felt that their school teachers should have focused their support and effort on the learners who were struggling.

'It's understanding the individual, because I know they have pressures in big classrooms now, but identifying those people that are say from abroad or have dyslexia or have dyscalculia, it helps then putting things in place there; extra support, albeit like the simple booklets I got to help me with English, things like that. So providing that kind of support, I think and targeting the individuals within the 30 or whatever class group you have.' (Care leaver)

Learners in the focus groups felt that they may have done better in their exams if they had had more time to complete their papers. This was a particularly pertinent issue for learners with SEND, but was also discussed by care leavers.

'There's also time issues as well. Because sometimes the first controlled assessment is two hours, which is a writing one, the middle three is the reading and it's one hour 20 minutes. Sometimes I need more time because as I write I remember more things. Whereas if you're exam pressured then you tend to forget some things and you just lose it.' (Learner with SEND)

It was important for both interviewees and focus group participants that appropriate support was put in place as soon as possible. Some learners had experienced significant delays in receiving additional support in maths or English. Consequently, this impacted on the time learners had to achieve in these subjects. These learners

felt that they would have achieved better grades if their support needs had been addressed sooner.

'I didn't have any extra half hour after school to help me with English, which would have been great. If I'd had it through Year 10, then I probably would have had better results through Year 11.' (Care leaver)

3.2.2 Post-16

In general, interviewees felt that the support they received for their maths and English learning post-16 was more proactive than that they received at school. In part, this was due to them being in much smaller classes, which meant each learner was able to have the appropriate level of support to meet their needs.

'Everyone is helpful. Everyone gets on in the class. It's a small class so you get one on one attention more.' (English learner)

Learners also felt that their post-16 tutors took the time to go over anything that they found difficult which made them more confident in asking for help.

'If I'm ever stuck on anything I can ask the teacher and she's always helping me... It's actually better than I expected. I thought the teacher was just going to give us the work and we were just going to do it with no help but it's been quite good.' (Maths learner)

3.3 Peers

3.3.1 At school

Interviewees had mixed views about the influence of their peers on their maths and English learning at school. Some spoke about being distracted by their peers who disliked maths or English and felt that their friends were probably a bad influence on their attitudes towards the subjects at school.

'Not good [because of] behaviour. I think mine and others around me as well. I tend to I think probably look at others and then act my behaviour according to that, and obviously because my friends weren't really the best...' (Maths learner)

Other interviewees found that much of their lesson was taken up by teachers trying to get the class under control. This meant that learners did not get the attention or support they required. This was particularly the case for learners who were in lower sets for maths and English.

'Well I had maths every day apart from once and within my class there was many distractions because a lot of people didn't like maths. So I couldn't concentrate... there wasn't time within the lessons because there were so many distractions that half of the lesson was consumed of the teacher actually having to discipline the other children.' (Maths learner)

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This was also an issue raised by learners in the focus groups, who felt that their maths and English learning was disrupted by others who did not want to learn at school.

'They need to reduce the amount of students in each class. Because sometimes you have - you get good students as well as bad, yeah, and the bad ones disrupt the learning. They come in late and so on, so on.' (Learner with SEND)

One learner had experienced particularly bad bullying at school but felt that the teachers did little to stop it. Consequently, they found it difficult to engage in class as they did not have the confidence to answer questions or participate in activities.

'Getting picked on in the class was one of the things. I didn't feel comfortable speaking in class sometimes... That was my main problem throughout school, all the time, bullying... It's bad. They just don't do anything about it, I think it's disgusting.' (Maths learner)

A small number of learners felt embarrassed about asking for help in front of their peers. As a result, they would often misbehave to cover up the fact that they were struggling with their maths or English. These learners felt that teachers should have encouraged learners to ask for help and encourage a more supportive environment in the classroom.

'If you put your hand up you would feel stupid in a classroom of people, your peers that would expect you to get it because they got it. So then, you would not - I'd end up - me personally I would end up being naughty and disruptive to get out of the lesson.' (Maths learner)

Two interviewees spoke about their frustration at seeing their peers make progress while they still struggled. This acted as a strong barrier for these learners to continue engaging with English.

'As the years went by, English got harder and I just - I was stuck at square one and everyone else was progressing, I wasn't getting anywhere with it.' (English learner)

'It's just hard when... there's all the good people and they - you find yourself drifting away, that kind of thing.' (English learner)

However, some learners found their peers to be a positive influence on their maths and English learning at school.

'...when I was sitting next to a friend and I was a bit stuck, they would talk to me about how to do it and what would be the best way for me to do a sum or anything like that.' (Maths learner)

3.3.2 Post-16

In contrast with their school experiences, on the whole interviewees were very positive about their peers in their post-16 learning. A quarter of interviewees felt that their peers were less distracting post-16 than they were at school. Learners explained that because everyone in their class had either chosen to learn or had realised the importance of having a maths or English qualification, they were all motivated to learn. As a result, interviewees felt less pressured and found it easier to concentrate.

'It seems a lot better than high school. Because the classes are smaller than what you get in high school it's easier to learn - you don't get as distracted as much because everyone wants to pass and they know how important it is now.'
(English learner)

A small number of interviewees also felt that their peers had been very supportive on their post-16 learning programme. This had helped them to build their confidence and learn easier ways of tackling problems.

