Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of National Tests in Primary School in Wales: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Abstract

Pupils in Wales currently take national tests in reading and numeracy every year from Year 2 until Year 9 (Welsh Government (WG), 2017a). Existing literature considering the experience of such external, standardised tests in primary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) has tended to focus on English children taking standard assessment tests (SATs) at the end of Year 2 and 6 only, specifically exploring the impact of 'test anxiety' and closely related constructs (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Connors, Putwain, Woods & Nicholson, 2009; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012). Whilst there is a growing body of research considering the English primary assessment context, it is argued that there remains a paucity of research considering the unique Welsh context, and, furthermore, a lack of consideration for the parent voice in enabling a broader and more holistic view of the test experience. Therefore, this research aimed to provide an insight into parents' perceptions and experiences of primary school children taking the national tests in Wales. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight parents recruited from two primary schools in different areas of Wales. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was completed. Three super-superordinate themes were identified: 'relationships', 'constructions of child's experience' and 'constructions of the test'. The research findings are discussed in relation to existing theoretical and research literature; namely concepts from Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, a joint family and school systems approach (Dowling & Osborne, 2003) and the relevance to bioecological systems theories of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The implications of the current research for the practice of educational psychology are discussed, including how educational psychologists could work at a variety of systemic levels using tools to explore the test experience with children, parents and school staff, are discussed, alongside the strengths and limitations of the current study. Further areas for future research are suggested, such as explicitly using a case study approach to explore a variety of different perspectives within one

school context, as well as examining the hypothesis that cognitive dissonance exists

throughout the system.

Declaration

This work has not been submitted in substance for any other degree or award at this or any other university of place of learning, nor is being submitted concurrently in candidature for any degree or other award.

Signed: *Emily Clement* (Candidate)   **Date:** 02.05.2019

STATEMENT 1

This thesis is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of DEdPsy.

Signed: *Emily Clement* (Candidate)   **Date:** 02.05.2019

STATEMENT 2

This thesis is the result of my own independent work/investigation, except where otherwise stated, and the thesis has not been edited by a third party beyond what is permitted by Cardiff University's Policy on the Use of Third Party Editors by Research Degree Students. Other sources are acknowledged by explicit references. The views expressed are my own.

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STATEMENT 3

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if accepted, to be available online in the University's Open Access repository and for inter-library loan, and for the title and summary to be made available to outside organisations.

Signed: *Emily Clement* (Candidate)   **Date:** 02.05.2019

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Summary

This thesis consists of three parts: a major literature review, an empirical study and a critical appraisal.

In Part One, the literature review begins with a description of key search terms and literature sources before then outlining the national testing context in the UK, including the differences in England and Wales. The existing literature will then be critically discussed in relation to the impact of testing on children and young people in secondary and primary school contexts, including an appraisal of the 'test anxiety' construct. Literature considering the role of the school and parents in relation to the test experience will also be critically discussed. This then develops into the rationale for the current research, which is presented in Part Two.

In Part Two, there is a brief summary of the existing literature, followed by the empirical study, which provides a detailed account of the current research project. This includes an outline of the chosen methodology and procedure, as well as an interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) of semi-structured interviews with eight parents of primary school-aged children who have experienced taking the national tests in Wales. This analysis, and subsequent themes that emerged, are discussed in relation to psychological literature. Strengths and limitations of the current study are discussed, and possible implications for future research within this area, as well as the relevance to educational psychology practice, are also discussed.

Part Three is divided into two sections: firstly, a critical account of the research practitioner, including the rationale for the current thesis, subsequent methodology considerations and analysis of data; and secondly, a critical consideration of the current research with regard to contribution to knowledge, including how these findings can add to the existing literature, future research and professional practice within educational psychology.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

List of Figures

List of Abbreviations

ALN	Additional Learning Needs
ATL	Association of Teachers and Lectures
DfE	Department for Education
FP	Foundation Phase
FSM	Free School Meals
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
IPA	Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis
KS1	Key Stage 1
KS2	Key Stage 2
LA	Local Authority
LNF	Literacy and Numeracy Framework
NEU	National Education Union
NHS	National Health Service
NQT	Newly Qualified Teacher
NUT	National Union of Teachers
NSPCC	National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills
PGCE	Post Graduate Certificate of Education
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
SATs	Standardised Assessment Tests
STA	Standards and Testing Agency
TEP	Trainee Educational Psychologist
UK	United Kingdom
WG	Welsh Government

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Part 1: Major Literature Review

Word Count: 10,827

Part One: Major Literature Review

1. Introduction

It could be argued that, within the United Kingdom (UK), there is an increasing focus

and expectation on pupils' test results, from both schools and parents (Putwain, 2008a), due

to the testing culture that has developed as children begin taking standardised tests at the age

of 6 or 7 in both England and Wales (Standards & Testing Agency (STA), 2016; Welsh

Government (WG), 2017a). Changes to the national curriculum and subsequent national

testing arrangements in both England and Wales over recent years has brought about concern

regarding the impact of such tests on school-aged pupils, in particular, on children's mental

health and wellbeing (Brown & Carr, 2018). A focus on mental health in relation to testing is

reflected in empirical research, with a growing body of literature that examines the construct

of test anxiety and its possible consequences. Test anxiety can be defined as a situation-

specific form of anxiety, whereby individuals perceive the situation of testing or assessment as

threatening and therefore respond with a heightened state of anxiety, underpinned with

cognitive, behavioural, physiological and emotional components (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995;

Zeidner, 1998, 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005). A recent international review suggested a

significantly negative association between test anxiety and outcomes of standardised tests

(Von der Embse, Jester, Roy & Post, 2018).

In the UK, research has typically focused on secondary school pupils and older (e.g.,

Owen-Yeates, 2005; Putwain, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b), with the small amount of literature

considering testing in primary schools continuing to focus on exploring test-related stress and

anxiety (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012). However,

there is a lack of empirical research considering the parent voice regarding the primary school

test experience in the UK, which is particularly pertinent given that some research has

concluded, on the basis of teacher reports, that parents are potentially the largest source of

pressure for primary school children when taking formal, standardised tests (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain et al., 2012).

1.1. Overview of the literature review

This literature reviews begins by outlining the national testing arrangements in primary schools in Wales in order to set the context of primary-aged testing. As the majority of the UK-based research that considers the experience of primary school testing has been undertaken in England, the researcher felt it would be apposite to highlight the subtle differences in Welsh and English primary school testing processes, and therefore the Standardised Assessment Tests (SATs) that are taken by primary school pupils in England are also considered for contextual purposes.

The impact of testing on school-aged pupils will then be discussed, by initially exploring the construct of test anxiety and how this has been used in research when considering the reported impacts of testing on students, in both secondary and primary schools. The researcher will then explore how a systemic perspective may offer a more holistic perspective on the experience of testing for children and young people, and within this, discussing the role of the school and parents. The researcher will then offer some critical points regarding the application of the test anxiety construct in research. The literature review will conclude by considering the rationale for the current research and the subsequently developed research question, within the context of the existing literature discussed.

1.2. Search terms and sources

The empirical literature included in this review was obtained from online databases, including PsycINFO, Education Resources Information Center (ERIC), Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA) and Google Scholar. Search terms included "national test*[1]",

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[1] An asterisk indicates a truncated search term, e.g. "national test*" would also include the phrases "national testing" and "national tests".

"SATs", "primary school" and "parent*". For a detailed overview of the literature review procedure, see Appendix A. Further literature was selected though the references lists of primary sources. 'Grey literature' has also been included to help contextualise the area of study: relevant English and Welsh Government legislation and documents were accessed through focused online searches, as were press releases and reports from relevant teaching unions.

1.3. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

The research included in the literature review focused specifically on formal, standardised and school-based testing. Other than international systematic reviews, only studies based in western populations were included, and where possible, specifically based in the UK, as it could be argued that the specific national testing context and education systems differ too substantially from that in other populations. Some articles that were not part of peer reviewed journals, for example doctoral theses, were included due to the particular article's relevance to the current research. Only documents published in English were included.

2. Context of Primary School Testing in England and Wales

It is beyond the scope of this thesis to offer a detailed overview of the inception, development and subsequent reforms of the national curriculum and corresponding standardised assessment approaches in England and Wales. However, the literature review will begin by outlining the current position in both England and Wales, in order to contextualise relevant literature that is discussed and subsequently led to the formation of the current research project.

2.1. SATs in England

In England, a new national curriculum was introduced in 2014 to all local authority (LA) maintained primary schools and some academies (Department for Education (DfE), 2013). This included the introduction of new statutory national curriculum tests, also referred to as

standard assessment tests (SATs), from 2016 (Education Committee, 2017; STA, 2016). SATs are currently administered to pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) only, in the subjects of English (reading and grammar, punctuation and spelling) and Mathematics (arithmetic and reasoning) (STA, 2017).

Changes to the current SATs involved not only differences in the content of tests in line with the new curriculum, but also the way in which the results are published; national curriculum levels have now been replaced with a standardised score (Education Committee, 2017). The current system of SATs is an evolving picture: in 2017, Education Secretary Justine Greening announced that, from 2023, the KS1 SATs would no longer be statutory and a teacher-based assessment for Reception children would be introduced from 2020, to provide a baseline score for the purpose of pupil progress tracking by correlating these scores with end of KS2 SATs data (DfE & STA, 2017a; Education Committee, 2017).

The test results of Year 6 pupils continue to be published at a national and LA level, and as such, SATs results play a part of the accountability system within primary schools in England due to: publicly available school league tables comparing the percentage of pupils achieving expected standards for attainment and progress in Mathematics and English; floor and coasting standards based on the number of pupils achieving said expected standards; Ofsted's inclusion of KS1 and KS2 data in its judgement of schools during inspection; and, performance-related pay for teachers (DfE, 2013; DfE & STA, 2017a; Education Committee, 2017). As such, it could be argued that SATs can be considered 'high-stakes testing' due to the impact the data has across the school system. This impact will be discussed in subsequent sections of this literature review.

SATs have been a part of primary school assessment following the introduction of the Education Reform Act 1988, and prior to the most recent changes in 2016, pupils in Year 2 and Year 6 were expected to take SATs in English and Mathematics, and up until 2009, in Science as well (Murphy, Kerr, Lundy & McEvoy, 2010). It should be noted that due to the recent changes

in the national curriculum and SATs, much of the research literature that will be discussed in subsequent sections of this review refers to the previous SATs and national curriculum system. However, it is argued that many of the issues, including how SATs as 'high-stakes' tests are experienced, remain pertinent.

2.2. National Tests in Wales

In 2013, the WG created the Education (National Curriculum) (Assessment Arrangements for Reading and Numeracy) (Wales) Order 2013 No. 433, which introduced a statutory duty for maintained schools in Wales to administer the national tests in reading and numeracy (procedural and reasoning) to all pupils in Years 2-9 from 2014 onwards (WG, 2017a). The purpose of the national tests in Wales is to act as a "diagnostic" tool to allow teachers to "have a common understanding of strengths and areas for improvement" in reading and numeracy skills (WG, 2017a, p. 2). Unlike in England, the WG does not publish league tables of schools based on results from the national tests (Donaldson, 2015). The WG (2018a) states that results from the national tests are not included in performance measures that inform school categorisation, as the focus of the tests should be to understand learner progress, and not measure school accountability.

From the academic year 2018/19, "online personalised assessments will be phased in over a three-year period", where "the difficulty level of the questions will adjust to provide a personalised experience for each learner" (WG, 2018b, p. 3). This will begin with the procedural numeracy test in order to replace the paper-based tests that are currently administered (WG, 2018b). Due to the timing of data collection, it should be noted that the current research is not based on these new changes to the national tests.

Pupils in Years 2-9 taking the national tests are given two results for each of the three tests: an age-standardised score and a progress measure. The age-standardised score adjusts a child's raw score depending on the age of the child at the time of testing compared to their age-related peers, with the average age-standardised score ranging from 85-115 (WG, 2018b).

The progress measure compares both the pupil's score with the national data across Wales for that year group as well as the pupil's score from previous tests year on year (WG, 2018b). The score is divided into categories from considerably above to considerably below average (see Figure 1).

Figure 1: The progress measure chart showing a pupil's progress (indicated by the pink cross) across years as well as relative to the pupil's national peer group (indicated by the purple shaded box). Reprinted from 'Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales – 2018: Information for Parents and Carers of Children in Years 2 to 9' by WG (2018b) for the purpose of illustration for instruction.
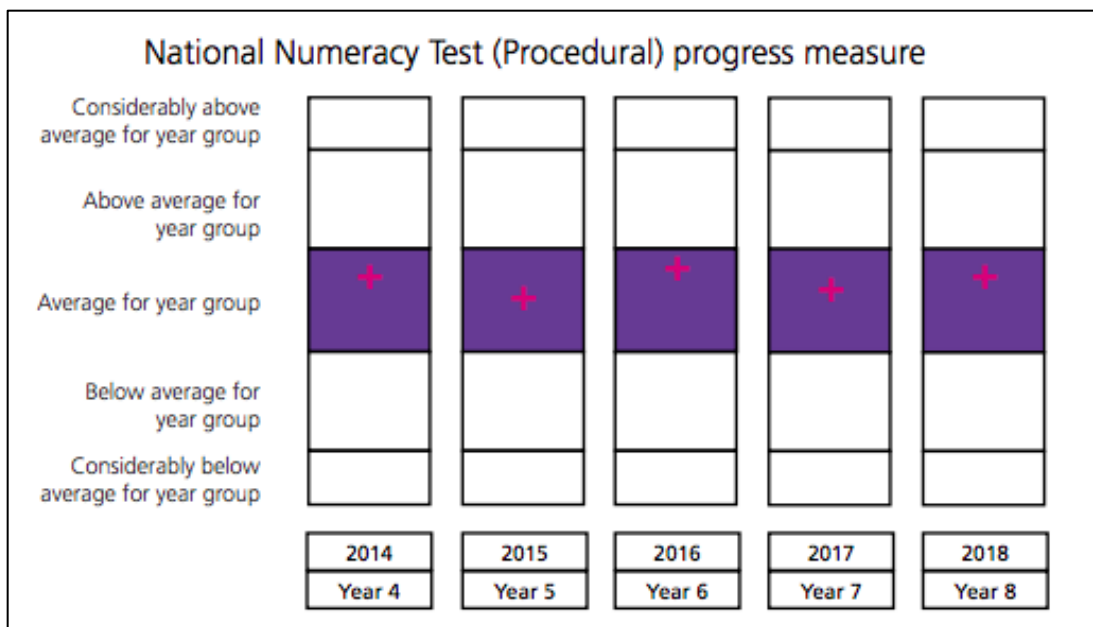
The national tests were introduced alongside the literacy and numeracy framework (LNF) as part of the WG's political agenda to improving levels of literacy and numeracy in Wales, partly in response to concern regarding Wales' performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 (Dauncey, 2013). The PISA surveys, focusing on literacy in mathematics, science and reading, are administered every three years on behalf of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) across 34 member countries (Wheater, Ager, Burge & Sizmur, 2013). In 2009, Wales' mean score on the three testing domains had decreased from the previous testing cycle in 2006 and Wales had the

statistically significant lowest mean scores across all three domains when compared to the other UK nations (Bradshaw, Ager, Burge & Wheater, 2010). Wales' performance in 2012 and 2015 were both significantly lower again (Wheater et al., 2013; Jerrim & Shure, 2016).

The recent independent review into the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, commissioned by the WG and led by Professor Graham Donaldson, highlighted the declining PISA results as "a significant driver for change", suggesting that the current "assessment arrangements are not making the contribution they should to improving learning" and therefore "the current national curriculum and assessment arrangements no longer meet the needs of the children and young people of Wales" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 10-11). Donaldson (2015, p. 117) outlined how "external, standardised testing provides important benchmarking information and should be used in combination with school tests and teacher assessment". Additionally, the review reported how many respondents viewed the current national tests as a beneficial addition to teacher assessments; external, standardised tests, such as the national tests, arguably offer a high level of reliability (the test would consistently produce the same results when repeated) and can be used as a complimentary form of assessment that offers a quantitative benchmark to impact on future teaching and learning (Donaldson, 2015).

However, it was teachers of young pupils that raised concern regarding the tests' usefulness and "did not necessarily merit the disruption to teaching and learning, and in some cases the levels of anxiety" generated from the tests themselves (Donaldson, 2015, p. 79). This concern was echoed by the OECD (2014, p. 95) who identified the possible tension in Year 2, where "the Foundation Phase curriculum emphasises opportunities to explore the world, learning by doing, understanding how things work and finding different ways to solve problems"; this arguably questions whether the national tests, at this age specifically, are congruent with the curriculum. The OECD (2014) also highlighted Wales as the only OECD country to test pupils annually, and suggested a need to "consider reducing the number of years covered by the Reading and Numeracy Tests" (OECD, 2014, p. 8). This is an issue

reiterated by Donaldson's (2015) review, emphasising that testing "frequency should be kept to a minimum in view of its impact on the curriculum and teaching and learning" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 117), suggesting developments to the current testing arrangements could include a rolling programme of testing across a number of different curriculum areas, involving a sample of pupils and would not need to be annual.

As a result of Donaldson's (2015) review, the WG (2017c) are currently developing a new curriculum. As yet, there is little information on how this will impact on the current national testing system.

3. Impact of Testing on School-Aged Pupils

Statutory assessments, such as SATs in England, have played a key role in the education system since the introduction of the national curriculum, as a means of "ensuring that every child is supported to leave primary school prepared to succeed" by helping "teachers to raise standards, and to give every child the best chance to master reading, writing and arithmetic" (DfE & STA, 2017b, p. 8). As outlined by the WG (2019), tests are a familiar tool used by schools to assess a child's learning, and the national tests in Wales offer an opportunity for teachers to gain "consistent, detailed information on each individual learner's development and progress in literacy and numeracy" (WG, 2019, p. 3), as well as highlighting areas for improvement. Additionally, in information designed for parents and carers, the WG (2019) highlights how the national tests are designed to provide useful information for teachers to use alongside other forms of assessment of a child to "identify strengths and also areas where more help may be needed", whilst recognising that "any test can only look at a limited range of skills and abilities" and "some children will not perform at their best on the day of the test" meaning "their test results alone may not give a full picture of their ability" (WG, 2019, p. 6).

However, it could be argued that changes to the national curriculum and subsequent national testing arrangements in both England and Wales over recent years has brought about

concern regarding the impact of testing on school-aged pupils, specifically considering the impact of such tests on children's mental health and wellbeing (Brown & Carr, 2018). The National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC, 2018) reported that in the academic year 2017/18, Childline delivered 3,135 counselling sessions that focused on exam stress; 1,579 sessions were held with 12-15 year olds and 203 sessions with children aged 11 years and below. NSPCC (2018) report that issues raised in these counselling sessions included: an overwhelming workload; pressure from parents; and worries about whether pupils would get the grades they wanted. In addition, NSPCC (2018) also stated that some pupils reported self-harming, feeling depressed and/or experiencing anxiety. Hutchings (2015, p. 5) argues in research commissioned by the National Union of Teachers (NUT) that this increasingly high level of school-related stress and anxiety in school-aged pupils is "caused by increased pressure from tests/exams; greater awareness at younger ages of their own 'failure'; and the increased rigour and academic demands of the curriculum".

A large body of international literature has considered the specific construct of 'test anxiety', which will be briefly defined and then critically discussed. Research has highlighted the relationship between test anxiety and a variety of outcomes. Von der Embse, Jester, Roy and Post (2018) conducted a 30-year meta-analytic review of 238 studies to examine how test anxiety is related to: outcomes in standardised achievement tests; intrapersonal factors including pupil motivation; and how demographic variables may predict test anxiety. Von der Embse et al. (2018) found a significantly negative association between test anxiety and outcomes of standardised tests, with the 'high-stakes' nature of the test related to higher levels of test anxiety compared to typical classroom tests and quizzes. It should be noted that the majority of studies included in Von der Embse et al.'s (2018) review involved pupils in secondary school or undergraduate and graduate students, with only nine studies focused on primary school aged pupils, reflecting the bias in the research towards older pupils.

Furthermore, as the results from Von der Embse et al.'s (2018) review are correlational, this does not imply causation between so-called 'high-stakes' testing and test anxiety.

3.1. The Construct of 'Test Anxiety'

As outlined in this section, much of the existing research considering the experience of taking tests or exams has focused on exploring the impact of test anxiety. The construct of test anxiety is also referred to as exam anxiety, exam stress or test stress in research (Von der Embse et al., 2018). Test anxiety can be defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety, whereby individuals perceive the situation of testing or assessment as threatening and therefore respond with a heightened state of anxiety, underpinned with cognitive, behavioural, physiological and emotional components (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 1998, 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005).

The construct of test anxiety is not a recent phenomenon, and has been conceptualised for over a century in research: Yerkes and Dodson (1908), as cited in Von der Embse and Witmer (2014), described how an individual's particularly high or low levels of anxiety were associated with lower performance on a given task, therefore suggesting an 'optimal' state of anxiety benefits performance. The concept of emotion as a central tenet to test anxiety influenced early models, such as the interference model, which illustrated how emotionality and worry impact on the recall and application of information, resulting in a low performance in a testing situation (e.g. Alpert & Haber, 1960; Liebert & Morris, 1967; Wine, 1967). Later models, such as the deficit model, hypothesise that test anxiety occurs due to an individual's lack of knowledge and study-related skills, and therefore it is the lack of such knowledge and skills that leads to these individuals not performing as well in test situations compared to individuals with lower test anxiety (e.g. Culler & Holaham, 1980; Tobias, 1985).

However, it could be argued that these models view the construct of test anxiety as something that resides solely 'within-child', and as such, overly reduce a complex and variable construct without considering the impact of external factors. More recently proposed models

of test anxiety have started to consider the importance of environmental influences. For example, Lowe et al.'s (2008) biopsychosocial model of test anxiety proposes biological, psychological and social factors combine to contribute to the manifestation of test anxiety. There is, however, a lack of empirical research that fully explores this model of test anxiety, and there is little clarity on how much each individual component contributes to test performance (Von der Embse & Witmer, 2014). In addition, Segool, Nathaniel, Mata and Gallant (2014) considered a cognitive-behavioural perspective, suggesting that cognitions and prior learning experiences could be combined with the social context the individual is placed in as a means of explaining and further understanding the construct of test anxiety (Von der Embse et al. 2018).

3.2. Impact of Testing on Secondary School Pupils

In the UK, research considering the experience of testing within compulsory education has typically focused on secondary school pupils preparing for and completing General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams. Research suggests that GCSE results are particularly considered 'high-stakes' due to how the results influence future educational and occupational opportunities, which impacts on pupils' personal identity and self-worth (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009a, 2011). Putwain and Daly (2014) found that 16.4% of a sample of 2435 English secondary school pupils from 11 schools self-reported to be highly test anxious and therefore at risk of underperformance in tests such as GCSEs. However, it is acknowledged that pupils' level of test anxiety (low, mid or high) was categorised based on three scales of test anxiety, extrapolated from two different test anxiety questionnaires[2], which require Likert-style responses; test items included statements such as "during exams I find myself thinking about the consequences of failing" (Putwain & Daly, 2014). It could be

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[2] Putwain and Daly (2014) report that the worry and tension scales used were from the 'Revised Test Anxiety Questionnaire (Benson, Moulin-Julian, Schwarzer, Seipp & El-Zahhar, 1992; Hagtvet & Benson, 1997) and a social derogation scale used was from the 'Friedben Test Anxiety Scale' (Friedman & Bendas-Jacob, 1997).

argued that, through self-reported measures, the pupils surveyed may offer socially desirable responses (Robson & McCartan, 2016), or demonstrate demand characteristics, whereby the responses reflect what the participant believes the researcher expects (Gavin, 2008), which may have skewed the findings of the study. The critiques of adopting the construct of test anxiety in research, including the measures used in such research, is explored in further depth in a subsequent section of this literature review.

In a replication of Kyriacou and Butcher's (1993) case study of Year 11 students in the north of England, Owen-Yeates (2005) reported, through questionnaires, that students identified the main sources of stress as arising from examinations, deadlines for assessed work (e.g. coursework), revision and too much homework. There have been reported gender differences in how testing impacts on secondary school pupils; for example, Owen-Yeates (2005) found that Year 11 girls reported to be more worried about exams than boys, a finding echoed by Putwain and Daly (2014). Nevertheless, in comparison with Kyriacou and Butcher's (1993) study, Owen-Yeates (2005) claims that stress reported by boys has increased over the 10 year period between studies. Caution should be exercised when interpreting the gender difference, however, as it may be that girls are more likely to be open and willing to admit to examination worries than boys (Kyriacou & Butcher, 1993).

Conversely, Putwain (2008b) found that although self-reported test anxiety was negatively correlated with GCSE examination results in a sample of 557 Year 11 students, this association was not significantly moderated by gender. It was, however, moderated by socio-economic background: students who were from a lower socio-economic background reported higher scores of test anxiety, and, in addition, a stronger inverse relationship was observed between test anxiety and GCSE results for those pupils from lower socio-economic backgrounds (Putwain, 2008b). However, the link between self-reported test anxiety and GCSE results was correlational, and Putwain (2008b) reported this to have a weak effect size; in essence, this study cannot offer a causal link between higher test anxiety and lower GCSE

results. In addition, Putwain (2008b) measured socio-economic background through a questionnaire that required pupils to report the employment details of the head of household, which was coded in line with the Office for National Statistics (2002) categorisation of occupations. This is arguably only one way of measuring socio-economic background, and it is acknowledged that alternative findings may be observed through different constructions of socio-economic background, for example, eligibility for free school meals (FSM) (Putwain, 2008b). Nevertheless, Putwain's (2008b) findings may suggest the need to consider the wider social and cultural systems within which students experience testing.

Denscombe (2000, p. 372) highlighted how some students in Years 10 and 11 cope better than others when taking GCSEs, and that this is likely to be a result of "differing personalities, abilities and cultural pressures", which arguably emphasises an alternative, broader perspective to the individual psychological level in which test stress and anxiety has been explained, rather than suggesting that tests such as GCSEs prove stressful regardless of personal predispositions. In an effort to capture the richness, and arguably idiographic nature, of the test anxious experience in comparison to the self-reported quantitative studies within the area, Putwain's (2009a, 2009b) qualitative study used grounded theory to explore the factors that lead to GCSEs being perceived as stressful, as well as how this impacts on the students. The emergent themes were centred on a narrative of stress, achievement and esteem, and appear to exist within a social context. For example, motivation to achieve and avoid failure was underpinned through judgement relating to esteem and the perception of acceptance from important individuals within the students' lives. Additionally, the experience of stress and feeling anxious was placed within the wider school context, which is determined by policies that schools and teachers may be obligated to work within. Nevertheless, Putwain (2009a, p. 391) highlighted the specific state of examination anxiety as being "associated with facilitating effects prior to examinations and debilitating effects during examinations", emphasising the exam-taking experience as a process as opposed to a single event.

In an attempt to consider further the subjectivity of examination stress experienced by pupils preparing for and taking GCSEs, Putwain (2011) used the interviews collected in an earlier study (Putwain, 2009a, 2009b) to explore the detail of examination stress further. Putwain (2011) suggested that pupils' experiences were 'idiosyncratic', whilst claiming that examination stress experienced by pupils was made up of a number of factors, including the fear of failure, value placed on academic achievement, poor personal competence beliefs regarding demonstrating memory recall of knowledge during exams, personal predisposition to appraise events as threatening, workload, assessment formats, preparation prior to exams and personal view of ability as fixed or incremental. However, it should be noted that Putwain (2011) found that stress was not only referred to in the context of exams, but also in relation to meeting coursework demands and preparing for exams, and therefore caution should be taken when considering how applicable the themes are to the unique experience of exams alone. It should also be noted that the various studies in this area written by Putwain (2009a, 2009b, 2011) are based on the same semi-structured interviews, which involved 34 pupils in Year 10 and 11 from six different secondary schools in the north of England. The participants were recruited after completing Spielberger's (1980) 'Test Anxiety Questionnaire'; participants' scores were within the six highest for each school. Although Putwain (2011) acknowledges that the schools were selected to reflect a range of socio-demographic backgrounds and geographical locations, the sample is still small and restricted to six schools in one area of England; any claims of generalisability of the eight identified areas of examination stress should be circumspect, particularly given the emphasis on the subjective nature in which pupils appraised exams as stressful.

Considering that the focus of existing literature appears to have been on the potential detrimental effects of taking tests and exams once pupils are in secondary schools and beyond, it would seem apposite to examine the experience of taking formal, standardised tests for younger pupils in primary school.

3.3. Impact of Testing on Primary School Pupils

There appears to be a gap in the literature regarding the experience of primary school pupils taking formal, standardised tests in the UK, with the small amount of existing literature in relation to SATs in England again focusing on exploring test-related stress and anxiety. Connor (2001) highlighted that while the use of SATs at the end of KS1 and KS2 appear to be associated with higher standards of achievement, there are concerns about the potential impact of these tests on children's psychological and emotional wellbeing, as a result of constant and increasing demand for academic achievement (Mental Health Foundation, 1999). In addition, research in primary schools has suggested that "children as young as 7 can experience stress and that, for some children, the SATs can be the source and scene of maladaptive signs and symptoms" (Connor, 2003, p. 106). In addition, Connors, Putwain, Woods and Nicholson (2009) conducted a mixed methods study with Year 6 pupils and teachers, and report that lower SATs levels in English, Maths and Science were significantly correlated with higher self-reported levels of test anxiety. However, Connors et al. (2009) report that these pupils also had lower resiliency levels, and as the link between anxiety and SATs levels was correlational, it is not indicative of a causational relationship.

Connor's (2001) initial study into pupil stress and SATs involved Educational Psychologists (EPs) from the Farnham and Godalming service surveying primary schools to identify children displaying a significant change in behaviour related to stress or anxiety during the period of time leading up to and during the SATs testing experience. School staff from 15 schools identified a total of 25 children who they believed were showing stress and/or anxiety above a 'typical' level. There were 11 symptoms that school staff reported, included tearfulness, tenseness, attention-seeking behaviour and psychological withdrawal. It should be noted that relying on teachers to identify children may not be reliable and the judgement on what would constitute stress and anxiety above a 'typical' level would appear to be highly subjective. Connor (2001) also reported that 14 children were identified as showing stress by

parents, with behaviours such as physical sickness, tearfulness and interrupted sleep patterns. However, of these 14 children, only two children were also identified by school staff, suggesting that parents may be aware of more anxiety or stress related behaviour at home that is unnoticed or not apparent in school for some children. Connor (2003) suggested in a follow up study that parents should be encouraged to inform school staff of any signs of anxiety in their children at home.

The 'high-stakes' perception of SATs relative to the age and stage of primary school pupils is also apparent, although there is arguably less 'at stake' for the individual students compared to other standardised assessment, such as GCSEs, in terms of further educational and/or occupational achievements (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2009a, 2011). Connor (2001, p. 106) reported a number of concerns expressed by some children, including the worry "that a poor score might affect the set or group into which they would eventually be placed", a sentiment that was also echoed by pupils in Connors' et al. (2009) study. Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind and Sheehy (2004) conducted an ethnographic study with two primary schools and found that pupils were highly aware of SATs and the importance of achieving, and this impacted on pupils' identity and status within the class based on their ability. This is echoed by Putwain, Connors, Woods and Nicholson (2012, p. 299) who suggest that SATs create a risk that "children's identity as learners become defined in terms of attainment closely related to self-worth". Connors et al. (2009) conducted focus groups with Year 6 pupils and individual interviews with teachers to gain a better understanding of how Year 6 pupils experience SATs, and emergent themes included: attitude to SATs, SATs related emotions and sources of SATs related pressure. The researchers reported that the 'high-stakes' perception appeared to differ across teachers, parents and pupils, with parents attributing "considerable importance to their children's performance in the KS2 SATs, seeing it as a potential means of securing a good start to their children's high school education if the children did well enough to be placed in a good set" (Connors et al., 2009, p. 8). However, this assertion was made by teachers, and therefore

is a highly subjective interpretation and generalisation to all parents' perceptions and attitudes towards SATs. It could be argued that this 'high-stakes' message is communicated by significant adults in the pupils' lives (i.e. teachers and parents), and this will be discussed in further detail in subsequent sections of this literature review.

From the pupils' perspective, Connors et al. (2009) reported a mixture of positive (e.g. excited) and negative (e.g. nervous) emotions towards SATs. This also seemed to be time and situation-dependent, with lower levels of negative emotions during the 'lower-stakes' practise SATs tests that are completed in the lead up to the 'real' SATs. Furthermore, Connors et al. (2009, p. 9) reported that "many pupils anticipated feeling a sense of relief once the SATs were 'over and done with'".

Connors' et al. (2009) mixed method study offers a wider perspective, beyond the test anxiety or related constructs, to how all children experience SATs, which has highlighted the variety of pupil perceptions towards SATs. For example, Putwain, Connors, Woods and Nicholson (2012) explored whether Year 6 pupils experienced stress and anxiety during the period prior to SATs by conducting small focus groups with Year 6 pupils from three different primary schools, in conjunction with interviewing the head teacher and Year 6 teacher from each school. The researchers found that the pupils shared a mixture of both positive and negative experiences of SATs: some pupils described the experience as anxiety-provoking in line with a threat appraisal of stress, whilst others described the experience as exciting, in line with a challenge appraisal of stress (Putwain et al., 2012). Although it could be argued that both categorisations of pupils found SATs stressful, how this stress manifested as positive or negative varied. However, it should be noted that the findings are based on three focus groups with 18 Year 6 pupils from three different primary schools, and therefore not representative of the experiences of all Year 6 pupils across England. Furthermore, Putwain et al. (2012) outline how the three head teachers were asked to select the six children to take part in each of the focus groups. Although the authors claim that head teachers were asked "to ensure that pupils

represented a diversity of ability judged on the basis of ongoing classroom work" (Putwain et al., 2012, p. 292), it may be the case that the pupils were not representative of the wider class population's experience of tests. This possible bias in the sampling method may mean generalisations to the wider population are not possible. Finally, Putwain et al. (2012) claim that the pupils were able to speak openly about SATs within the focus groups, and were not impeded by peer influences which may lead to pupils 'downplaying' the importance of school, and SATs, in front of their peers; the authors term this "the 'too cool for school' effect" (Putwain et al., 2012, p. 301). However, it may be the case that pupils gave responses that they felt were socially desirable and/or reflective of what they felt the researchers wanted to hear (i.e. demand characteristics) (Gavin, 2008).