'People in the frying room, now that I've worked a bit longer here, help me know - showed me an easier way of how to add this up and it's enjoyable for me because I'm not sat down with a pad and paper in my hand all the time.' (Maths learner)

3.4 Attitudes towards maths and English

3.4.1 At school

Learners' experiences of maths and English at school heavily influenced their attitudes towards the subjects. A quarter of interviewees said they enjoyed maths or English at school. These learners tended to find the subjects interesting or relatively easy and therefore engaged well in their learning.

'I quite enjoyed maths. It was an easy subject, something I got on with really well.' (Maths learner)

Furthermore, a small minority of maths learners felt that they learnt new things and made good progress at school. This acted as a strong motivator for these interviewees to engage with the subject as they could see that their effort was paying off in their improved grades.

'I liked it in my last year because I was in - I could see that I was improving more. Obviously I went from an F to a D. So I could see I was improving.' (Maths learner)

However, overall interviewees reported negative attitudes towards both maths and English at school, with almost half of interviewees saying that they did not enjoy the subjects. Over half of interviewees admitted that maths or English was difficult for them and around a quarter said they found the subjects boring. This was particularly

the case for maths learners, many of whom identified particular topics which they struggled with at school. However, maths learners who achieved a D, as opposed to E-U, grade at GCSE were most likely to say that they did not enjoy the subject and found it difficult. The topics learners struggled with included algebra, multiplication, ratios, trigonometry, and fractions, percentages and decimals. Similarly, the topics which English learners found difficult varied across interviewees, and included grammar, spelling, understanding vocabulary and handwriting.

The issues around not enjoying maths and English and finding them difficult or boring were often related, with interviewees stating that they did not enjoy the subjects because they found them difficult, or that they were bored because they did not understand what was being taught.

'[English is] a boring subject you didn't really want to go to... Whereas maths and stuff is - I enjoyed it so I paid attention more.' (English learner)

Interviewees who found the subjects difficult or boring admitted that their behaviour was often poor, as they tended to switch off or stop paying attention in class. Other learners said they had misbehaved at school to cover up the fact that they struggled with the subjects. These interviewees felt embarrassed about asking for help and therefore chose to be disruptive so they would be taken out of the lesson.

'If you put your hand up you would feel stupid in a classroom of people, your peers that would expect you to get it because they got it. So then, you would not - I'd end up - me personally I would end up being naughty and disruptive to get out of the lesson.' (English learner)

A small number of interviewees commented that they did not see the purpose or use of maths or English learning at school. As a result, they found it difficult to engage with the subjects.

'I hated it... I wasn't interested in the slightest... I didn't see the point - the purpose in doing it. As long as I could write in English that was all that mattered to me.' (English learner)

3.4.2 Post-16

Over a third of interviewees felt that their attitude towards maths or English had improved since they left school. For many, this improvement had come about because of their experiences of learning post-16, which had helped them to enjoy the subjects and feel more confident in asking for support. Learners who had achieved an E-U grade at GCSE were particularly likely to say that they enjoyed their post-16 learning.

'It's a lot better from when I was at school. I used to dread going to maths. I used to hate it. Now I look forward to it a bit more because I know I'll get the help that I need.' (Maths learner)

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'I feel positive. I'm ready to learn. My ears are wide open. I'm listening.' (English learner)

Many interviewees spoke about feeling more motivated to engage with maths or English learning. For the majority of these learners, their motivations to re-engage with maths and English learning were related to progression in one or more areas of their life, particularly education and employment.

'I feel different about it now. I've realised it's more important and I should have listened and attempted it at school... Because nowadays employers are only looking for people who's getting C grades in maths and English... It's good because I want to achieve, I want to actually upgrade my Functional Skills.' (English learner)

Over a third of interviewees had taken up maths or English learning post-16 in order to gain a qualification. These interviewees tended to feel that they had developed a more mature approach to learning and had realised the importance of having English and maths qualifications, for example in order to get a job, pursue the career they are interested in, or go to university. Interviewees who achieved an E-U grade at GCSE were particularly motivated to re-engage with learning in order to get a job, while those who achieved a D wanted to prove to themselves that they could achieve the qualification.

'I'm thinking of going to university and one of the main entry requirements is getting your GCSE maths grade C. So I thought in order for me to pursue my career and university I have to get the basic requirements.' (Maths learner)

Learners following vocational courses were particularly motivated to engage with maths and English in order to progress in work. Over half of these interviewees were offered the opportunity to learn by their employer, and as many spoke about feeling motivated to engage because the course would be work-based. The idea of earning while learning was also appealing to a small number of vocational learners.

'It was having the motivation and drive to obviously try to move forward in the business I'm working in now. That's what influenced me and pushed me to have more of an understanding for mathematics and knowing that's an important subject in all aspects in life and in the work environment.' (Maths learner)

'I still believe this course that I have done is beneficial to me in the future and as well as that, growing up, at a young age, at 21, I want to progress and I don't want to be doing the same thing, I just want to be moving up and up the ladder. So when this course came up and I knew that the company was funding it, I thought it was a great opportunity for me to do it.' (Maths learner)

Learners were less likely to say that they were motivated to engage with maths or English because of their enjoyment of the subject or their previous learning

experience. However, a minority of learners did give these reasons for learning post-16 and, as discussed above, once they had re-engaged with the subjects, interviewees tended to find maths and English more enjoyable post-16 than they did at school.