Connors et al. (2009, p. 9) reported that "some pupils indicated that, if given the choice, they would not continue to do SATs whereas others would continue in order to see 'if I had learnt anything' and because '…you need to challenge yourself'", highlighting the variety in pupil perspective of the value of SATs at an individual pupil level. Similar to Putwain et al. (2012), this claim appears to contradict the construction that formal tests or exams will only result in negative consequences for all pupils, but instead, some pupils see the experience as motivating. Therefore, there may be value in exploring the broader experience of all pupils taking formal tests to understand the wider perspective on how this experience is understood in the primary school context. Additionally, it would seem apposite to explore the role of the school and parents, in order to further understand the various systems in which children experience testing.

3.4. A Systems Theory Perspective

In light of the evidence surveyed, it could be argued that there are many different factors that have the potential to impact on a child's experience of testing, and these factors are likely to have varying influences across a child's development (McDonald, 2001). As a child progresses throughout education, their past experiences and beliefs regarding tests, which are

influenced by a range of systemic factors, will impact upon their reactions when placed in a formal test situation (McDonald, 2001).

Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory highlights the importance of understanding an individual's development within the context of that individual's environment. The model is represented as five interconnected systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. The microsystem refers to the environment closest to an individual, including family, peers and school. The mesosystem represents interactions between aspects of the microsystem and the exosystem, which involves social structures that may indirectly impact upon the individual, for example, structures within the community. The macrosystem refers to overarching societal and cultural values, including public policy, which contextualise the environment of the individual. Finally, the chronosystem refers to how the individual and his/her system changes over time. Subsequent developments to the model include Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bioecological model of human development, also known as the general ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This extension to the ecological paradigm included the role of the individual's genetics, biology, psychology and behaviour, "fused dynamically with the ecological systems" previously constructed (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv).

Exploring the impact of these systemic factors, including the role of teachers and parents in relation to testing, would arguably illuminate the wider context and experience in which testing occurs, and therefore the impact of testing on pupils.

3.4.1. Role of the School. The first Health and Education select committees joint inquiry, which considered the role of education in children's mental health, suggested "government and schools must be conscious of the stress and anxiety that they are placing on pupils and ensure that sufficient time is allowed for activities which develop life-long skills for well-being" (Commons Select Committee, 2017, p. 8). Brown and Carr (2018) suggest it is the response of schools to SATs and other national testing requirements (e.g. GCSEs) that are of

concern, rather than the pupil's own pressure to perform well in such tests. Furthermore, Owen-Yeates' (2005) qualitative research with Year 11 students completing GCSEs found many significant differences between what students suggested caused them stress compared with what teachers hypothesised would cause the students stress. Owen-Yeates (2005, p. 51) concluded that "if teachers are to help reduce stress in their students at this critical stage of their education, then it is important for the teachers to listen to the voices of their students and not to act merely on their own preconceptions".

However, there appears to be a tension where schools are required to use results from tests as a measure against target setting and other accountability measures; the Commons Select Committee (2017, p.8) acknowledged that current accountability measures, such as Ofsted[3], are "primarily based on attainment data and a thin range of measures", into which SATs results fall, which is restricting schools in being able to address wider mental health and wellbeing concerns. The Association of Directors of Public Health commented that "children with higher levels of emotional, behavioural, social and school wellbeing have higher levels of academic achievement on average" (Commons Select Committee, 2017, p. 8). From this claim, it could be argued that the negative impact that testing may have on some pupils' mental health and wellbeing may lead to lower levels of academic achievement on average for those pupils. However, this is arguably a broad assertion that dismisses the claims made by Connors et al. (2009) and Putwain et al. (2012) highlighting the variety in pupil perspective, both positive and negative, of the experience of SATs at an individual pupil level.

It has been suggested that anxiety experienced by children taking formal tests, such as SATs, in primary school may partly be accounted for by a transmission of pressure from teachers, as SATs results play a part in target setting and school league table position (Connors

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[3] It should be noted that the newly released draft Ofsted framework, which is currently undergoing consultation, continues to highlight that "results from national tests and examinations which meet government expectations" (Ofsted, 2019, p. 11) will be an aspect that inspectors will use to measure the 'quality of education' in schools.

et al., 2009). Troman (2008) undertook qualitative research using informal conversations and participant observation of five head teachers and 37 teachers over a school year, offering an insight into the lived experience of different primary school staff in relation to SATs. The research highlighted the concerns relating to not only the use of SATs results to inform league tables, but also the negative impact on pupils' mental health and wellbeing. Troman (2008) reported school staff implementing a variety of ameliorating strategies to this negative impact, such as allowing Year 6 pupils to bring in toys to SATs sessions. The impact on teaching staff is also felt to be one of personal accountability for pupil performance in SATs, with one Year 6 teacher quoted as feeling that she has "the responsibility for getting good results" (Troman, 2008, p. 623). However, Troman (2008, p. 626) also highlighted how some teachers reported "achieving good SATs results was seen as rewarding and morale building, especially in low [socio-economic status] schools". This arguably suggests the teacher's perception of SATs is not simply to be constructed as wholly negative, and the apparent contradiction here may be a reflection of Troman's (2008) ethnographic methodological approach, which allowed him to gain an in-depth analysis over a school year.

It could be argued that children are made to feel SATs results are important due to the importance teachers attribute to the results, therefore emphasising the perception that SATs can only be passed or failed, and failing should be avoided (Connor, 2001, 2003; Hall et al., 2004). Recent research has considered how language in relation to SATs is used by teachers in primary schools; the use of 'fear appeals' are messages that emphasise the negative outcome of a situation, as a means of motivating the individual to act to avoid such an outcome (Ruiter, Kessels, Peters & Kok, 2014). With regards to the test experience, research suggests that fear appeals are used by teachers to motivate pupils and elicit more effort in preparing for tests in order to avoid failing (e.g. Putwain & Roberts, 2012; Putwain et al., 2016; Putwain & von der Embse, 2018; Sprinkle, Hunt, Simonds & Comadena, 2006). The way in which pupils appraise fear appeals impacts on subsequent engagement with the test in question; for example,

Putwain et al. (2016) posit from research with secondary students that when the fear appeal is appraised as challenging, students were more likely to engage compared with a threatening appraisal. Additionally, Putwain and von der Embse (2018) explored teachers' use of fear appeals and timing reminders, from the perspective of teachers, in relation to perceived school accountability pressure, teacher self-efficacy and teacher belief that pupils would appraise messages as a threat. The findings suggested that teachers used fear appeals and timing reminders differently; fear appeals were found to be used more often when: teachers believed pupils would appraise such communication as worrying, when the outcome of the test was judged as important, and when low self-efficacy in relation to pupil engagement was reported by teachers (Putwain & von der Embse, 2018). Timing reminders were also found to be used in the same conditions as fear appeals, as well as when teachers consider there to be a higher accountability pressure. Putwain and von der Embse (2018, p. 1016) concluded the findings reflected a sense of "pressure from above, below and within", suggesting the underlying factors that may influence a teacher's behaviour in the classroom prior to formal tests or exams. The researchers highlighted how the majority of respondents (459 compared to 354) worked in primary schools; however, as participants surveyed included both secondary and primary school teachers, this may suggest the findings cannot be specifically generalised to the primary school context as the nature of tests in primary and secondary schools is arguably different to one another.

In addition, Mamaniat (2014) conducted a doctoral thesis research project to explore how language was used by teachers when preparing primary school children for SATs, and concluded that teachers in Year 2 and Year 6 used a combination of positive motivational communication and negative threat-type communication, with the former more frequently used than the latter. Mamaniat (2014) also suggested that teachers 'fine tune' the language used, depending on their judgement of the desired outcome on the children. Furthermore, Putwain and Best (2011) attempted to explore the use of fear appeals in the primary

classroom by exposing primary school pupils to a week of 'low threat' conditions where pupils were reminded on a twice-daily basis of a Maths test at the end of the week, and then a second week of 'high threat' conditions where pupils were reminded three times a day of the Maths test using fear appeals. The researchers report that pupils performed more poorly in the test in the 'high threat' condition, and described experiencing thoughts and behaviour associated with test anxiety. Although Putwain and Best's (2011) research offers an experimental approach to exploring the impact of fear appeals on test anxiety and standardised test scores in the primary school context, the manipulations within the conditions are arguably artificial and the standardised test will not have been considered the same in terms of the specific nature of SATs.

Connor (2001) suggested that stress surrounding SATs was minimised in certain primary schools that had attempted to normalise the routine of testing, for example by practising with past papers. In addition, there was an emphasis on "'keeping things low key'…by reducing the emphasis on the concept of testing…and offering reassurance that the results are not going to be critical to the children and probably not even remembered" (Connor, 2001, p. 106). Furthermore, Connors' et al. (2009, p. 11) study involving interviews with Year 6 teachers regarding SATs found that teachers consistently reported that they "did not put undue pressures on their pupils in regard to the forthcoming SATs" and instead suggested the "greatest amount of pressure brought to bear on pupils, was believed…to come from their parents." (Connors et al., 2009, p. 10). However, it could be argued that the teachers interviewed were unlikely to admit to the researchers that they had actively and consciously placed 'undue pressures' on pupils, due to the fact it would be perceived as professionally unacceptable.

Recent research has considered other aspects of the classroom that are impacted upon due to formal testing. Silfer, Sjorberg and Bagger (2016) conducted research into the daily life of Swedish classrooms during the national testing period for 9 and 10 year olds. The

research highlighted how the child-teacher relationship is impacted on within the testing context because the teacher, who would normally offer help and scaffolding to the child within the classroom, is positioned as a test administrator and invigilator, and gave the message that pupils "had to struggle by themselves, as individuals, without support" (Silfer, Sjorberg & Bagger, 2016, p. 249). As the research was completed in a Swedish classroom setting, generalisations to the English or Welsh contexts may not be appropriate. However, Ball (2003) has referred to a similar conflict between commitment to good pedagogy and performance in accountability measures as 'values schizophrenia', which he argues is "required to satisfy national targets" (Brown & Carr, 2018, p. 18). This may also be reflective of comments from the teachers sampled in Troman's (2008, p. 619) study, who suggested teachers "hold onto their humanistic values and their self-esteem, while adjusting their commitments".

The 'audit culture' that can be created in schools through the use of tests, such as SATs, arguably generates this pressure leading to changes in teaching pedagogy such as the use of fear appeals, 'teaching to the test' and narrowing the curriculum focus (Boyle & Bragg, 2004; Connors et al., 2009; Education Committee, 2017; Frankham & Howes, 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Torrance, 2004; Troman, 2008). Year 6 teachers interviewed as part of Connors' et al. (2009, p. 9) study highlighted the 'one moment in time' nature of SATs, and how there is a professional "desire for autonomy in regard to their delivery of a curriculum, their teaching practices and approaches to assessment". This has been echoed in the recent Donaldson (2015, p. 10) review of curriculum and assessment in Wales, which highlights how the national curriculum has narrowed, and argues that "the mission of primary schools can almost be reduced to the teaching of literacy and numeracy and of secondary schools to preparation for qualifications". Brown and Carr (2018, p. 20) pose the question that if children begin primary school by being coached "in the art of test-taking", are schools inadvertently contributing to increasing pressure on children's mental health and wellbeing whilst substituting "rote

learning and memory recall for emancipatory critical thinking?" It could be argued that this not only leads to a stressful and demotivating environment for pupils, but also for teachers.

The National Union of Teachers (NUT, 2017) conducted a survey of 2,375 primary school teachers who were part of the union on the KS1 and KS2 SATs towards the end of the academic year 2016/17. Emergent themes included impact on: teaching and learning, inclusion, reduced funding, breadth of curriculum, workload, and recruitment. After the publication of the most recent primary school performance tables, the National Education Union (NEU, 2018)[4] commented that "in the pursuit of high SATs scores, teachers' workload is intensified and children's well-being is damaged", highlighting the concern that teaching professionals have with a narrowing curriculum resulting from pressure to achieve targeted SATs results. A survey of teachers carried out by NUT Cymru (2016a) reported similar responses to their English counterparts, with 97.5% of respondents reporting that they did not believe the national tests were a positive experience for pupils. In addition, NUT Cymru (2016a, 2016b) stated that 44.1% of respondents had not received any parental feedback regarding the tests, whilst 33.7% had received feedback and it was deemed to be wholly or mostly negative; 0% reported positive parental feedback on the tests. It should be noted, however, that the figures discussed are reflective of members of the respective teaching unions who have chosen to offer a response. It may be the case that the responses illustrated are reflective of those teachers who have a particularly strong viewpoint on external, standardised testing, and therefore cannot be generalised to be representative of the perceptions and experiences of all primary school teachers across England and Wales.

3.4.2 Role of Parents. There is a distinct lack of empirical research that accesses the parent voice when exploring the test experience for children in the UK. Murphy et al. (2010) conducted research on behalf of the Wellcome Trust to explore the views of parents and

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[4] The NEU is the UK's largest education union, combining members of the Association of Teachers and Lecturers (ATL) and NUT from September 2017.

pupils on the use of science SATs in Year 6 in England and Wales, acknowledging the UK

Government's comments on the lack of reporting of parents' and pupils' views on testing and

assessment arrangements. The research offered a unique insight into parents from both

England and Wales, as at the time of surveying the participants, Wales had abolished science

SATs (along with English and Maths) in 2004, whereas England were on the cusp of removing

science SATs. From the 245 parent responses, the researchers found that parents of children in

Wales thought teacher assessment was the optimal way to assess science, whereas parents of

children in England thought SATs were better; this corresponded with the method of

assessment in the respective countries at the time of research. In addition, parents in England

expressed concern about removing SATs in science whereas the majority of parents in Wales

reported their children enjoyed and learned more in science since SATs had been removed.

These findings suggest that parents support the current methods of assessment within their

child's school. It should be noted that these perceptions are based on a relatively small parent

sample across England and Wales, and therefore are not necessarily representative of all

parents' views on this issue.

There is also a paucity of research that explicitly considers the role of parents in formal

testing environments in the UK. Research considering the role of parents in how students

subsequently perceive their own competence and performance has tended to focus on the

concepts of parental support and parental pressure (e.g. Raufelder, Hoferichter, Ringeisen,

Regner & Jacke, 2015). Parental support can be defined as socio-academic support, which is

divided into behavioural and emotional components: behavioural support includes the parent

helping the child prepare for a test, whilst emotional support refers to encouragement in the

child's self-belief of his/her ability in the context of the academic domain. Conversely, parental

pressure, or socio-academic pressure, is also divided into these components: behavioural

pressure could include parents advocating for the child to work intensely, whereas emotional

pressure may include parents setting unrealistically high expectations or criticising the child's

academic achievements (Raufelder et al., 2015; Ringeisen & Raufelder, 2015; Wang & Eccles, 2012). Furthermore, as discussed in Ringeisen and Raufelder (2015), research highlights high levels of parental pressure in students, in particular adolescents, is positively correlated with levels of both general and test anxiety. However, it could be suggested that the construct of 'parental pressure', as perceived by the student, does not necessarily suggest an antecedent to test anxiety: it may be the case that students who experience high levels of anxiety in formal testing situations perceive pressure from parents to be higher, regardless of whether this is the reality or not (Putwain, Woods & Symes, 2009).

Recent research has explored different models of test anxiety to consider the impact of parents/carers. For example, Otterpohl, Lazar & Stiensmeier-Pelster (2019) considered the concept of parental academic conditional positive regard (PACPR), where parents appear to give their children higher levels of affection, esteem and attention when their children study and achieve, compared with normal. Otterpohl et al.'s (2019) research with German secondary school pupils suggested a positive association between PACPR (as reported by students) and test anxiety. This relationship was mediated by contingent self-esteem, which is one's dependency of one's self-esteem from success and failure (Crocker & Wolfe, 2001). Although the results do not provide a causal link, the research highlights how students perceive their parents behaviour around formal tests has the potential to impact upon students' emotional experience of taking tests, even though the concept of PACPR is well-intentioned. Otterpohl et al. (2019) highlight important implications for ensuring positive and productive parent-teacher communication as a way of understanding the respective environments that the student experiences. However, Otterpohl et al.'s (2019) study relied on self-report data from students on how they perceived their parents' behaviour, and therefore this may not be an accurate reflection of how the parents believe themselves to be behaving. On the other hand, there are limitations with relying solely on parental self-reports of behaviour as well, as it could be suggested that parents are likely to give researchers socially-desirable responses and are

unlikely to discuss behaviours towards their children that would be deemed as problematic

(Otterpohl et al., 2019).

As discussed in the previous section considering the impact of formal testing on

secondary school pupils, Putwain's (2009a, 2009b, 2011) qualitative study using grounded

theory explored the factors that lead to GCSEs being perceived as stressful, as well as how

these impact on the students. Putwain (2009a, 2009b, 2011) interviewed 34 GCSE students

from six secondary schools, who were chosen due to their likelihood to find examinations

stressful and anxiety provoking. One emergent theme centred on how students perceived

parents and wider family members as sources of pressure, which was hypothesised to be as a

result of parents communicating "messages perceived by the student as emphasising

conditions of acceptance based on achievement in KS4 assessments, rather than the effort

made" (Putwain, 2009a, p. 402). However, Putwain (2009a) only interviewed students who

were deemed likely to find GCSE exams stressful, and did not compare this experience to those

students who did not experience the equivalent GCSE exams in the same way. Putwain (2011)

argues that the experience of examination stress is subjective to the individual; it could also be

argued that the experience of taking tests generally, regardless of whether the pupil finds it

stressful or not, is subjective to the individual, and therefore exploring this experience across a

broader range of students (and their individual family systems) would offer "the development

of a fuller theorisation into the nature, subjectivity and antecedents of stress" in formal testing

situations (Putwain, 2009a, p. 409).

In the primary school context in the UK, Connor (2003) suggested that parents are

well-placed to identify signs of anxiety and/or stress in their children at home with regards to

SATs. The researcher continues with implications for the role of parents for children taking

SATs, and posits that:

> …parents may play a part in increasing stress levels in their children as a result of
> their own anxieties and aspirations, or their belief that a specific level of
> achievement is necessary if maximal opportunities for the children are to be created

or maintained (Connor, 2003, p. 101).

In addition, Putwain et al. (2012, p. 296) found that Year 6 teachers attributed "the greatest amount of pressure…on pupils…to come from their parents", believing that parents were "greatly, if not overly, concerned with their children's SATs performance, seeing it as having implications for their progression into high school", and even go so far as to suggest that "the build-up of anticipation and agitation in pupils as the SATs were looming was due to the influence of parents communicating the importance of achieving good grades to their children". However, both Connor's (2003) and Putwain et al.'s (2012) studies did not explicitly explore the views of parents within the scope of the research, instead basing assertions on the impact and role of the parent through reports from other sources (i.e. pupils and school staff). Therefore, it could be argued that there is merit in future research exploring "the role of parents in creating, mediating and reducing educational pressure on their children" (Putwain et al., 2012, p. 301).

Beyond empirical research, the role that parents and carers have in supporting children and young people during formal testing situations is apparent. For example, the National Health Service (NHS, 2017) has issued guidance to help parents and carers identify signs of exam stress and ways in which they can best support their children through exams. The guidance includes: a list of 'signs of stress', suggestions to ensure the child eats a healthy diet and has enough sleep, and links to advice from Family Lives (2019) on how parents can support teenagers specifically during exams and ChildLine (2019) for information on 'exam stress and pressure', aimed at children and young people. Additionally, as part of the 'Education Begins at Home' initiative, the WG (2017b, 2019) have issued information for parents and carers of children who will be taking the national tests, which covers information regarding the purpose and content of the tests. This guidance also states that parents and carers should not help their child prepare for the tests as "the best way to prepare your child is to make sure that they are not worried or anxious" (WG, 2017b, p. 12), suggesting a

construction that the role of parents and carers is not to prepare children for the content of the tests, but instead ensure the child's mental health and wellbeing is supported throughout the testing period.

3.5. Critique of Adopting the Construct of 'Test Anxiety' and Similar Phenomena in Research

The discussion of different definitions and models of test anxiety, and how these have been explored in existing research, illustrates a number of points that may suggest caution when using the 'test anxiety' construct within research. The relationship between the construct of test anxiety and its impact on examination performance has been well documented in international literature (e.g. Von der Embse et al., 2018). However, there is a smaller research base considering the UK educational context, thus suggesting caution should be taken when generalising international research to UK populations with different schooling and societal policies and expectations (Putwain, 2008).

It would appear there is a lack of clarity in the literature when referring to stress and anxiety when considering the testing experience (Putwain, 2007). Different researchers choose to adopt different ways of conceptualising and constructing test anxiety and closely related phenomena: for example, exploring 'examination stress' through transactional models of stress (e.g. Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2011), compared to Connor's (2001, 2003) exploration of 'academic stress', which considered various factors including work completed in lessons, homework, SATs preparation work, as well as the experience of taking SATs themselves (Putwain, 2007). Putwain's (2011) qualitative research into examination stress in students preparing for GCSEs highlights how exam-related stress is broader and beyond the confines of the experience of taking the exam itself. It could then be argued that if research within the field is considering other related but fundamentally separate constructs to test anxiety, how useful is it to apply such a construct within research; it may be of value to explore the experience of formal testing without a predetermined construct or hypothesis.

In addition, there appears to be a bias within the existing research to operationalise the construct of test anxiety and similar phenomena, generating quantitative data in this area (Putwain, 2008c). This arguably offers a reductionist perspective to exploring a complex construct, and risks dismissing relevant contextual and systemic factors. In addition, much of the existing research relies on self-report measurement tools as a means of quantifying students' levels of stress, anxiety and worry in academic and examination contexts (Putwain, 2007, 2008c). However, these measurement tools have developed over time. For example, early measurements such as Sarason and Mandler's (1952) Test Anxiety Questionnaire measured test anxiety as a single component, whereas later measurements, such as the Test Anxiety Inventory for Children and Adolescents (TAICA: Lowe et al., 2007), are multidimensional and consider a number of subscales that constitute the test anxiety construct (Putwain, 2008c). The process of developing the test anxiety construct has occurred alongside the need to measure the construct for empirical research, meaning it "is not possible from existing literature to establish a test anxiety construct that is separate from its measurement" (Putwain, 2008c, p. 148). Furthermore, Putwain (2007, p. 213) highlights how research in this area uses a variety of different self-report questionnaires as a means of quantifying students' test anxiety and related phenomena, but does so without "an explicit justification for either the choice of a quantitative methodology…or the method of data collection."

Putwain (2011) claims that the phenomenon of examination stress remains poorly understood, partly due to the subjective nature of how individuals experience tests and exams. Although test anxiety appears to be subjective, one should not assume it is a wholly individual phenomenon, and research has suggested that stress and anxiety experienced within the formal testing environment may not be due to a personal predisposition (Denscombe, 2000; Putwain, 2011). In addition, as discussed by Putwain (2007; 2009b), Hart (1998) suggests that particular research areas (such as test anxiety and/or the test-taking experience in school) can

develop a *modus operandi* in how to approach the exploration of a topic, and therefore fail to consider how research questions and methodological approaches could be alternatively conceptualised as a means of broadening the research area from a different perspective.

In summary, it could then be argued that there would be value in exploring the experience of formal testing qualitatively, in order to understand the experience at an idiographic level within a wider, systemic context.

4. Rationale for Current Research

Although there is limited research focusing on primary school pupils' experience of taking formal, standardised tests in the UK in general, there is currently a paucity of research that considers the unique experiences of Welsh primary school pupils, which provides reason to explore this specific group further. It could be argued that the experience of Welsh primary school pupils is different from that of their English counterparts due to a different approach to testing: Welsh primary school pupils take national tests at the end of every academic year from Years 2-6, whereas English pupils are currently expected to only take SATs in Years 2 and 6, with legislative changes suggesting this may only be in Year 6 by 2023 (DfE & STA, 2017a). Putwain et al. (2012, p. 293) argued that "the Year 6 SATs seemed to represent [the pupils'] first experience or awareness of high-stakes testing and the experiences and views described by pupils were framed by a sense of novelty and discovery". It could be argued that the same could not be said for pupils in Wales, as they experience national testing every year from Year 2-6 throughout primary school. In addition, the apparent lack of parent voice amongst the empirical research regarding the primary school testing experience in the UK underpins this current research project. This is particularly in light of the fact that some research has concluded, on the basis of teacher reports, that parents are potentially the largest source of pressure for children and young people when taking formal, standardised tests (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Connors et al., 2009; Putwain et al., 2012).

The current research aims to explore how parents perceive and experience their primary school-aged children taking the national tests in Wales. Unlike much research in this area, this current project will not explicitly consider this through the construct of 'test anxiety' or other closely related phenomena. Instead, the research aims to explore the holistic experience of taking national tests from the parents' perspective. It should be noted, in line with Denscombe's (2000, p. 373) comments regarding research into the experience of pupils taking GCSEs, that the purpose of the current study is deliberately focused on the experience of national testing in "the social context within which such experiences arise". Therefore, this study aims to explore the following research question: What are parents' perceptions and experiences of children taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in primary school?

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Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of National Tests in Primary School in Wales: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Part 2: Major Empirical Study

Word Count: 6,640

Abstract

Pupils in Wales currently take national tests in reading and numeracy every year from Year 2 until Year 9 (Welsh Government (WG), 2017a). Existing literature considering the experience of such external, standardised tests in primary schools in the United Kingdom (UK) has tended to focus on English children taking standard assessment tests (SATs) at the end of Year 2 and 6 only, specifically exploring the impact of 'test anxiety' and closely related constructs (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Connors, Putwain, Woods & Nicholson, 2009; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012). Whilst there is a growing body of research considering the English primary assessment context, it is argued that there remains a paucity of research considering the unique Welsh context, and furthermore, a lack of consideration for the parent voice in enabling a broader and more holistic view of the test experience. Therefore, this research aimed to provide an insight into parents' perceptions and experiences of primary school children taking the national tests in Wales. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with eight parents recruited from two primary schools in different areas of Wales. Recordings of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was completed. Three super-superordinate themes were identified: 'relationships', 'constructions of child's experience' and 'constructions of the test'. The research findings are discussed in relation to existing theoretical and research literature; namely concepts from Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory, a joint family and school systems approach (Dowling & Osborne, 2003) and the relevance to bioecological systems theories of child development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). The implications of the current research for the practice of educational psychology, including how educational psychologists could work at a variety of systemic levels using tools to explore the test experience with children, parents and school staff, are discussed, alongside the strengths and limitations of the current study. Further areas for future research are suggested, such as explicitly using a case

study approach to explore a variety of different perspectives within one school context, as well as examining the hypothesis that cognitive dissonance exists throughout the system.

1. Introduction

In 2013, the Welsh Government (WG) introduced a statutory duty for maintained schools in Wales to administer the national tests in reading and numeracy (procedural and reasoning) to all pupils in Years 2-9 from 2014 (WG, 2017a). This differs from the statutory national curriculum tests, also referred to as standard assessment tests (SATs), that are administered in England to pupils at the end of Key Stage 1 (KS1) and Key Stage 2 (KS2) only, in the subjects of English (reading and grammar, punctuation and spelling) and Mathematics (arithmetic and reasoning) (Standards & Testing Agency (STA), 2017).

The purpose of the national tests in Wales is to act as a "diagnostic" tool to allow teachers to "have a common understanding of strengths and areas for improvement" in reading and numeracy skills (WG, 2017a, p. 2). Unlike in England, the WG does not publish league tables of schools based on results from the national tests (Donaldson, 2015). The national tests in Wales were introduced alongside the literacy and numeracy framework (LNF) as part of the WG's political agenda to improving levels of literacy and numeracy in Wales, partly in response to concern regarding Wales' performance in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) in 2009 (Dauncey, 2013).

The recent independent review into the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, commissioned by the WG and led by Professor Graham Donaldson, highlights how "the current national curriculum and assessment arrangements no longer meet the needs of the children and young people of Wales" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 10-11). The review reported how many respondents viewed the current national tests as a beneficial addition to teacher assessments; external, standardised tests, such as the national tests, arguably offer a high level of reliability (the test would consistently produce the same results when repeated) and can be

used as a complementary form of assessment that offers a quantitative benchmark to impact on future teaching and learning (Donaldson, 2015).

However, it was teachers of young pupils that raised concern regarding the tests' usefulness and "did not necessarily merit the disruption to teaching and learning, and in some cases the levels of anxiety" generated from the tests themselves (Donaldson, 2015, p. 79). This concern was echoed by the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2014, p. 95) who identified the possible tension in Year 2, where "the Foundation Phase curriculum emphasises opportunities to explore the world, learning by doing, understanding how things work and finding different ways to solve problems"; this questions whether the national tests, at this age specifically, are congruent with the curriculum. As a result of Donaldson's (2015) review, the WG (2017b) are currently developing a new curriculum. As of yet, there is little information on how this will impact on the current national testing system.

As outlined by the WG (2019a), tests are a familiar tool used by schools to assess a child's learning, and the national tests in Wales offer an opportunity for teachers to gain "consistent, detailed information on each individual learner's development and progress in literacy and numeracy" (WG, 2019a, p. 3), as well as highlighting areas for improvement. Additionally, in information designed for parents and carers, the WG (2019a) highlight how the national tests are designed to provide useful information for teachers to use alongside other forms of assessment of a child to "identify strengths and also areas where more help may be needed", whilst recognising that "any test can only look at a limited range of skills and abilities" and "some children will not perform at their best on the day of the test" meaning "their test results alone may not give a full picture of their ability" (WG, 2019a, p. 6).

However, it could be argued that changes to the national curriculum and subsequent national testing arrangements in both England and Wales over recent years has brought about concern regarding the impact of such tests on school-aged pupils, specifically considering the impact of such tests on children's mental health and wellbeing (Brown & Carr, 2018). It could

be argued that, within the UK, there is an increasing focus and expectation on pupils' test results, from both schools and parents (Putwain, 2008a), due to the testing culture that has developed as children begin taking standardised tests at the age of 6 or 7 in both England and Wales (STA, 2017; WG, 2017a).

A focus on mental health in relation to formal testing is reflected in empirical research, with a growing body of literature examining the construct of test anxiety and its possible consequences: a recent international review suggested a significantly negative association between test anxiety and outcomes of standardised tests (Von der Embse, Jester, Roy & Post, 2018). Test anxiety can be defined as a situation-specific form of anxiety, whereby individuals perceive the situation of testing or assessment as threatening and therefore respond with a heightened state of anxiety, underpinned with cognitive, behavioural, physiological and emotional components (Spielberger & Vagg, 1995; Zeidner, 1998, 2007; Zeidner & Matthews, 2005).

In the UK, research has typically focused on exploring the experience of secondary school pupils preparing for and completing General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) exams, with a focus on examination stress (e.g. Denscombe, 2000; Owen-Yeates, 2005; Putwain, 2008b, 2009a, 2009b, 2011; Putwain & Daly, 2014). The small amount of literature considering testing in primary schools in the UK has also chosen to explore test-related stress and anxiety, specifically in the context of pupils taking SATs in England (e.g. Connor 2001, 2003; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012). From the pupils' perspective, Connors, Putwain, Woods and Nicholson (2009) reported a mixture of positive (e.g. excited) and negative (e.g. nervous) emotions towards SATs. This also seemed to be time and situation-dependent, with lower levels of negative emotions during the 'lower-stakes' practice SATs that are completed in the lead up to the 'real' SATs. Furthermore, Connors et al. (2009, p. 9) reported that "many pupils anticipated feeling a sense of relief once the SATs were 'over and done with'".

Furthermore, Putwain et al. (2012) explored whether Year 6 pupils experienced stress and anxiety during the period prior to SATs by conducting small focus groups with Year 6 pupils from three different primary schools, together with interviewing the head teacher and Year 6 teacher from each school. The researchers found that the pupils shared a mixture of both positive and negative experiences of SATs: some pupils described the experience as anxiety-provoking in line with a threat appraisal of stress, whilst others described the experience as exciting, in line with a challenge appraisal of stress (Putwain et al., 2012). Although it could be argued that both categorisations of pupils found SATs stressful, how this stress manifested as positive or negative varied. This appears to contradict the construction that formal tests or exams will only result in negative consequences for all pupils, but instead, some pupils see the experience as motivating.

Research suggests that the way in which children experience taking formal tests, such as SATs, in primary school may partly be accounted for by a transmission of pressure from teachers, as SATs results play a part in target setting and school league table position (Connors et al., 2009; Troman, 2008). Children may be made to feel SATs results are important due to the importance teachers attribute to the results, therefore emphasising the perception that SATs can only be passed or failed, and failing should be avoided (Connor, 2001, 2003; Hall, Collins, Benjamin, Nind & Sheehy, 2004). This may be reflected in teachers' use of fear appeals (e.g. Mamaniat, 2014; Putwain & Best, 2011), narrowing the curriculum to focus on test-related content (Boyle & Bragg, 2004; Connors et al., 2009; Donaldson, 2015; Education Committee, 2017; Frankham & Howes, 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Torrance, 2004; Troman, 2008) or changes in the role of the teacher during the testing experience (e.g. Silfer, Sjorberg & Bagger, 2016).

There is a distinct lack of empirical research that accesses the parent voice when exploring the test experience for children in the UK. Murphy et al. (2010) conducted research on behalf of the Wellcome Trust to explore the views of parents and pupils on the use of

science SATs in Year 6 in England and Wales, offering a unique insight as, at the time of surveying the participants, Wales had abolished science SATs (along with English and Maths) in 2004, whereas England were on the cusp of removing science SATs. Murphy et al.'s (2010) findings seem to suggest that parents supported the current methods of assessment within their child's school. Within empirical research, the role of parents within testing scenarios has centred on concepts such as parental support and parental pressure (e.g. Raufelder, Hoferichter, Ringeisen, Regner & Jacke, 2015). The existing literature on primary school testing suggests that parents are "greatly, if not overly, concerned with their children's SATs performance, seeing it as having implications for their progression into high school", and even go so far as to suggest that "the build-up of anticipation and agitation in pupils as the SATs were looming was due to the influence of parents communicating the importance of achieving good grades to their children" (Putwain et al., 2012, p.296). However, this study and similar (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Connors et al., 2009) do not explicitly explore the views of parents, instead basing assertions on the impact and role of the parent through reports from other sources (i.e. pupils and teachers).

In light of the evidence surveyed, it is argued that there are many different factors that have the potential to impact on a child's experience of formal testing, and these factors are likely to have varying influences across a child's development (McDonald, 2001). This could be illustrated through Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems theory, highlighting the importance of understanding an individual's development within the context of that individual's environment, for example, the home and school. Exploring the impact of these systemic factors in relation to formal testing would arguably illuminate the wider context and experience in which such testing occurs.