'With doing the second one anyway, the company encouraged me to do the second level. So I went in on level 2 and did that and I really enjoyed the learning and the training of it all. So it gave me motivation to do the third one as well... It was my decision to do the level 3. The level 2, I just got put through that as part of my job role. But the level 3, it made me want to do level 3 because I enjoyed it.' (Maths learner)

A small number of interviewees also spoke about being encouraged by their families and the fact that their local learning provider had a very good reputation.

'I had some advice from my parents and guidance... [The college] is close, it's been rated well and my brothers and sisters have been here.' (English learner)

A minority of learners said that they felt the same about maths and English as they did at school. However, these learners did not necessarily have a negative attitude towards the subjects and only a small number of interviewees said that they were not interested or did not enjoy English or maths. These learners were most likely to say that the only reason they re-engaged with maths or English learning was because it was a requirement of their broader post-16 learning programme.

'It's the same... I like some parts of it and then other parts not so much.' (Maths learner)

'I'd say I've always enjoyed it, so it's the same attitude.' (English learner)

4. CONCLUSION

The findings from this research demonstrate the importance of high quality teaching and learning, access to timely support and peers in supporting learners to engage with, and have a positive attitude towards, English and maths learning at school and post-16. The findings suggest that most learners respond well to practical and interactive teaching methods which relate learning activities to real life situations. Furthermore, it is important that learners feel their teachers have taken the time to fully explain difficult topics, and can use different approaches when necessary. Learners appear to respond best to teachers who have strong behaviour management skills, are supportive and approachable, and respect and view learners as young adults.

Many learners felt that they received good support at school from teachers and learning support staff. This included having additional support in the form of one-to-one tuition or extra sessions outside of school hours. However, other learners believed they did not receive adequate support at school, or that additional support was put in place too late for it to make a difference to their achievement in maths or English. One of the main reasons cited was large class sizes, which meant that teachers had insufficient time to support all learners. Consequently, many learners, particularly those with SEND, felt that support should have been focussed on those who struggled with maths or English. Learners welcomed the smaller class sizes and additional one-to-one support in their post-16 learning.

It was found that peers can be both a positive and negative influence on maths and English learning, both at school and post-16. Many learners, particularly those in lower sets, were distracted by their peers' poor behaviour at school, demonstrating the importance of strong behaviour management skills on the part of teachers. However, other learners felt well-supported by their friends and classmates.

On the whole, learners felt that their experiences post-16 were far more positive than at school, and as a result their attitudes towards maths and English generally improved. One of the main reasons behind this was the realisation that maths and English skills and qualifications are both crucial when progressing in learning or work. This was the main motivation for learners to re-engage with the subject post-16.

5. KEY MESSAGES FOR THE SECTOR

Below are 10 key messages for the sector, drawn from the findings of the research.

1. Learners are most likely to have positive attitudes towards maths and English if they enjoy the subjects, find them interesting and can see their progress. Learning therefore needs to be **fun and interactive** in order for learners to stay motivated. Learners both at school and post-16 also respond well to practical learning activities and timely feedback on their progress.
2. A strong motivator for learners to engage positively with maths and English is an understanding of the **purpose and importance** of holding these qualifications. The majority of learners in this study were motivated to re-engage with maths and English learning post-16 in order to progress in one or more areas of their life, particularly education and employment. Maths and English needs to **be related to real life situations**, and it should be emphasised that these qualifications are needed when progressing to further learning or moving into the world of work.
3. Learners need to see the purpose and **relevance** of what they are learning. At school in particular, learners were frustrated at being asked to participate in tasks or activities which they perceived to be irrelevant to their learning. It is important for learners to have the purpose of tasks explained to them and that feedback on their performance relates activities to the qualification they are studying for.
4. It is important for learners to have the **time they need to practise** topics which they find difficult, and to feel they **receive sufficient support** from teaching staff. This is particularly the case for learners in lower sets at school, who often feel that teachers do not expect them to achieve in maths or English. Sufficient time and support for these learners may be achieved by having additional staff in the class, such as Learning Support Assistants, or by offering learners additional one-to-one or small group sessions at lunch or after school.
5. As well as having sufficient time to practise difficult topics, learners need to be **clear on the way in which they will be assessed**. Advice on how to structure answers to exam questions and clarity on marking schemes and assessment schedules enable learners to adequately prepare for exams and coursework assignments.
6. Learners need **timely initial assessments** to identify support needs and for any additional support they require to be put in place as soon as possible. Any delay in either of these processes impacts on the time learners have to achieve in maths and English.
7. Learners perceive larger **class sizes** as a barrier to effective teaching and learning, causing issues related to behaviour management and teachers having sufficient time to support all learners.

8. It is important that teachers have **strong behaviour management skills** to reduce the impact of peers distracting learners during lessons. However, time should not be spent on behaviour management at the expense of supporting learning, as poor behaviour can be a sign that learners are finding the subject difficult.
9. Embarrassment can be a strong factor in learners not asking for support when they need it. **A supportive environment should be fostered in the classroom** and learners should be encouraged to ask for help. This will also encourage peer support in the classroom, which can be a very positive influence on learners' experience of maths and English learning, both at school and post-16.
10. **Practitioner research** is an effective way to gather learner voice to inform future work and delivery. It can enable practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of learners' individual needs and how their previous experiences impact on their current learning. Practitioners can then tailor learners' support and learning programmes accordingly, resulting in a more positive experience of learning maths and English.