1.1. The Current Research

Although there is limited research focusing on primary school pupils' experience of taking standardised tests in the UK in general, there is currently a paucity of research that

considers the unique experiences of Welsh primary school pupils (Appendix A), which provides reason to explore this specific group further. Putwain et al. (2012, p. 293) argued that "the Year 6 SATs seemed to represent [the pupils'] first experience or awareness of high-stakes testing and the experiences and views described by pupils were framed by a sense of novelty and discovery". However, it could be argued that the experience of Welsh primary school pupils is different from that of their English counterparts due to a different approach to testing: Welsh primary school pupils take National Reading and Numeracy tests at the end of every academic year from Years 2-6, whereas English pupils are currently expected to only take SATs in Years 2 and 6, with legislative changes suggesting this may only be in Year 6 by 2023 (DfE & STA, 2017).

In addition, the apparent lack of parent voice amongst the empirical research regarding the primary school testing experience in the UK underpins this current research project, particularly as existing research has concluded, on the basis of teacher reports, that parents are potentially the largest source of pressure for children when taking SATs (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Connors et al., 2009; Putwain et al., 2012).

Unlike much research in this area, this current research will not explicitly consider the parental perspective and experience of primary testing through the construct of 'test anxiety' or other related phenomena. Instead, the research aims to explore the holistic experience of taking national tests from the parents' perspective. It should be noted, in line with Denscombe's (2000, p. 373) comments regarding research into the experience of pupils taking GCSEs, that the purpose of the current study is deliberately focused on the experience of national testing in "the social context within which such experiences arise".

1.2. Research Question

This study therefore aims to explore the following research question: What are parents' perceptions and experiences of children taking the National Reading and Numeracy tests in primary school in Wales?

2. Methodology

2.1. Ontology and Epistemology

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents who have children in primary school who have taken the national tests in Wales. As such, a social constructionist epistemological stance, underpinned by a relativist ontology, was adopted and therefore influenced subsequent methodological decisions. The relativist ontological position emphasises the subjective value of the data and recognises the multiple ways in which individuals interpret experiences (Willig, 2013). In addition, social constructionists posit that knowledge is co-created through social processes and interactions (Burr, 2015). The researcher valued the fact that different parents would suggest a variety of equally valid realities when considering their individual experiences and perceptions of the national tests.

2.2. Methodology

In keeping with the researcher's ontological and epistemological positions, a qualitative methodological design of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was adopted, in order to explore a more in-depth view of parents' perspectives (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009). IPA is underpinned by three key concepts: phenomenology, hermeneutics and idiography. The relationship between IPA and the researcher's ontological and epistemological positions will be explored further in Part Three.

Data was gathered using semi-structured interviews. The researcher constructed two main interview questions, which were open in nature, in order to encourage participants to talk at length and in depth, with interruptions from the researcher kept to a minimum. Putwain (2011) suggests that the subjective nature of the test experience remains poorly understood within the area of research, due to a paucity of in-depth, qualitative research. The

researcher therefore felt there would be value in exploring the experience of national testing qualitatively, in order to understand the experience at an idiographic level.

2.3. Participants

In line with the principles of IPA, a purposive approach to sampling was adopted with specific selection criteria to ensure a fairly homogenous group was selected (Smith & Osborn, 2015). Participants had at least one child in Year 2-6 who had experienced taking the national tests. This purposive sampling approach "enables the researcher to satisfy their specific needs in a project" and is not necessarily focused on statistical generalisation from the sample to population (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 281). Table 1 presents information regarding each participant and his/her child or children.

Table 1: The participant details, including the ages of each participant's child/children.

Participant Number	Parent's Pseudonym[5]	Child/Children's Pseudonym[5]	Child's School Year at Interview[6]
1	Rhiannon	Olivia	Going into Year 5
2	Jenny	Sophie Adam[7]	Going into Year 7 Going into Year 10
3	Sian	Claudia Lowri	Going into Year 3 Going into Year 6
4	Carys	Rhys Sam Matthew[7]	Going into Year 7 Going into Year 7 Going into Year 10
5	Abigail	Ewan Daniel[7]	Year 5 Year 9
6	Johnathan	Rebecca Lucy	Year 6 Year 6
7	Zoe	Isla Poppy[7]	Year 6 Year 8
8	Lily	Eleri Lloyd[7]	Year 5 Year 7

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[5] Pseudonyms have been used for participants and children to ensure anonymity.
[6] The first four participants were interviewed during the summer holidays and so therefore the children were between school years.
[7] Although these children are not currently at primary school age, these corresponding participants spoke about the older sibling(s)' experience of taking national tests in primary school.

School A was a single-form entry school on the outskirts of a town. In a recent Estyn inspection, the school was deemed to be 'Good' across both current performance and prospects for improvement. The percentage of pupils eligible for free school meals (FSM) in 2018, as reported by Welsh Government (2019b), was approximately 13%. School B was a small village school in an affluent area. According to Esytn, this school was also deemed to be 'Good' across both current performance and prospects for improvement. The percentage of pupils eligible for FSM in 2018 was approximately 4% (Welsh Government, 2019b).

Two parents in the sample worked as teaching assistants and one parent volunteered in a school to listen to children read. The children discussed in the interviews had a range of academic abilities.

2.4. Recruitment and Procedure

The research procedure, including details of how participants were recruited and when interviews took place, is outlined in Figure 2. All participants were interviewed by the researcher in their own homes; this was hoped to not only be the most convenient place for participants to be interviewed, but also avoid any possible bias caused by interviewing participants in the school setting as the researcher wanted the participants to be able to speak freely and openly about their experiences. The interviews were recorded using a dictaphone in order to be transcribed by the researcher during the analysis stage.

2.6. Ethical Considerations

Ethical approval for the final research project was obtained from the Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Committee in June 2018. A summary of ethical considerations is presented in Appendix G. The researcher was asked, out of courtesy, to discuss the research project with a Chief Education Officer (CEO) of a Local Authority (LA) that the researcher intended to recruit participants from. The CEO did not want the research to take place in any

schools in the LA and so the researcher did not approach any schools within this LA to take

part; the implications of this will be explored further in Part Three.

Gatekeeper Consent	• A gatekeeper letter (Appendix B), addressed to the Headteacher, was emailed to 49 primary schools across Wales in June and July 2018. The first Headteacher that agreed for his/her school's parents to be included in the research was selected, and thereafter the researcher did not send any further recruitment emails to any other schools.
Participant Recruitment from School A	• The participant information sheet and consent form (Appendices C and D) were distributed in July 2018 to all parents of a child or children in Years 2-6 in school A. Four parents returned the consent form and were therefore selected to take part.
Interviews with Parents from School A	• Individual semi-structured interviews, supported with an interview schedule (Appendix F), were completed in participants' homes during July and August 2018.
Participant Recruitment from School B	• Due to the small sample size from the initial recruitment, a second recruitment attempt was made in September 2018 from school B as the Headteacher at this school had been the second Headteacher to agree to take part during the initial recruitment attempt in July 2018. The participant information sheet and consent form were distributed in September 2018 to all parents of a child or children in Year 3-6 in school B. Parents who had a child or children only in Year 2 were not included because these children would not have experienced taking the national tests at the time of interview.
Interviews with Parents from School B	• Five parents returned the consent form and were therefore selected to take part. However, only four participants responded to invitations to interview. Individual semi-structured interviews were completed in participants' homes during October 2018.

Figure 2: The recruitment and procedure for data collection.

3. Findings

This section explores the findings from the IPA. The interview transcripts were analysed in accordance with Smith et al.'s (2009) IPA procedure (Appendix H). Figure 3 presents the super-superordinate themes[8], superordinate themes[9] and subordinate themes[10]. These themes illustrate higher order concepts and thematic patterns developed from individual analysis on each of the eight participants' transcripts. It is acknowledged that these themes represent the researcher's interpretation of what participants said, and as such, each theme is presented to illustrate "the interweaving of analytic commentary and raw extracts" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 110).

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[8] Super-superordinate themes are presented as bold, capitalised and underlined throughout the findings and discussion sections.

[9] Superordinate themes are presented as bold throughout the findings and discussion sections.

[10] Subordinate themes are presented in italics throughout the findings and discussion sections.
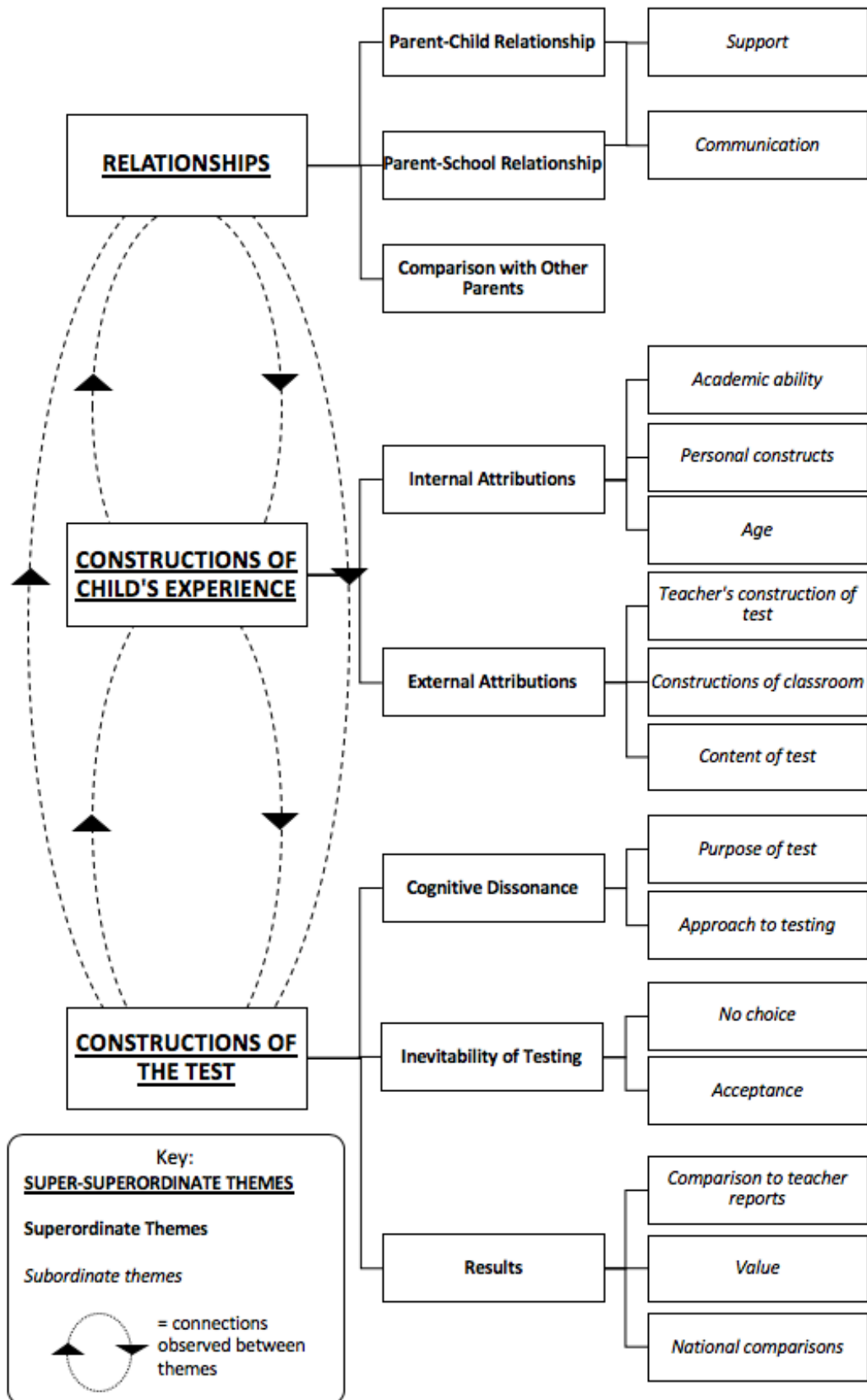
Figure 3: Thematic map displaying the super-superordinate, superordinate and subordinate themes.

3.1. <u>RELATIONSHIPS</u>

The first super-superordinate theme of **<u>RELATIONSHIPS</u>** included the superordinate themes of '**parent-child relationship**', '**parent-school relationship**' and '**comparison with other parents**'.

3.1.1. Parent-Child Relationship. The superordinate theme of '**parent-child relationship**' relates to the interactions between the parent and his/her child or children. This encompassed the subordinate themes of '*support'* and '*communication'*.

3.1.1.1. *Support.* The parents all discussed how they supported their child or children throughout the process of the tests, offering encouragement and reassurance both before and after the tests.

Rhiannon reflected:

> *…I said to her, you know, "you are as good as you can be babes and that's it, and, you don't really need a piece of paper to tell you…what you are good at and what you're not good at", you know, so. [Laughs].* (Participant 1, lines 93-96)

From this extract, it would be reasonable to infer that Rhiannon felt the need to offer reassurance to her daughter. Likewise, when discussing how she and her daughter reflected on the test results, Jenny shared:

> *And I said "and they don't look good. But don't worry about it. We'll find a way, it will come together in the end".* (Participant 2, lines 256-258)

Sian highlighted how she offered *support* to her older daughter after a test:

> *…when one of the days you know, she'd come home saying she hadn't been able to finish again, I was, sort of, worried how much that would bother her, because I know she can, sort of dwell on things a little bit. But again, we talked it out and…as far as I know, it didn't cause her any further worry because she didn't really mention it again.* (Participant 3, lines 347-350)

Carys shared how she supported one of her sons, Rhys, due to his difficulties with reading. She described how she felt she needed to explore options to *support* Rhys taking the test due to his literacy difficulties:

> *Just because he, the one year he'd come home very stressed, not been able to answer the questions, and, and everything, and then not scored greatly, and we was very conscious that it wasn't a true representation of Rhys. So then the following year when they started saying, "Right, we're at the next one," I was like right, do you know what, I need to go and have a conversation.* (Participant 4, lines 263-267)

She also noted how she supported her other son through reassurance before the test:

> *And then he's like, "But what if I don't know the answers?" so I say, "Then you don't answer it, that's fine, you know. This is about what you do know and you do the best you can do,"…* (Participant 4, lines 158-160)

Similarly, Abigail shared how she supported her younger son with understanding the format of

the test questions:

> *Whereas, um…with Ewan, it's more that frustration of just, you know, getting him used to the way the questions are asked and him getting-, his level of frustration is different, his level of frustration is, "I can do this, why can't I do it? What's going on? Oh, it's the way the question's asked," and so helping him through that.* (Participant 5, lines 360-363)

Johnathan also discussed supporting his daughters in preparation for the tests:

> *Again it…you know, you're sort of thinking, you just want them to be healthy and go in there, and well-slept, and do, you know, those sorts of things. Um, but again it's one like, "you need to, you need to go to bed early tonight."* (Participant 6, lines 182-184)

Zoe acknowledged her role as a parent in supporting her daughters taking the tests:

> *Obviously, as your children, you can't, you can't help them on the day, you can't write it for them. Um, so, you, I think you do feel nervous for them, because you can't do anything about it, you know, where normally you can stick a plaster on it, you know, so [laughing]. Um, but you just have to support them and go from there. I think as a parent, whatever they're doing, if they're happy within themselves and kind of, pleased with what they're doing, um, it's easier.* (Participant 7, lines 130-135)

Lily, however, described how she supported her children by encouraging them to take the

tests seriously:

> *…I found that they were so relaxed about it I was almost saying "look this is important, you have to concentrate and try your best" [laughing].* (Participant 8, lines 13-14)

> **3.1.1.2. *Communication*.** The parents' discourses also reflected the

communication with their children. This was felt to encompass aspects of the **parent-child**

relationship beyond '*support*'. For example, Rhiannon reflected on how she had chosen to not

explicitly discuss the tests with her daughter beforehand:

> *Yeah I was surprised by her reaction, but then...I wasn't at home saying "right you've got a test tomorrow, you've got a test tomorrow"...I don't think I mentioned them at all actually.* (Participant 1, lines 248-250)

Zoe reflected on the individual differences regarding the levels of *communication* between her

two daughters:

> *Um again, here, it tends to be the personalities come in to play. So, um, Miss Poppy, is zero communicator. She always has been, you know, I've always found out about things via other people [laughs]. So she tended to be like, "Oh yeah, yeah, no we wrote a test a few days ago," you know, and I'm like, "[laughing] what's happening?" You know, and then Isla tends to be more, coming back saying, "Mum, I have done it." And, she would normally be more of, she is a bit more analytical, so she will come back and go, you know, "There were 40 questions, I only did 36," or something like that, um. So she does talk about it a little bit more, is more aware of what it is.* (Participant 7, lines 206-213)

Sian shared how she noticed an increase in *communication* from her daughters about the most

recent tests:

> *...but yeah, there was definitely more communication with us about them this time. But I dunno, it could be because there's two of them talking about it I suppose...*(Participant 3, lines 84-86)

Carys reflected how the *communication* between herself and her sons has increased her

understanding of the tests:

> *But I probably have increased my knowledge in terms of as they come back and told me what they contain and what they have to do and we've discussed them, then I've increased my knowledge.* (Participant 4, lines 240-242)

Similarly, Johnathan highlighted how his daughters have discussed the tests with him at home,

and this in turn has impacted on how he perceives how to approach preparing the children for

the test:

> *But it was, probably again, it was probably much more prompted by them coming in and talking about it more. So if they're talking about it more, it needs to be addressed. So whether...would we have, you know, if the girls hadn't of come home, and talked about it more, would we have, you know...I can't answer that, I don't know.* (Participant 6, lines 236-239)

This may suggest a circular link between the child's experience and the parent's perception and understanding of the tests.