6. APPENDIX 1: RESEARCH TOOLS AND GUIDANCE

The practitioner research approach adopted by the project proved highly effective in enabling practitioners to gain a deeper understanding of learners' individual needs and learning journeys in relation to maths and English. NIACE has therefore included the guidance documents and research tools developed for practitioner researchers here, in order that other providers can carry out their own practitioner research to gather learner voice and inform their future work and delivery.

6.1 Guidance for providers



Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Guidance for providers

Your organisation has been selected to take part in the GCSE maths and English research project which is being undertaken by NIACE on behalf of the Education and Training Foundation (ETF). Your organisation has been allocated a grant in order to undertake 12 individual research interviews with young people aged 16-24 who did not achieve GCSE grade A*- C in maths or English at school. This guidance has been developed in order to provide you with the information that you will need to undertake this work.

The aim of this work is to:

- Capture learner voice on attitudes towards maths/ English and their views on how they could have been supported more effectively at school.
- Develop an increased understanding of the practices that lead to changes in confidence and attitude, and enable success.
- Work closely with a range of providers from across the sector to build an evidence base to support the ETF in its work to upskill the FE workforce and increase the number of young people gaining Level 2 maths and English

We have developed a **briefing sheet for providers**, outlining the project, which you may wish to share with colleagues in your organisation.

Identifying your sample

This project is focussed on young people aged 16-24 who did not achieve GCSE grade A*- C in maths and/or English at school. It is expected that the 12 interviewees will be current maths and/or English learners or have now achieved grade A*- C and therefore able to reflect on their experiences of learning at school and as an adult.

Selecting your sample

Please ensure that this sample is as diverse as possible, and includes apprentices, trainees, those on 16-19 study programmes and young people with special educational needs and disabilities (SEND).

Your organisation will be required to complete 12 individual interviews. Your sample must include:

- 6 male learners and 6 female learners.
- 6 learners who achieved grade D in maths or English at school, and 6 learners who achieved grade E-U.
- 6 interviews focused on maths and 6 interviews focused on English.

Each participant will receive a £10 gift token for taking part in the project. NIACE will supply you with these gift tokens.

As part of the support materials that we have produced, you will find:

- A **briefing sheet for participants**, explaining the project and their role in this. Please ensure that interviewees receive a copy of this in an appropriate format (i.e. large font, Braille, coloured paper, etc) and understand the points raised within it.
- A **participant information form** to collect useful contextual information on each of the individuals involved in the project. Please ensure that this is completed and returned for each individual being interviewed.
- A **consent form** for participants to sign that will enable us to use the material generated from your work. The form must also be signed by the interviewer. The original form should be returned to NIACE and a copy given to the participant. A signed consent form relating to each interviewee will need to be returned to NIACE in order to satisfy the requirements of the grant agreement.

If you anticipate that you will have problems in undertaking the full number of interviews required, please let us know as soon as possible by contacting emily.jones@niace.org.uk

Undertaking the interviews

As part of the support materials that we have produced you will find a document entitled **Planning and Conducting Interviews**. This should help you to think through some of the issues and practicalities of undertaking research interviews.

We have also provided a **topic guide** for interviewers to follow when undertaking interviews. The guide identifies the key questions that we are concerned with, as well as a set of prompts or sub-questions that should enable interviewers to engage young people in a rich discussion. You may need to think about the best way of phrasing these questions for the people you are interviewing.

We anticipate that interviewers will have a good understanding of issues affecting young people who did not achieve GCSE grade A*- C in maths or English at school and be able to develop a good rapport with them.

Audio recording and transcription

As part of the project we require you to digitally audio record the interviews. NIACE will supply the audio equipment.

As well as providing an accurate account of your interview, creating a digital audio recording will allow you to concentrate on what the interviewee is saying and more

easily capture verbatim quotes. Before the interview, take time to familiarise yourself with, and test the equipment. Make sure that you have additional batteries for the recorder.

In order to satisfy the requirements of the grant agreement, you will need to submit to NIACE an electronic copy of each digital audio file. Submissions should be sent on an encrypted disc or in a compressed password protected .zip file, providing us with the password.

Provider questionnaire

In January 2015, we will be sending you a link to an **online provider questionnaire** in which we will ask you for your reflections on what you have learned as part of this process and what you plan to do differently as a result. This questionnaire will need to be completed and submitted in order to satisfy the requirements of the grant agreement.

6.2 Briefing sheet for providers



Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Briefing sheet for providers

NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education, has been asked by the Education and Training Foundation (ETF) to undertake a research project to explore the reasons why learners leave school without GCSE grade A* - C in maths and/or English.

Aim

The aim of the research project is to:

- Capture learner voice on attitudes towards maths/ English and their views on how they could have been supported more effectively at school.
- Develop an increased understanding of the practices that lead to changes in confidence and attitude, and enable success.
- Work closely with a range of providers from across the sector to build an evidence base to support the ETF in its work to upskill the FE workforce and increase the number of young people gaining Level 2 maths and English.

Focus

This project is focussed on young people aged 16-24 who did not achieve GCSE grade A*-C in maths and/or English at school. It is expected that the interviewees will be current maths and/or English learners or have now achieved grade A*- C – and therefore able to reflect on their experiences of learning at school and as an adult.

Method

Selected providers have been allocated a grant to undertake 12 individual face-to-face-interviews with young people aged 16-24 who did not achieve GCSE grade A*-C in maths and/or English at school. In addition, providers will be asked to complete a short provider questionnaire to reflect on what they learned from their experience and what they plan to do differently as a result. A range of support materials and services will be provided by NIACE to undertake this work.

All interviews for this project must be audio-recorded. You will need to obtain permission from those interviewed to record the interview. Please use the consent form provided.

Outputs and timescale

All 12 audio recordings should be submitted to NIACE by 16th January 2015, along with consent forms and participant information forms. We would be very grateful if you could send in each audio file as soon as it is available. Completion of the online provider questionnaire will be required by 21st January 2015.

What next?

Following 16th January 2015, audio files will be professionally transcribed and NIACE researchers will undertake a detailed analysis of the data submitted with a view to producing two publications.

If you have any queries about the project, please email emily.jones@niace.org.uk

6.3 Planning and conducting interviews

NIACE The National Voice
for Lifelong Learning

The
Education
& Training
Foundation

Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Planning and conducting interviews

Introduction

Interviewing is one of the most common methods used to collect research evidence. We are asking you to undertake semi-structured interviews with young people aged 16 to 24 who did not achieve GCSE grade A* - C in maths and/or English at school. These interviews will enable you to explore the research topics and gather in-depth data. Through your interaction with the interviewees, you will be able to find out more about their experiences, attitudes and motivations.

The topic guide

We have designed a topic guide to help you frame and lend some structure to the interview. In doing so, we have endeavoured to:

- Construct questions that your interviewees are likely to be able to answer easily.
- Sort topics into a logical sequence, beginning with non-threatening questions that will help you to put interviewees at ease.
- Construct sequences by 'funnelling' from broad questions to more specific, probing ones.
- Ensure that questions are open-ended so as to elicit detailed and full answers, rather than closed questions that tend to generate single word responses. For example, "What do you think about returning to learning?" is likely to be more productive than: "Do you think you will return to learning?"
- Ensure that language is simple, direct, clear, succinct and appropriate to the particular group of interviewees
- Avoid double barrelled (or multiple-barrelled) questions such as: 'What do you think about your experiences of learning maths at school and since leaving school?'
- Avoid leading questions which encourage a specific answer, such as 'Don't you think that all young people should stay in education until they are 18 years old?'

Setting up interviews

- Make sure you have gained permission in order to speak to interviewees.
- Decide how you will approach interviewees to arrange the interviews.
- Decide when and where interviews will take place. Select a venue and an environment that are quiet, comfortable and accessible and will feel 'safe' to interviewees and the interviewer.
- Make sure all of the potential interviewees have a copy of the 'briefing for participants' (which we have provided) and give them time to read it and ask questions before they decide whether or not to participate. The briefing will provide information about the project, the interviewees' role, how their data will be stored and used, and will reassure them about confidentiality or anonymity.

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- Cover the cost of interviewees' travelling expenses and subsistence expenses if appropriate. All interviewees will receive a £10 gift token for taking part. NIACE will supply you with gift tokens.
- Once participants have agreed to take part, provide them with a copy of the topic guide and invite them to sign a consent form. The consent form needs to be signed by the interviewer and the interviewee and also a parent/guardian if the interviewee is under the age of 18 years. The interviewee should be given one copy and the original returned to NIACE.
- Remember that setting up interviews can be time-consuming.
- Sometimes agreed interviews have to be rearranged at the last minute. Try to take account of this when planning your schedule.

The interview relationship

When you are interviewing someone, you are establishing a relationship with them, not just using them as a way of gathering data. What an interviewee tells you will be dependent upon:

- Their perception of you. Think how the way you dress and present yourself may affect interviewees' responses.
- The interviewees' perception of the research or project.
- Their interpretation of your questions.
- How they wish to present themselves.

Preparing and conducting interviews

- Familiarise yourself with the topic guide.
- Practise with a willing student or colleague to help you think through wording and flow, but remember that interviews will vary according to interviewees' responses.
- Find out about the interviewees in advance, paying particular attention to any cultural issues or support needs.
- When you meet the interviewee, try to put her/him at ease. Establishing rapport and trust is very important in enabling interviewees to open up to you. Starting with some social conversation before starting the interview may help to set interviewees at ease.
- Only ask sensitive questions once you have established rapport and gained the interviewee's trust.
- Only ask one question at a time.
- Ensure that there is a logical flow from one section or topic to another.
- Let interviewees finish their sentences and explore their ideas fully: avoid interrupting them in mid flow.
- Ensure that you cover all of the topics, but be flexible about the order to ensure that the conversation flows.
- Keep to time as far as possible.
- Be aware of your own and the interviewee's body language.
- Look out for non-verbal cues that may indicate boredom, anger, tiredness, distress or embarrassment and respond appropriately.
- Show that you are listening and interested by maintaining appropriate eye contact, nodding, smiling and making encouraging noises such as 'uh-uh' or 'hmm'.

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- Tolerate pauses and silences (unless the interviewee appears puzzled) as they are likely to be thinking and will continue talking once they have gathered their thoughts.
- At the end of a topic it can be helpful to summarise key points and check your understanding.
- Clarify anything you are unsure about.
- At the end of the interview, give the interviewee an opportunity to add anything they wish to say about the topic.
- Close the interview by thanking the interviewee and reminding them about what will happen next.

6.4 Briefing sheet for participants



Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Briefing sheet for participants

What is the project about?