3.1.2. Parent-School Relationship. The parents' discourses also highlighted the superordinate theme of '**parent-school relationship**', which refers to the interactions between the parent and members of school staff. As with the '**parent-child relationship**', this theme was constructed as highlighting '*support'* and '*communication*'.

3.1.2.1. *Communication*. Jenny described how *communication* from the school to parents indicated a sense of pressure, particularly for children to attend school during the testing period:

> *You must send your child in. And the communication that came in the letters was very very forceful, and other teachers, senior members of the leadership team that I spoke to in private, she said "yeah it comes from the top. And we have to do it and we have to tell the parents to just do it whether they like it or not".* (Participant 2, lines 331-334)

Sian discussed how she spoke to school staff about changes to the school timetable due to the tests in Year 2, and how she felt this reflected the school's construction of the importance of the tests:

> *…cos I did actually raise it with the school about the swimming because I thought it was a shame, that there were two, no three afternoons they were going to do testing. They do swimming in the morning, um, but then they said they wanted to do the testing in the morning cos they felt the children were…more alert, and I thought well when they're 6, does it really make that big a difference, but as I say, for them obviously, it's a really important thing.* (Participant 3, lines 324-329)

Carys discussed the lack of two-way *communication* with the school around the tests and results:

> *But I also then started to realise that, you didn't get the feedback very quickly on how they'd achieved. In fact we normally get it by either the last day of term or a couple of days before, so you don't even have any opportunity to speak to a teacher about it. And whether that's intentional or not, I don't know [laugh]. But that's when you get them, you get them in the last week of term. And you've got, there's, there's no dialogue around that. And in fact, there is no dialogue around them anyway. This is when the tests are, we will be taking part as is a national standard, and that's it, there is no dialogue around that.* (Participant 4, lines 233-240)

Abigail reflected on the *communication* with the school when the tests were first introduced:

I guess the school, maybe the schools were a bit more…annoyed with the whole process at the beginning, when they were first introduced, and conveyed some of that…ill-will to the parents, "Well we've gotta do this cos it's what government requires," this kind of thing, and not helped by parents pushing back against them. (Participant 5, lines 402-406)

Johnathan acknowledged a time where he asked to speak to his daughter's class teacher to

discuss the results in further detail:

And so, for the, for the first time, I saw a printout of the sort of, almost the traffic light colours of how she'd done across the test. In other words, the areas where she really needs to improve. Now that was useful. It's the first time, and it's only because I went in to question some of the…I just wanted to know why certain decisions have been made, you know, not to accuse them of anything being done wrong, because if anything, I think the school generally does a reasonably good job. Again, there are inconsistencies in the school, but on the whole, I'm happy. That was really informative, and it's the first time I've ever been shown that. (Participant 6, lines 130-137)

Zoe spoke positively about her *communication* with school staff:

Um, the teachers were quite proactive. So obviously, the first few years, um, it was just getting the report. They didn't sort of, when they were really little, there's not really much. But then as soon as we got to, it must've been Year 2, um, the teacher reached out in-. She was lovely, so we used to have weekly letters, and things, so she reached out on the letters saying this was coming up, everything was prepared, and um, also welcoming us at any time if we had questions or things like that, so. (Participant 7, lines 21-26)

I think that's where [School B] has exceeded the expectations where they have engaged the parents and, sort of, involved them in some of it. Um, but obviously I'm sure teachers just shake their heads when parents start getting involved, and stressed [laugh]. (Participant 7, lines 283-286)

This was also echoed by Lily:

…[the school] were saying "we don't want the kids to worry, and please don't worry them about [the tests]"…(Participant 8, lines 8-9)

3.1.2.2. *Support*. Throughout the parents' discourse regarding the **parent-**

school relationship, there appeared to be more emphasis on *communication* rather than

support, and where *support* was discussed, different parents shared this *support* as being

perceived to be present or not.

For example, Rhiannon discussed the positives of her relationship with the deputy

headteacher, and how this helped *support* her daughter in school during the Year 2 tests:

> *…I'm very friendly with one of the teachers there and the deputy head outside of school, and she'd sort of, you know, talked to her a little bit on my behalf I suppose, um, leading up to it in Year 2…* (Participant 1, lines 230-232)

However, Carys discussed the perceived lack of *support* from the school, specifically in making the test more accessible for her son, Rhys:

> *…you can get information and I have sought information, I have looked them up. And I've looked them up in terms of, of stopping Rhys doing them actually. Or getting him additional support, and I spoke to the school about it as well. And it was a big fat no.* (Participant 4, lines 250-253)

3.1.3. Comparison With Other Parents. In addition to relationships with their children and the school, the parents' discourses also reflected a sense of **comparison with other parents'** experiences of the tests, both indicative of national tests in Wales and SATs in England. Some parents made references to other parents in the school community who may not agree with the tests. Rhiannon shared:

> *And I hear a lot of the parents say "oh I hate these tests, I hate these tests", and then they'll take them out but they still have to sit them and they have to put them in those circumstances where they're now completely singled out.* (Participant 1, lines 148-150)

In addition, Jenny reflected:

> *I just know, I cannot think of a single person…not of a single parent or teacher or child…that sort of approves of these tests, and see the point of them.* (Participant 2, lines 277-279)

Furthermore, Abigail noted:

> *But we weren't in that group of parents who were like outraged at this, about this being done to our children. Um, and talking about keeping our kids out of school things like that, so yeah.* (Participant 5, lines 138-140)

Additionally, some parents commented on other parents' approach to preparing their children for the tests. Carys shared:

> *I do know a couple of parents who do, do the so-called training. They literally do work them for a couple of weeks before in terms of getting up their skills and things, their maths and English skills. And their rationale for that, when I've spoken to them about that, you know, "Why do you do that?" you know. They are really competitive, they're competitive people and it's like, it's almost like they've got to do their best and be top. And that for them, is, is the value placed on everything.* (Participant 4, lines 351-356)

Similarly, Rhiannon noted:

> *…well I know there's one parent in my daughter's class who is very strict. They have to do their homework, they have to do this, they have to be the best at this and best at that. And that doesn't do them any favours either, because I don't, I don't personally know what the reaction is if they don't perform…* (Participant 1, lines 193-196)

Zoe also shared:

> *Um, obviously being in [local area], um, parents are quite, sort of, competitive [laughing] and you can imagine the tests, um, the Mums get a little bit fraught because they're tests! [Laughing] But I tend to be like, yeah whatever, which you can imagine they do.*
> (Participant 7, lines 135-138)

Lily reflected:

> *I know friends who've kids in others schools, they were actually practising for it. I'm not sure if they're supposed to but they were doing practise tests…* (Participant 8, lines 5-7)

A minority of parents also made reference to SATs, through comparisons with parents who live in England. For example, Zoe acknowledged:

> *And I think for me, that's where the tests come quite well, because they don't get tested at all really. Um, which is lovely because it gives them a feeling of, um, I dunno, childhood I suppose, and not the terrible pressure where I see my friends in England with, um, SATs and things where there's so much pressure on them at this stage.* (Participant 7, lines 65-68)

Lily also expressed:

> *But I had heard that, Welsh children weren't doing as well as English children were because they weren't used to doing the tests, and English kids kind of gone through doing these for years, and we've only just started redoing them. And so that was another…um, something I'd heard, I don't know.* (Participant 8, lines 159-163)

3.2. <u>CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILD'S EXPERIENCE</u>

The way in which the parents made sense of their perception and experience of the tests was closely related to their perception and understanding of their child or children's experience of the national tests. This appeared to be linked to the parents' understanding of attributing factors for the child, which have been captured in two superordinate themes: '**internal attributions**' and '**external attributions**'.

3.2.1. Internal Attributions. The superordinate theme of '**internal attributions**' relates to the 'within child' aspects that the parents felt were relevant when considering how their child or children experienced the tests. These included the subordinate themes of '*academic ability*', '*personal constructs*' and '*age*'.

3.2.1.1. *Academic ability*. The impact of the child's *academic ability*, including

a child's additional learning needs (ALN), seemed important to understanding the child's

experience for many parents. Carys described her son, Rhys, who had been diagnosed with

dyslexia and dyspraxia during primary school, and highlighted how this impacted on Rhys'

experience of the tests:

> *But he gets very stressed after the exams, because the exams themselves, he really struggles with, because one of the things with Rhys is he's not very good at reading black on white or grey backgrounds, and different things, and the colour of the writing and the text size, he couldn't actually read it for many-, for quite a while so, and he's not allowed any help, so he gets a lot of help with his work.* (Participant 4, lines 23-28)

Similarly, Jenny described how her daughter's reading difficulties impacted on the test

experience:

> *Came home, cried on me and says "Mum Mum Mum, I couldn't read the question. I couldn't answer most of them. I am rubbish. I am bad. I am…I can't do this. I should have been better"…and she took it all on herself, thinking that she is rubbish in school because she can't read.* (Participant 2, lines 154-157)

Abigail also spoke about her initial concern that her older son's ALN would be highlighted as a

result of the tests:

> *But he was in learning support, and so the idea of him taking the test was, you know, horrific. The fact he was going to be placed across Wales and, he was going to have this piece of paper where he could see how badly he was performing.* (Participant 5, lines 8-12)

Conversely, Sian discussed the impact of her two daughters' being very academic:

> *They're both very bright children, um, so it doesn't have-…it had quite a nice ending for them because they get their things and they can look and see how they…well my older daughter could look and see how she'd done compared to last year. Um, and you know, see if you can see if you're doing above average, that's a nice thing. I can imagine if it's the other way it might not be such a…positive experience, I don't know but, um…but it's, it's a weird thing.* (Participant 3, lines 43-48)

3.2.1.2. *Personal constructs*. The parents identified how a child's *personal*

constructs may also be relevant in understanding the test experience. Lily described her

children's constructs towards school, and how she felt this influenced the test experience:

> *…my kids tend to be so…not disengaged but they, they're not at all-, they don't seem to have that concern about what school…thinks of them, or you know, what, they're not that worried about results or anything, so, um, yeah, they kind of came at it in quite a relaxed way. But, um, yeah so no nerves…*(Participant 8, lines 9-12)

Zoe reflected on her younger daughter's personality traits, and how this was apparent during

the testing period:

> *Um, she is the second child, she is a real all-rounder. She's kind of…middle-to-good at everything. Um, so she is a bit more, but she is quite a worrier so I did notice with her, you know, there was a bit of focus on being prepared, so, you know, on those days she did want to be on time, she did want all her, like, pens and pencils and things, that kind of. She's very much someone who wants to be prepared, um, you know and so, that side of it. But she doesn't tend to get very overwrought about it, you know, there's no panic, there's no not wanting to go. It's just a case of she wants to be prepared.* (Participant 7, lines 81-87)

Sian reflected:

> *Um…my younger daughter, I think, I, I don't know if it has such an impact on her age, or if it's just her because she's…she's a bit of a free spirit [laughs]. She doesn't, things don't sort of play so much on her mind. She'll very much deal with something and then it's done. She doesn't really sort of worry about things as much.* (Participant 3, lines 148-152)

Abigail explained her younger son's *personal constructs* around the test:

> *…we've not worried about him as much as the older one, because he's more capable, but he's struggled with it because of that…scenario where he's going to be tested as to his real ability and things like that.* (Participant 5, lines 174-177)

Jenny compared the experiences of her son and daughter with regards to their individual

personal constructs:

> *Um, my son took it, took it just like another test. He, er, altogether went through much more solidly and shoulder shrugging, and just move on to the next thing like a lot of men and boys do anyway. My daughter tends to take it more personal, other children I don't know.* (Participant 2, lines 637-640)

Similarly, Johnathan identified the differences between his daughters, and highlighted how he

thought the personality differences between the two impact on their approaches to the tests:

> *I think when the pressure's on and it's timed. I think at the moment she…the questions are a little bit…um, not as she might've expected, it throws her. It induces a little bit of panic, rather than it a, "Right, what do I do?"* (Participant 6, lines 315-317)

He expanded on this further, emphasising the importance of his children developing self-esteem and resilience:

> *Um, she's just more sensitive, she's a little bit more…she overthinks. Her fear of failing… She can doubt herself a bit too quickly. So again it's, it's the bigger things, isn't it, self-esteem, resilience.* (Participant 6, lines 333-335)

Carys also discussed self-confidence with regards to her son, Rhys:

> *So just to be able to build his confidence back to that, so then to come home and not to have finished the paper and when all the other kids were talking about that. Um, we've had tears. He just gets, he loses that confidence. He comes home with an attitude of "I'm rubbish. I'm no good. I can't do it," you know, really, really low and his self-esteem is knocked, and I would say that lasts quite a few days. On that day particularly he's upset, and that lasts for quite a few days and then he won't talk about it.* (Participant 4, lines 63-68)

Jenny reflected on her daughter's lasting anxiety with tests:

> *And it has in fact put a fear of tests in her at the age of 5 and 6…* (Participant 2, line 53)

3.2.1.3. *Age*. Many of the parents discussed the concept of *age* as being relevant to how their child or children experienced the tests. Johnathan spoke about his daughters' increased awareness as they became older, and the fact they are now in Year 6:

> *I would say that, you know, that they, how they see the test is has, has probably changed across, the in terms of the age that, you know, that they, that they are…* (Participant 6, lines 9-10)
>
> *I think this year there is…added to that, it is an appreciation in Year 6, you know, next year they will be…for some subjects, put into groups on the back of tests and that's a growing awareness at the moment. And I think, when they, I believe the moment when it comes to the Year 6 tests, um…they'll be, there will be a different response this year, because they'll be thinking about how it feeds into their, what they take to secondary school. So I am anticipating this year, there will be more nerves, pressure. I just think that will be, a natural development. Because if you're thinking about the bigger picture…* (Participant 6, lines 74-80)

Zoe also shared:

> *Um, obviously as they've grown up, they're more aware of, that there are results and we've chosen to share the results with them, so they can plot their improvements and sort of growth and things. So, um, so they are aware of it.* (Participant 7, lines 12-14)

Abigail noted how her first son became more familiar with the tests as he got older:

> *Um, and so by the time he's kind of got to that point, he'd already done it a few years, and it was just part of the, you know, it wasn't a surprise or unexpected.* (Participant 5, lines 80-82)

Similarly, Sian described:

> *Yeah, suppose it might be slightly different because you know, they've both got a bit more understanding of them now and they've both experienced them. So yeah I suppose it'll be slightly different, they maybe will be more interested, I don't know. And hopefully, my youngest daughter will find the process a bit simpler.* (Participant 3, lines 255-258)

However, Carys discussed her children's inability to associate the test experience from year-to-year due to their *age*:

> *And so, he doesn't then, cos obviously because of their age, he doesn't really associate then in the next year, "Right it's the test I did last year and I did crap in." I'm not gonna mention it [laughing].* (Participant 4, lines 96-98)

Jenny focused on the significance of *age* in Year 2, which is when the tests are first introduced:

> *So where parents were absolutely up in arms because, especially for the little ones, people weren't so concerned from Year 4, 5, 6 onwards. But for small children, Year 2 onwards, and I've experienced myself, a lot of them can't even read properly. Actually a large amount can't read properly. And that included my daughter, right?* (Participant 2, lines 24-28)

Abigail discussed the lack of peer comparisons due to the children's young *age*:

> *…I don't think they were of an age where they chatted, you know, like when you're in university, or A Levels, you leave the exam and you all talk about it. I just don't-, they really do that, they don't think-. So he never, you know, had them talking about, "Well I got this answer, what did you get?" kind of thing, that he would have got…* (Participant 5, lines 72-75)

3.2.2. External Attributions. All the parents highlighted situational or environmental factors that appeared to impact on the test experience, which the researcher has constructed to be '**external attributions**'. This superordinate theme has been divided into the subordinate themes '*teacher's construction of tests*', '*constructions of classroom*' and '*content of the tests*'.

3.2.2.1. *Teacher's construction of tests*. All of the parents discussed how they perceived the teacher to construct the test. Some parents discussed how the way in which the teacher had appeared to construct the tests had had a positive impact on the test experience.

Lily shared:

> *They seemed fine, um...the school really played it down I think, so that helped.* (Participant 8, line 6)

Similarly, Zoe described:

> *But she doesn't tend to get very overwrought about it, you know, there's no panic, there's no not wanting to go. It's just a case of she wants to be prepared. But I think a lot of that comes from the school, because they are so calm about it, and it's just another activity.* (Participant 7, lines 85-88)

Johnathan acknowledged how teachers seemed to be careful in how they discussed the tests with the children, particularly in Year 2:

> *I can tell you in Year 2, 3, we paid little attention to the fact, that…you know, with them, that there were tests. And I think you know, and I know the school was very, not really mentioning it all. "We've got some things to do this afternoon" and being very…careful I think, in terms of how the message of the testing was delivered. Which I think, you know, I would imagine, for a majority of parents, that's, we're probably all on the same page with the school on that as well. It's common sense, isn't it. I mean, you know, they're 7.* (Participant 6, lines 208-214)

Abigail reflected:

> *When they first introduced it, they would try and not to talk about the fact that this is a test. And I guess as it's become part of the annual culture in the school, and the kids all just know it's the past, and they don't pretend it's anything other than that now.* (Participant 5, lines 22-25)

These extracts suggest these parents view the experience as positive because the school constructs the test as part of the usual school activities. Similarly, Sian also highlighted the apparent deliberate constructions of the test in Year 2, and how teachers seemed to avoid using the word 'test':

> *This year, I think they both seemed to be a bit more aware of the fact that they were happening, and I don't know if that's because my younger one…they kind of tried to make it as if it was a bit like a sort of fun games thing, their teacher told them they were doing secret testing for the government. That they were like being spies and tried to make it into like a, yeah like a bit of an adventure in the class so she was talking about them quite a lot.* (Participant 3, lines 14-19)

Rhiannon also shared:

> *Yeah...But…gosh, I remember in Year 2, actually they called them competitions. No, was it competitions? Not a competition, no not a competition, wrong word, wrong word. Um, oh my gosh, what did they say, they were… It wasn't a competition, that's the wrong word, ahh. I can't remember, oh no. But it was something that wasn't 'test'. Oh god no, I can't remember now…but anyway, they didn't call them 'test'…or 'national tests' in Year 2, I remember that. But they have in Year 3 and Year 4, yeah, said that they are national tests.*
> (Participant 1, lines 256-261)

On the other hand, Jenny described how her daughter's teacher appeared to construct the test, which seemed unhelpful for her daughter.