NIACE is undertaking a research project with learning providers to find out about young people's views of maths and English and their experiences of learning these subjects, particularly at school. This project is funded by the Education and Training Foundation, which is an organisation that helps Colleges and other learning providers to provide the best possible service for learners.

We would like to hear of your experiences so that Colleges and other organisations that provide GCSE maths and English courses can support young people to achieve good grades in these subjects.

Why have I been invited to take part?

We would like to hear about the experiences of people who did not achieve GCSE grade A* - C in maths or English at school.

Do I have to take part?

No you don't, it's up to you. If you do, we will ask you to sign a consent form. You are free to leave the research at any time.

What will I have to do if I take part?

We would like you to take part in a short interview. It will last around 30 minutes.

The interview will be about:

- Your experiences of learning maths or English at school
- What further support you would have found helpful at school

If you are currently learning maths or English or have completed your GCSE since leaving school, we would also like to know about this experience.

You will be asked for your permission to audio record the interview. This helps us to capture everything you say and to report it accurately. We require all interviews to be recorded for this project.

As a thank you for taking part in the project, you will receive a £10 gift token.

What are my rights?

- You can leave the research at any time.
- We will follow the Data Protection Act 1998 in storing and using any information you give us. This means that we will keep your contact details securely and in a separate place from the information collected during your interview. Nothing you say will be linked to you unless you have given us permission to do this.

What will happen to the results of the research?

Once we have completed the project we will write two reports which will include the stories of the people that have been interviewed. We may also use the information you give us in future publicity and other promotional material. We will not use any names in our reports, so nothing you say can be linked with you.

If you have any questions, please speak to a member of staff at your college or training provider. You can also contact Emily Jones on 0116 2859676 or email emily.jones@niace.org.uk. Emily is the Project Manager at NIACE.

6.5 Participant information form

NIACE The National Voice
for Lifelong Learning

The
Education
& Training
Foundation

Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Participant Information Form

Thank you for taking part in an interview about your experiences of learning GCSE maths and English. We would like to know more about you to help us understand your interview. We will use this information in our analysis but will not include names in our report, so the information you provide will not be linked with you.

1. Your name	
---------------------	--

2. Interviewing organisation	
-------------------------------------	--

3. What is your age?	
-----------------------------	--

4. Please describe your gender identity. Select one.

Female (including male-to-female trans women)	
Male (including female-to-male trans men)	
X	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

5. Do you consider yourself to be Deaf or disabled?

Section 6(1) of the Equality Act 2010 states that a person has a disability if: (a) That person has a physical or mental impairment, and (b) The impairment has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on that person's ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities.

Select one.

Yes	
No	
Prefer not to say	

5.1 If yes, please select all that apply.

Blind/partially sighted	
Deaf	
Facial disfigurement	
Hard of hearing	
Learning difficulties	
Long-term illness / medical condition	
Manual dexterity difficulties	
Mental health problems	
Mobility difficulties	
Progressive medical condition	
Speech difficulty	
Other	
Prefer not to say	

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6. Which of the following qualifications do you hold to date? Please select all that apply.

1-4 GCSEs (any grades), Entry Level, Foundation Diploma	
NVQ Level 1, Foundation GNVQ, Basic Skills	
5 or more GCSEs (grades A* to C), School Certificate, 1 A level/ 2-3 AS levels/VCEs, Higher Diploma	
NVQ Level 2, Intermediate GNVQ, City and Guilds Craft, BTEC First/General Diploma, RSA Diploma	
Apprenticeship	
2 or more A levels/VCEs, 4 or more AS levels, Higher School Certificate, Progression/Advanced Diploma	
NVQ Level 3, Advanced GNVQ, City and Guilds advanced craft, ONC, OND, BTEC National RSA Advanced Diploma	
Undergraduate degree (e.g., BA, BSc)	
Master's degree (e.g., MA, MSc)	
Doctorate degree (e.g., PhD)	
NVQ level 4-5, HNC, HND, RSA Higher Diploma, BTEC Higher Level	
Professional qualifications (e.g. teaching, nursing, accountancy)	
Other vocational/work-related qualifications	
Non-UK qualifications	
No qualifications	
Prefer not to say	

7. Are you currently involved in learning? Select one.

Yes	
No	

7.1 If yes, what are you currently learning? Select all that apply.

GCSE Maths	
Functional Maths	
GCSE English	
Functional English	
Apprenticeship	
Traineeship	
Other, please specify:	

ENGAGING LEARNERS IN GCSE ENGLISH AND MATHS

8. What type of school did you mainly attend between the ages of 11 and 16? Select one.

A non-selective state-run or state-funded school	
A selective (on academic, faith or other ground) state-run or state-funded school	
Attended school outside the UK	
Didn't attend	
Home school	
Independent or fee-paying school	
I don't know	
Prefer not to say	

9. What subject are you being interviewed about today? Select one.

Maths	
English	

10. At school, what grade did you achieve in this subject at GCSE? Select one.

D	
E – G	
U	

11. Have you retaken your GCSE in this subject since leaving school? Select one.

Yes	
No	

11.1 If yes, what grade did you achieve? Select one.

A* - C	
D	
E-G	
U	

Thank you.

6.6 Topic guide for learner interviews

NIACE The National Voice
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Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Topic guide for learner interviews

Introduction

Good morning/ afternoon. My name is ... I am [name/ role].

Thank you for your interest in the project and for agreeing to take part in a short interview today. The project is being led by NIACE. NIACE is a national charity.

Have you read the briefing sheet that explains the purpose of the interview? (If not, explain that the interview is about their experience of learning GCSE English/ maths, mainly at school, and their attitude towards the subject now.)

The interview will take around 30 minutes. I will be asking you some questions and listening to your answers.

Before we start, I need you to sign a consent form. (Check still happy to take part if consent obtained prior to interview).

The consent form is a record that you understand the purpose of the project and this interview, and that you are happy to take part and for what you say to be recorded and used in our project reports. Although I am asking you to give your name, you will not be named in the report and nothing will be linked to you personally. We will take care with the information you give us and store it safely.

I will also ask you to complete a short information form at the end of the interview.

Thank you. Do you have any questions before I begin the interview?

About you

- 1. What is your name?**
- 2. Since leaving school, what maths /English learning have you undertaken?**

If recently gained GCSE maths /English at grade C or above - when/ where did you complete the course?

If currently studying GCSE maths/English - when are you due to finish your course?

Are you studying English and maths as part of your course e.g. apprenticeship?

I'd now like to ask you a few questions about your current/recent learning.

Learning maths / English POST-16

- 3. Please can you briefly describe your course?**

How long is it?

How many classes per week? (hours)

Where do classes take place?

How many people are in your class?

Is it a mixed group in terms of age and gender?

Is it a maths/ English course or is maths/English part of the course? [Embedded delivery]

- 4. Why did you decide to do this course?**

What were your main reasons/ motivations?

Was it your own decision? If not, who suggested it and why?

Why did you choose to study at [NAME OF PROVIDER]?

- 5. How did you feel when you started the course?**

What were your hopes and expectations as you got started?

- 6. What has been your experience of the course?**

Are you enjoying it?

What is good about it?

What is not so good or would make it better?

Is it what you expected?

7. How does this experience of GCSE maths/ English compare to your experience of learning the subject at school?

Is it similar or different?

If different, in what ways?

I'd now like to ask you a few questions about learning maths/ English at school.

Learning maths/ English AT SCHOOL

8. How did you feel about maths/ English at secondary school?

Did you like the subject, or aspects of it?

Did you always feel this way or did your view change over time?

Did you feel motivated to learn this subject?

What do you think influenced your attitude to maths/ English?

9. Can you tell me a little more about your classes?

10. What was your experience of learning the subject?

What was good?

What was not good?

What did you find particularly challenging?

What support, if any, did you receive to try and help you overcome these challenges?

Did you find anyone/ anything particularly helpful/ supportive?

11. What support, if any, would have helped you to improve your maths/ English?

What could your TEACHER have done (differently)?

What could the SCHOOL have done (differently)?

Is there anything YOU could have done?

What about OTHER support? e.g. family

Impact of maths/ English learning

12. What difference will achieving GCSE maths/ English at grade C or above make to your life? (Or has it made already?)

13. What is your attitude to English/maths NOW?

Key messages

14. Thinking about all of your maths/ English learning, what have you found particularly helpful in developing your skills?

15. Do you have any other comments you wish to make?

Closing

Thank you for taking part in this project. The information you have given is very helpful. It will contribute to the project reports.

Please can you complete a participant information form. This collects background information about you, which will help the researchers in their analysis to better understand your interview.

It has been good to meet you. Goodbye.

6.7 Focus group topic guide

NIACE The National Voice
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The
Education
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Foundation

Engaging and motivating learners with GCSE maths and English Topic guide for focus groups

Introduction

Good morning/ afternoon. My name is XXX and I work for NIACE. NIACE is a national charity that campaigns for all adults to have opportunities to access and benefit from learning.

This is my colleague Rebecca and she will be taking notes of our discussion.

Thank you for your interest in the project and for agreeing to take part in a focus group today.

Have you read the briefing sheet that explains the purpose of the session? [If not, talk them through the briefing sheet and explain that the focus group is about their experience of learning GCSE English/ maths at school.]

The session will take no more than 1 hour. I will be asking you some questions and listening to your answers.

[Set any ground rules for the session]

Before we start, I need you to sign a consent form.

The consent form is a record that you understand the purpose of the project and this session, and that you are happy to take part and for what you say to be recorded and used in our project reports. Although I am asking you to give your name, you will not be named in the report and nothing will be linked to you personally. We will take care with the information you give us and store it safely.

I will also ask you to complete a short information form at the end of the session.

Thank you. Do you have any questions before I begin the focus group?

A. ABOUT YOU

Invite each member of the group to give their name and to say if they have taken part in any maths/ English learning (including GCSE) since leaving school.

B. MATHS

Learning at school

1. How did you feel about maths at secondary school?

Did you like the subject, or aspects of it?

Did you always feel this way or did your view change over time?

Did you feel motivated to learn this subject?

What do you think influenced your attitude to maths?

2. What was your experience of learning the subject?

What was good?

What was not good?

What did you find particularly challenging?

What support, if any, did you receive to try and help you overcome these challenges?

Did you find anyone/ anything particularly helpful/ supportive?

3. What support, if any, would have helped you to improve your maths?

What could your TEACHER have done (differently)?

What could the SCHOOL have done (differently)?

Is there anything YOU could have done?

What about OTHER support? e.g. family

Current situation

4. How do you feel about maths now?

Do you feel the same as you did at school?