> *And the teachers tried everything to prepare the children, told them it's just the government and we have to do them to show them how clever we are and all these things, but she came home crying and crying and crying.* (Participant 2, lines 50-53)

Carys shared her perception of the negative impact of teachers' constructions of the test:

> *I do think [teachers] place a lot of pressure on them for the week or so beforehand. They talk about it non-stop. Um, I think it is quite anxiety-provoking for the kids. Um…um, I think some teachers are worse than others.* (Participant 4, lines 507-509)
>
> *That is cascaded down into the kids I think. I think it's cascaded down in terms of their, their need to achieve. Their need to do their best. The need to score highly, you know, the need to participate is drummed into them. That they're not allowed to have days off, you know, which is great, but actually if they really are sick, they're sick.* (Participant 4, lines 511-514)

3.2.2.2. *Constructions of classroom*. All of the parents discussed aspects of the classroom that they felt impacted on the test experience. Many parents spoke about the perceived changes to the classroom routine in preparation for the tests, the majority of which appeared to be perceived as negative or unhelpful.

Abigail shared:

> *I mean the school's approach to both was much the same, in that, you know, there's a lot of coaching. And a lot of time is given in to it…*(Participant 5, lines 14-16)
>
> *But it's more the whole school machinery gets turned over, over to that, and you know, they might miss out on something that they should otherwise be doing in their week and it might be Art, it might be science, it might be PE. Um, and it can go on for quite a while, this ramping up to this couple of days when they have these tests. Um…and you know, it's, it's almost like, fudging the figures isn't it, you're trying to get all the children a little bit up the rankings, when in fact they're not really up the rankings.* (Participant 5, lines 190-196)

Johnathan acknowledged:

> *Um…I think last year, for the first time, there was a lot more focus on them, and as the result, they were talking about them more. Um, they were doing lots more practise.*
> (Participant 6, lines 28-29)

Lily wondered:

> *…but there's always going to be a separation between the school and, and our…awareness so, I wouldn't know, I think the teachers would know if they were teaching towards the test but I don't think parents would, but you wonder. Well you hear that on the news.*
> (Participant 8, lines 155-158)

This quote highlights how parents may not be fully aware of what preparation is done in schools before the tests, and the construction of the distinction between home and school systems as separate.

Zoe shared:

> *I knew that they had sort of incorporated similar activities into general, um, worksheets and things like that beforehand so that the children did feel really confident and they did some practising cos obviously in [School B] it's tiny, so they all sit sort of, almost on top of each other, so they practise things like sitting in for a test [laughing]. Which, I was like, "What?" But I suppose, you know, children aren't sometimes used to change, I wouldn't have even thought about that, but yes, they did lots of sort of little things like about so, which was fine.* (Participant 7, lines 26-32)

Within this subordinate theme of '*constructions of classroom*', parents also discussed the incongruency of the tests with the Year 2 classroom and Foundation Phase approach.

Rhiannon described:

> *…but yeah Foundation Phase so definitely Year 2 with the Foundation Phase, um, really I think scared her the fact that "hang on, I've been playing, I've been allowed to do this, I've been doing roleplay, I've been doing all this stuff and now you're going to put me in front of this pen and paper and say right you're not allowed to talk and do this", you know, where Foundation Phase is very much, you know, let's get involved or have you got an answer, you know, things like that, so…*(Participant 1, lines 26-32)

Sian also shared:

> *And hopefully, my youngest daughter will find the process a bit simpler. Um, cos I think even at that age, just the fact of having to do something, you know, like you've got the whole class sitting and having to be quiet and doing something to time is, is different thing cos they don't work that way generally in class…*(Participant 3, lines 257-261)

Finally, some parents highlighted the change in teacher role during the tests, particularly focusing on the lack of help teachers are allowed to give during the test compared to usual classroom tasks. Jenny shared:

> *The teachers aren't allowed to help or to read so these tests are being very much treated like a A-level test, a GCSE test, err, a university test, um, by which you sit down, don't say a word, don't talk, don't ask for help, and you have all that pressure that is actually designed for more mature adults.* (Participant 2, lines 44 -47)

Carys acknowledged:

> *…and he's not allowed any help, so he gets a lot of help with his work. He's got, he can't read it, so someone quite often reads to him, then he tells the answer and they help him scribe. He's not allowed to do that in those tests, so quite often he can't even read and understand the questions, so he doesn't get to finish them.* (Participant 4, lines 27-31)

3.2.2.3. *Content of the tests*. Some parents also discussed the *content of the tests*, and how this impacts on the test experience; this included the fact that two year groups take the same test. Sian reflected:

> *…to me I just thought what a strange approach to test children at the end of Year 2 on the same thing that you're testing children a year later, because it seemed very much to me pitched at end of Year 3. And maybe if it was kind of the midway point, and you know, by the end of Year 3 you'd expect them to be, you know, find it quite simple. But yeah, I, I don't know, maybe as an adult, you over think things, but I was thinking, you know, what impact is that going to have on a child of 6, if they're faced with something and then half of it they can't answer? Is that going to have a positive impact on them? I wouldn't have thought so, from, just from knowing my own children. I would imagine it would make them feel a bit demoralized, and the next time they come to do them they're already thinking "well I'm probably not gonna be able to do this".* (Participant 3, lines 118-127)

Jenny shared:

> *And then I found out, again which I could not believe this. The children in Year 2 were doing Year 2 and 3 tests. The children in Year 4 were doing Year 4 and 5 tests and Year 6 was doing Year 6. [Pause] So now I think…how the hell did you come up with that? Children who cannot possibly be good at maths because you just haven't learnt it for a Year 5, right.* (Participant 2, lines 92-96)
>
> *So I think, so really I think, we have children that are in weak positions, tested on something that is actually for top children and for top classes. Now they're spread across over 2 years and one test every year.* (Participant 2, lines 108-110)
>
> *But putting them through tests that are completely, knowingly, out of reach, for a good 40 or half of the class. Now to me, that's psychological abuse. That's emotional abuse. And I don't take kindly to that.* (Participant 2, lines 169-171)

Carys discussed how she thought the format of the test was inaccessible for her son Rhys:

> *And if I had a conversation and I ask him a question on the paper verbally, and he would tell me an answer, I know he'll score in a completely different way. So, um, yeah he's being judged on the basis that he can't read and write because it's not on coloured paper, you know. And even that, even just changing the colour of the paper, and the text size, that's all he needs, you know. It's disgusting really, when you think about it, you know. Twenty-first century and that's where we're at. Actually no, we print it, the text is in a grey box, black writing in a dark grey box, blah blah blah, and that's the text size, really small and close together and no spaces, and it's like, you know, he can't read that. He cannot read that. Excellent, thanks very much [laughing].*(Participant 4, lines 304-312)

Some parents also discussed the style of questions. Sian reflected:

> *And, then when I read the papers I was even more surprised because I just thought they were horrendous. The way they were written was really complex for somebody who's-, I mean my daughter's one of the youngest so she was still 6 at the time of doing them, and the language that they used just to actually pose the questions, I thought was really complex, like really long sentences. By the end, even me as an adult reading them I was sort of having to go back and read it again.* (Participant 3, lines 97-102)

In addition, Johnathan reflected on how he had asked a tutor to focus on test-style questions to prepare his daughters for the tests:

> *I had a maths tutor, […] one of the maths PGCE students would work with them half an hour a week and I specifically asked her to do styles of question, that in the weeks before, just so there would be a little bit more familiarity and comfort and less…apprehension about them, because they'll be something that they would have been familiar with.*
> (Participant 6, lines 63-66)

3.3. CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST

The third super-superordinate theme encompassed the parents' **CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST**, which helped enlighten parents' broader perceptions of the tests based on their experiences. This theme included the superordinate themes '**cognitive dissonance**', '**inevitability of testing**' and '**results**'.

3.3.1. Cognitive Dissonance. The majority of parents' discourses reflected a level of **cognitive dissonance** through discussion of conflicting and/or inconsistent beliefs. This predominantly centred around the two subordinate themes of the '*purpose of tests*' and '*approach to tests*'.

3.3.1.1. *Purpose of tests*. Many parents discussed conflicting perceptions of

the *purpose of the tests*, including whether the results reflected an accurate assessment of the

school or the individual child.

Rhiannon shared:

> *I think, you know, these tests are just, you know, we do, I do appreciate that they do need to measure where children are at and what they know and what they don't know and what we might need to change in the curriculum and things like that, I do appreciate things like that, but these poor kids, you know, bless them. They are guinea pigs…[laughs].*
> (Participant 1, lines 62-66)

Sian discussed:

> *…all you see is your child's results, and yet you're always kind of told, you know, "well it's more about how the school's performing" so it doesn't fit together really, because you only ever see…that tiny little snippet, which is obviously they're not gonna tell you every children's, but it might be nice to kind of, get some idea of, you know, the whole school performance. Um...although I did say that I don't really think much of those, didn't I [laughs], looking at league tables and things. But I don't even know if they use those in if the leagues tables actually...*(Participant 3, lines 379-385)

Carys' discourse around the results highlighted some conflicting perspectives:

> *…I just feel like you know, just…it's just a shame because the opportunity is there to standardise and everything else, and yet, it's not a true reflection of all the kids, either because they've been in training or they need additional support or, you know, whatever else, and because of all the anxiety that's placed around it… (*Participant 4, lines 587-590)
>
> *But it's clearly a bit, you know, I know and, as an adult it's a big deal for the teachers anyway, you know, and it is a reflection of them isn't it, you know…* (Participant 4, lines 509-511)

Lily described the conflict between her son's high test scores compared to the standard of

work in his school books, whilst maintaining the test would be accurate:

> *I kinda felt like the test didn't necessarily, you know, when we got the results, didn't necessarily reflect what the picture I got from his books. It seemed to show him in a better light and it was kind of difficult to tell how accurate that meant that they were. So after that experience I did feel as though, slightly dismissive about them.* (Participant 8, lines 52-56)
>
> *But obviously he hadn't done the work and, um, had still got the results, so I don't know how, I'm not sure how it works, but it must be accurate, but I don't really…understand or know what they're testing…* (Participant 8, lines 119-121)

Zoe shared:

> *Um so, and I think that's always where I'm a bit cautious when you look at the results, kind of year on year, and I'm always like, well, how did you actually measure them, so, you know. So, but yeah. I think we've got to have some sort of measurement to see how they're doing.* (Participant 7, lines 268-271)

Johnathan expressed the conflict between understanding the *purpose of tests* without thinking tests were necessarily positive:

> *So you know, I don't…I don't think it's…I understand why they are done. I don't necessarily agree that it's the best thing, but I understand why.* (Participant 6, lines 21-22)

Abigail reflected on her professional role, and how this impacts on her perception of the tests:

> *…it may be also because we can see the, the wider value… You know, I've got a system at work that when I use it personally I hate it, but when I use it in my management role I think it's really good, because of all the, you know, the aggregated information that it gives you. And so I guess I can see the value in the tests from, from that perspective, in that whilst you know…it may not suit my child to be in that test at the moment, I can see its value in having that information. And then I, like I said, Daniel is a really specific example I think of how valuable that can be, in that having that global snapshot of how children his age or key stage are performing, and where he sits along that spectrum is quite good. So, um…so yeah, because I can differentiate between the personal cost and the global reward shall we call it [laughs].* (Participant 5, lines 307-317)

3.3.1.2. *Approach to tests*. Many parents also expressed dissonance with regards to their *approach to the tests*, highlighting the conflict between wanting their child to perform well in the tests without putting on pressure or high expectations. Rhiannon reflected:

> *And like, you know, I want her to do her best, but yet I don't want also to, you know, put that pressure on her at this age, where I think Lee would be a little bit more like "come on then babe. This is what this is" you know.* (Participant 1, lines 287-289)

Johnathan shared:

> *So you know, stuff like on little apps, little maths things, practising some papers. But essentially not trying to overplay it so that they have a sleepless night worrying about it. And then again I think that as a parent is the hardest thing, you know the importance of…testing, at the end of each year, whether it be national tests or GCSEs or whatever they face in the future and…again, if you can get good habits instilled early on…it will benefit them in the long run, but again, it's not over playing it, so that they become really nervous about exams…* (Participant 6, lines 190-196)

Zoe also acknowledged this confliction:

> *Um, so, um, and, it's always a quandary as an adult, um, we've tried different things in different years, whether you make a fuss because they've done it or not…*(Participant 7, lines 38-40)
>
> *…so I always oscillate between protecting them and their childhood, to, you're gonna have to do this, so get on and practise because that's the only way you're gonna get good at it.* (Participant 7, lines 74-76)
>
> *…it's just that that side of trying to work out the best way to support them because you want them to take it seriously but you don't want to stress them out, but you also…[laugh]. So it's the normal things, make sure they get enough sleep [laughing].* (Participant 7, lines 120-123)
>
> *Um, so, um, it's always interesting, cos I'm always, um, almost schizophrenic with…have a great childhood, relax and enjoy learning, to, you know, actually, we need to be able to make sure if you're making progress or not.*(Participant 7, lines 179-182)

Some parents' discourses suggested **cognitive dissonance** when discussing the conflict between their own perception of the tests, and how they then communicate with their child about the tests. Carys reflected:

> *Cos I don't say to them about how I feel that it's a waste of time, you know, it's like I try and put a positive spin on that for them. But that's very hard when they are questioning. "What's the difference?" Well there isn't really one [laughing]. But do it anyway [laughing]. "So what happens if I do really well?" "Well, you get a box higher, and the x goes higher on the box [laughing]. Well nothing…[laughing]."* (Participant 4, lines 595-599)

Sian acknowledged the dissonance between her perception and her older daughter's construction of the importance of the tests:

> *Um…and trying to reassure her that it wasn't…overly important, but obviously for her at that moment…it's important isn't it, and that goes right through, you know, your GCSEs are really important but then when you're doing your A-Levels your GCSEs don't matter [laughing]. Um, so for her at that particular moment, that was really important.* (Participant 3, lines 222-226)

3.3.2. Inevitability of Testing. Many of the parents discussed how the national tests fit into an educational expectation where testing is inevitable. This superordinate theme was captured in two separate subordinate themes: '*no choice*' and '*acceptance*'.

3.3.2.1. *No choice*. Several parents' discourses reflected a feeling of '*no choice*'

about participating in national tests, from the perspectives of the school, children and parents.

Sian reflected:

> *…I'd be interested to know what [the school], what they do with all the tests. All that stress that they put themselves through really, cos, I know they don't have a choice, I know they have to do the testing…* (Participant 3, lines 370-372)

Jenny shared:

> *And the headmistress said to me, and it was obvious it came from somewhere else, is "we have to do them. It's not like it's optional, like we can…you know you can do badly at other things, you can be a failing school, you can not do other tests or assessments and you get away with it for years. If we are not doing this, everybody is going to be in trouble. You must send your child in". And the communication that came in the letters was very very forceful, and other teachers, senior members of the leadership team that I spoke to in private, she said "yeah it comes from the top. And we have to do it and we have to tell the parents to just do it whether they like it or not".* (Participant 2, lines 327-334)

Carys described:

> *Um…I kind of expected it. Because I think, perhaps, it's such…it's always just so, you know, you have no control over them participating or not participating, it's like they have to do it, you know. It's very much dictated to you as a parent, that they have to do this. It's not optional. You have no input into anything, when they take place, when they don't take place. Any control over any of it. Um…which is difficult with children in primary, I think you would expect it when they're taking GCSEs in Comp, you expect it, but I think it is quite challenging when they're in primary school.* (Participant 4, lines 289--295)

Rhiannon reflected:

> *…'cos I suppose, there's not really much we can sort of say or do about them. It is - your child is going to sit these tests you know…*(Participant 1, lines 142-143)

3.3.2.2. *Acceptance*. Several parents' discourse also reflected a sense of

'*acceptance'* at the **inevitability of testing** throughout a child's education, referring to how the

tests have become part of the school structure. Sian described:

> *…I don't think that they'd particularly had…a negative or positive impact on them. I think it was just a part of, this is what we're doing at school now. The structure of school, I mean it's certainly very different from when I was at school because they kind of do things in topics and it's quite normal for something to come up and they focus on it for a few weeks, um, and then that's done and they move on to something else. So it was almost as if it was another topic that they were, that they were doing really.* (Participant 3, lines 27-32)

Johnathan shared:

> *Um…they like, or they care, but they don't really seem to be too much about it. Maybe that's because it's becoming more part and parcel of the day at school. You know, it's nothing special.* (Participant 6, lines 343-345)

Several parents made reference to GCSEs and A-Levels. Zoe reflected:

> *…but somewhere along the line if they're going to go to university, or, you know, they're going to have to write GCSEs, they're gonna have to write A Levels, so they're going to have to get used to that process.* (Participant 7, lines 175-177)

Abigail described:

> *And it comes back to that, you know, getting them ready for proper exams later on and you know this is something you do actually have to put a bit of effort into um, and…work out the strategy that's going to work best for you to, you know, showcase your learning and things like that, so um.* (Participant 5, lines 373-376)

Carys highlighted her perception that test situations can be a positive learning and preparation experience for children:

> *…I don't have a problem with the stress of an exam situation, I think that's an important part of their life that they need to grow up and learn about, that some things in life are stressful and you have to learn to manage that stress. And actually, doing it young, that's absolutely fine…*(Participant 4, lines 202--205)

In addition, Johnathan acknowledged the need to measure education standards nationally:

> *Um…and with, you know, with pressure on…education in Wales generally…you know, with the PISA results…aren't great, um. Again I completely understand why why, why, the Government would want to keep tabs on…educational development across all key stages, and it's one way of doing it, isn't it.* (Participant 6, lines 417-420)

3.3.3. Results. All parents discussed the **results** of the tests, and therefore it was felt this was a significant aspect that enlightened the perception and experience for each parent. The superordinate theme of **results** was captured in three subordinate themes: '*comparison to teacher reports*', '*value*' and '*national comparisons*'.