Would you be interested in doing further learning in subject? What would encourage you to do so?

[For those who are now studying the subject] Why did you decide to participate? How are you finding learning the subject now?

C. ENGLISH

Learning at school

5. How did you feel about English at secondary school?

Did you like the subject, or aspects of it?

Did you always feel this way or did your view change over time?

Did you feel motivated to learn this subject?

What do you think influenced your attitude to English?

6. What was your experience of learning the subject?

What was good?

What was not good?

What did you find particularly challenging?

What support, if any, did you receive to try and help you overcome these challenges?

Did you find anyone/ anything particularly helpful/ supportive?

7. What support, if any, would have helped you to improve your English?

What could your TEACHER have done (differently)?

What could the SCHOOL have done (differently)?

Is there anything YOU could have done?

What about OTHER support? e.g. family

Current situation

8. How do you feel about English now?

Do you feel the same as you did at school?

Would you be interested in doing further learning in subject? What would encourage you to do so?

[For those who are now studying the subject] Why did you decide to participate? How are you finding learning the subject now?

D. KEY MESSAGES

9. Thinking about EITHER maths or English, what one thing have you found particularly useful in helping you to develop your skills?

10. Do you have any other comments you wish to make?

Closing

Thank you for taking part in this project. The information you have given is very helpful. It will contribute to the project reports.

Please could you complete a short information sheet. This collects background information about you, which will help us in our analysis.

It has been good to meet you. Goodbye.

7. APPENDIX 2: FINDINGS FROM PRACTITIONER-RESEARCHER REFLECTIVE SURVEY

7.1 What practitioners gained from the project

Overall, practitioners said that they enjoyed the project as it enabled them to interact with their learners on a level they do not normally reach.

'I enjoyed the project and uncovered some interesting information.'

'On a personal note, I enjoyed carrying out the interviews and the interaction with learners who were not my learners that I teach.'

Practitioners identified two main benefits from undertaking the research with their learners. Firstly, practitioners found the interviews to be an effective way of getting information from learners about their individual needs and learning requirements. This helped them to reflect on the support they had put in place for learners and adjust this according to their interview responses. This experience reinforced practitioners' perceptions of the importance of listening to their learners.

'I found it to be a good way of getting information from learners, we can check if we are meeting their needs and requirements and adjust our plans to suit. I have realised the importance of making the learners feel valued and respected and that we are listening to them. There is nothing more rewarding than being a part of your learner journey, helping them to gain confidence and improve their performance to meet their goals.'

'The importance of the learner voice - 'getting it straight from the horse's mouth'.'

'I have learnt how supportive we are to our learners. The importance of listening to our learners and creating training plans to suit their individual needs and requirements.'

The second main benefit for practitioners involved in the project was a deeper understanding of how learners' school experiences impacted on their current learning. Practitioners in both the FE college and work-based learning settings were surprised at how negative their learners' experiences of maths and English at school had been. This made them realise that these learners are likely to need additional support to overcome the barriers these experiences have created in their attitudes towards learning maths and English.

'The scale of the issues surrounding secondary education and how they deliver GCSE Maths and English are very significant. The interviews were quite fascinating and revealed some very interesting insights into the learners' individual learning journey in English and Maths. All of the learners I interviewed are very keen to work towards Grade Cs and are aware of the impact this could have on their lives. However, from conducting the research, they all feel that

they held back by their schooling experiences. I've also learnt that where I work (FE College) there is a lot of catching up that needs to be done to help these kids achieve their Maths and English Grades Cs but this spurs me on as an area leader in my college to do something about the situation.'

'I did not realise how big the differences were from school to work based learning and the negative impact school sometimes has. It made me realise even more how relevant work based learning is to those learners who get another chance at education.'

7.2 Implications for future work

Practitioners were committed to using what they had learnt during the project in their future work and delivery. For some practitioners, this included working with their colleagues to ensure that learners had a more positive experience of learning maths and English post-16 than they had at school. Practitioners intended to stress the importance of listening to learners in order to understand how they learn, and using different teaching strategies and adapting training plans to suit their individual needs.

'To ensure our learners at [provider] have a far better learning experience than what they have described about their school experience... through standardisation meetings with the team, stressing the importance of trying different teaching strategies if the learners do not 'get it'. The importance of reinforcing and building on prior learning and listening effectively to learners needs.'

'Ask more open questions, get to know my learners better and understand how they learn, create training plans with their individual styles that they like to learn with.'

One practitioner was also intending to plan for smaller learning groups and more frequent sessions in the next academic year, in response to learners' responses in the interviews.

'That learners would like smaller groups and one session per week... In planning for the delivery on 2016/2017.'

Two practitioners wanted to carry out further research to explore and improve learners' experiencing of learning maths and English with their organisations. These practitioners felt that this was crucial in enabling learners to improve their skills and boost success rates in these subjects.

'The more that can be done to help these kids achieve their English and Maths at Grade C, the better for their lives and their futures. This piece of research prepares me well to carry out further research within the college... so we are

doing everything possible from a leadership, management, teaching and learning perspective to help them to improve these very important skills.'

'I have really enjoyed taking part in this very important piece of research... We would be very happy to look at any other research projects that will help to improve the learners' experience at the college and boost attainment and success rates in Maths and English.'

Practitioners were intending to share what they had learnt from the project with their colleagues in various ways, including presentations at team meetings, workshops, training sessions, and staff development days.