3.3.3.1. *Comparison to teacher reports*. The majority of parents referenced the end of year written teacher reports, describing how they would focus on this over the test results as the two are distributed to parents at the same time.

Sian reflected:

> *But, I mean we've always with the reports, we always focus on the effort. That's always the first thing we look at, we make a point of looking at that before we even think about the achievement. It's just sort of, try and show them that making a good effort, trying your hardest, is the most important thing, um, and obviously that doesn't, we don't get any reflection on that in the test [laughing].* (Participant 3, lines 229-234)
>
> *Um, and they, we got [the results] alongside the school reports. So they were sort of…an afterthought in a way. So we were able to just focus on her report.* (Participant 3, lines 241-243)

Johnathan shared:

> *I focus much more on the written report and the comments, and talk through that.* (Participant 6, lines 121-122)

Rhiannon described:

> *I think I did, oh, because she was more concerned about the report and they came out with the report, or roughly the same time and Olivia just said "have I got a bad report?" and I said "no babe, you've done really really well, um, and you did well on those tests you did before you went on holiday" and that was it…* (Participant 1, lines 348-351)

3.3.3.2. Value. All the parents' discourses included aspects indicating whether the results were perceived to be valuable. Several parents discussed the perceived impact of the results. Johnathan shared:

> *I don't think it informs anything else that happens afterwards, other than a mark on a piece of paper.* (Participant 6, lines 26-28)

Carys described:

> *I can say to him, "Rhys, actually the results don't matter. Just because you score really low on there, it doesn't make any difference. You're still in the same class as all your friends, you still do all the exactly same work as your friends, you don't have to do extra homework, you don't lose anything or gain anything. So it doesn't matter mate, it's a tick on a piece of paper, or cross on a piece of paper." So as a parent, it all seems a little bit of a waste of time. In that, I just wonder, actually there's no benefits for the parents, there's no benefit for the kids.* (Participant 4, lines 211--217)

However, Zoe described the perceived positive impact the results had had for her daughter:

> *…but also with, think it was Isla, some of the results…definitely, there was a dip, and so they've put in extra support and things like that…* (Participant 7, lines 100-101)
>
> *…[the school] do tend to look at those results and then put some support in, which I think is important.* (Participant 7, lines 103-104)
>
> *We're now, I just think, to be able to be proactive and say actually spelling wasn't so great, so shall we do something. And it might come from the school or it might come from us, or it might come from the kids.* (Participant 7, lines 238-240)

Similarly, Abigail shared:

> *But also we had the evidence from learning support input, but also the input from these tests showing where he does sit in these things, so it helped make a decision about, yes it is the maths tutor that we will go for, and you know, spend the time and money on supporting that particular thing, because you can see that, um, yes his literacy is at a certain level and his numeracy is at a certain level, as you can see how they've been improving and you can see that, well actually part of his problem with numeracy is his problem with literacy, and all of those kind of things.* (Participant 5, lines 332-339)

When considering the *value* of the **results**, several parents' discourses highlighted whether they perceived the results to be a "true reflection" of their child, with the **results** constructed as being valid of "one day" and not necessarily inclusive of other academic qualities. Lily shared:

> *But, um, so, then we get the results, and they're kind of above average or average, and then in reasoning he was really-, one year he was really high and we're kind of like "ooh!", you know, off the scale. So that was quite nice, but at the same time we're kind of thinking, well, this test doesn't tell me anything really, because it doesn't reflect in my mind…what, what they're work…but you know.* (Participant 8, lines 72-76)

Rhiannon reflected:

> *I just left it there and thought, that's what she did on the day and that is that.* (Participant 1, lines 135-136)
>
> *And it would be nice if there was something else to, you know, maybe incorporate their creativity and things like that to measure as well, you know, so…* (Participant 1, lines 220-222)

Zoe acknowledged:

> *…the weird thing is, it's only one test once a year or so, so it's kind of Heaven help if you've got a cold or something like that, you know.* (Participant 7, lines 102-103)
>
> *Um, I think my big thing is, because it's only once a year. So if they're not on form that day, it's just, hang on, you know, for the next year, you're kind of, in this zone…and so I think it's that.* (Participant 7, lines 128-130)

Carys shared:

> *And I, and then when you compare it year on year, and they're achieving really low one year, high the next, and low the next, you just think, "Hmm, yeah is that a true reflection?" No, which one's the blip in there? They just happen to do well on that paper on that day.*
> (Participant 4, lines 219--222)

A minority of parents described how their **CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST**, and how they

considered the *value* of the **results**, had changed over the years with increased experience.

Carys reflected:

> *But I do think my understanding of them has changed slightly and perhaps that's because my firstborn kind of sailed through, was either in the average or above average group, and never really thought about it. But I also then started to realise that, you didn't get the feedback very quickly on how they'd achieved.* (Participant 4, lines 231--234)

Abigail described:

> *Yeah when it was first introduced, it was like, "Oh my god, why they doing this? All this time wasted while the school's trying to do this"…but, um, now I can kind of see the, the value in it, because I have had that tracking opportunity with my eldest son and less so with my youngest son.* (Participant 5, lines 38-41)

Jenny shared:

> *When the results came in, the reports, they were absolutely meaningless [pause]. Right? And they have been absolutely meaningless since. I have ripped up every single report, right?* (Participant 2, lines 54-56)
>
> *I'm not fussed about it anymore because I know that it doesn't actually matter and it makes no difference and…other things will become much more important, and we will just focus on that.* (Participant 2, lines 327-334)

Although these three parents discuss differing levels of *value* attributed to the **results**, these

extracts suggest their perceptions of the tests have changed over time with increased

experience. Interestingly, these three parents in particular (Carys, Abigail and Jenny) had the

oldest children in the sample, and therefore had experienced the national tests for more years

compared to other parents interviewed.

3.3.3.3. *National comparisons*. Several parents discussed the categorisation of

the **results** as being compared to the national average for that year.

Rhiannon commented:

> *…but then what's average, isn't it? What is an average child? See that's another issue that we could talk for ages about. What's an average child, who says that they've got to score between this and this to be at that point, yeah, you know.*
> (Participant 1, lines 338-340)
>
> *…yeah, it's hard to say who is average, who is not average, what's…that's really harsh sometimes, on these children, to say…* (Participant 1, lines 344-346)

Zoe reflected:

> *Um, the results tend to be, um…shared, but they, they're quite vague. You know, there's not a, you got, they got 20 out of 30 or. There's a cross over a little of a column, which could be an average or not, or, um, so you know. It in some ways, I find that bit quite frustrating, the actual reporting back to you is, um, very vague. Um, and…it's always one of those, they say the average, you know, and it's actually, you need to have a bit more of a median, or, you know, a bit more of a feel of what it is, um. So that, that, would probably be a frustration.* (Participant 7, lines 218-224)

Jenny shared:

> *Then the results where somehow he is doing average to other children…and again it makes no difference because sometimes he might look really really good, and not be good because everybody else is doing so bad that year…or, um, he drops because everybody else is so fantastic and because it's compared against other people and totally anonymous, and sloshed all across, it's absolutely meaningless statistically. From what I can see.* (Participant 2, lines 73-78)
>
> *If she is at average or just above then, either the average has sunk or she really has done better. I don't know, you can't tell. Because it goes against averages. So to me there is not even an up or down from last year.* (Participant 2, lines 367-370)
>
> *She said "oh I worked so hard and they dropped" but I said to her that we can't tell from these results because they're being compared to everybody else, and that goes up and down so, it's like…you can't compare it, there's no absolute to compare with.* (Participant 2, lines 248-250)

Carys commented:

> *Yes I do think that the general consensus amongst most parents is, is that you go through this and, and it is literally a league table…almost, you know, sticking your kids name on a league table of achievement. Um, showing schools, that schools have got so many high achievers or low achievers or, you know, they can get extra funding cos they've got, you know, children in this lower bracket who need additional support or whatever else…*
> (Participant 4, lines 338--342)

However, Abigail discussed the positive aspects she perceived from having her sons' results

presented in relation to the national average:

You've got a child who is struggling and you see a Wales-wide ranking and you go, "Yes yes, my child's not just struggling in this school, they're struggling more generally," and vice versa. My child is very able, but he's not just able in the context of this class, he's actually quite able in terms of the, the whole population in his age group, so. (Participant 5, lines 38-41)

It's just getting an idea of whether your child…is he genuinely in need of learning support, or is he just in need of learning support in the context of that particular class of children. So, you know, maybe that's a particularly capable class of children, they've all got very supportive parents. And maybe in the wider context, he wouldn't be. So the test, because it's the all Wales approach, kind of reinforces what the school is telling you and doing with you, I think. And then that's, that's been invaluable really… (Participant 5, lines 42-46)

And the tests have been really good at confirming that you know, it was his personal development in the context of the whole population of children his age, not just at this school versus at that school and things like that. Um, so it's been, it's been great from that perspective for him. (Participant 5, lines 252-255)

4. Discussion

This research aimed to explore the research question: what are parents' perceptions and experiences of children taking the National Reading and Numeracy tests in primary school in Wales? This section will discuss the research question in relation to existing literature concerning test experience in primary school, whilst also proposing tentative links between themes and psychological theory. Due to the scope of this writing, only selected themes will be discussed in relation to psychological theory and existing literature in this area of research, and it should be noted this is not exhaustive of all psychological literature that could be discussed as a means of understanding the analysis. Strengths and limitations of the current research will also be explored, before considering implications for EP practice and suggestions for future research.

4.1. Findings Linked to Existing Literature and Psychological Theory

4.1.1. Cognitive Dissonance Theory

An individual can hold cognitions that relate to "behaviours, perceptions, attitudes, beliefs, and feelings" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 5). Festinger's (1957) theory of cognitive dissonance proposed that pairs of cognitions could be relevant or irrelevant to each other;

relevant cognitions can be further classified as either 'consonant' (where one cognition follows the other) or 'dissonant' (where the opposite of one cognition follows the other). Where cognitions are dissonant, an individual becomes "psychologically uncomfortable… [which] motivates the person to reduce the dissonance and leads to avoidance of information likely to increase the dissonance" (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999, p. 3). This is arguably a relevant theory when considering aspects of the parents' **CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST**, specifically in relation to the parents' perceptions of the '*purpose of tests'* and '*approach to tests'*.

For example*,* many parents discussed conflicting perceptions when considering constructions of the *purpose of tests*. Some parents highlighted how they felt schools should measure children's progress, but suggested that the tests were not the best way to do this as parents seemed unsure of what the test was actually measuring. Some parents discussed conflicting perceptions of what part of the system the test aimed to measure: the school as a whole, the class teacher, or the individual child. However, it was then also acknowledged that tests may be felt to be the only way to measure progress, and therefore these parents expressed a sense of resignation at the current testing context. This arguably is also highlighted within the subordinate theme of *acceptance* when considering the **inevitability of testing**.

In addition, when discussing their *approach to tests,* several parents shared their conflicting perceptions of wanting their child to perform well in the test, which requires work and preparation beforehand, whilst not being responsible for creating additional pressure on the child which may inadvertently negatively impact on the child's performance. This may reflect the 'effort-justification paradigm', which posits that cognitive dissonance is heightened when an individual engages in an unpleasant activity (e.g. pressurising a child to prepare for a test) to obtain a desirable outcome (e.g. child's high test scores) (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). As the parent acknowledges that the cognition to pressure a child to prepare for a test is unpleasant, it follows that the parent would not engage in the activity, regardless of the

desirable outcome perceived. Alternatively, it could be argued that the **cognitive dissonance** interpreted from several parents' accounts is reflective of Aronson's (1968, 1992) self-consistency interpretation of cognitive dissonance theory, which posits that a situation (e.g. a parent preparing a child for the national tests) creates dissonance because the situation itself forms inconsistency between the parent's self-concept and the behaviour towards the child (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

It could be argued that the parents' awareness of the **inevitability of testing** for their child in the future may influence the **cognitive dissonance** experienced, particularly when considering how parents discuss their *approach to tests;* Zoe's discourse captured this:

> *...so I always oscillate between protecting them and their childhood, to, you're gonna have to do this, so get on and practise because that's the only way you're gonna get good at it.*
> (Participant 7, lines 74-76)

The apparent **cognitive dissonance** present in the parents' discourses arguably offers a distinctive hypothesis to how the test experience is perceived and experienced by parents. It may be the case that cognitive dissonance is present throughout the system within which the child exists, for example within the individual child, school staff, the collective school community, as well as parents. This may highlight a new area worthy of further exploration in future research within the context of test experience.

To explore the influence and inter-related nature of the current findings, this discussion will now explore how a systems perspective may illuminate the complexities of the parents' accounts further.

4.1.2. A Systems Perspective

The super-superordinate themes emerging from the parents' narratives highlight the importance of viewing the experience of national tests within the systemic context in which they occur. Dowling (2003) highlights how adopting a systems perspective such as this ensures "the behaviour of one component of the system is seen as affecting, and being affected by, the behaviour of others" (Dowling, 2003, p. 3). Viewing behaviour in terms of cycles of interaction

(i.e. A affects B affects C), rather than a linear causation (i.e. A causes B), is an example of circular causality (Dowling, 2003; Pellegrini, 2009). In adopting a circular causality perspective within the context of the current research findings, it could be argued that the **RELATIONSHIPS** that exist from the perspective of the parent impacts on, and is impacted by, the **CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILD'S EXPERIENCE OF THE TEST**, which simultaneously impacts on, and is impacted by, the parent's **CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST** itself.

Figure 4 shows how the concept of circular causality could be used to illustrate the detail of one aspect of the narrative for participant 4, Carys. This is by no means an assumption that it is representative of the experiences and perceptions of the whole participant group, but instead aims to show how the three super-superordinate themes are reciprocally linked.

A) CONSTRUCTION OF CHILD'S EXPERIENCE:
1) Rhys comes home stressed after the test; Carys thinks that Rhys had been unable to answer many of the questions due to his *academic ability.*

5) Rhys continues to find the tests stressful as he gets older (*age*) and because the *content of the tests* is not accessible for him to be able to read. Rhys becomes aware of *changes to the classroom* during the test as he is unable to access help from the teacher (which he usually experiences in school).

C) RELATIONSHIPS:
3) Parent-child relationship – Carys feels the need to explore what *support* is available for Rhys during the test experience.

4) Parent-school relationship – Carys approaches the school for *support* in making the test more accessible, but school are unable to accommodate this.

7) Carys' **cognitive dissonance** impacts on her *communication* with Rhys, as she doesn't feel it is appropriate for her to tell Rhys how little value she places on the tests and continues to encourage him to try his best.

B) CONSTRUCTIONS OF THE TEST:
2) Rhys' **results** are poor, and Carys feels they have no *value* as they aren't a true representation of his ability.

6) Carys continues to feel the **results** have no *value*, but begins to experience **dissonance** in how she approaches the test.

Figure 4: The concept of circular causality illustrating the detail of one aspect of the narrative for participant 4, Carys.

The application of circular causality to this aspect of Carys' narrative has focused on the interaction between the various individuals (mother, son, school staff), rather than making claims and apportioning blame or causality to one individual in particular (Osborne, 2003). Furthermore, as posited by Osborne (2003), this perspective also highlights how the individuals within the system are not equally influential: the lack of support from the school constructed by Carys may be reflective of the lack of control schools have over the test process, an influence impacting on the system from outside of the school and home.

4.1.2.1. Bioecological Systems Paradigm

This discussion will now explore how a bioecological paradigm can be applied to the findings of the current research, within the context of existing literature in the area of test experience. Bronfenbrenner's (1979) ecological systems paradigm highlights the importance of understanding an individual's development within the context of that individual's environment. The model is represented as five interconnected systems: the microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem. Later developments to the model include Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bioecological model of human development, also known as the general ecological model (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). This extension to the ecological paradigm included the role of the individual's genetics, biology, psychology and behaviour, "fused dynamically with the ecological systems" previously constructed (Lerner, 2005, p. xiv).

Figure 5 shows how the findings from the current research could be considered within a bioecological model, adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994), illustrating the individual, microsystem, mesosystem, exosystem, macrosystem and chronosystem levels within the context of national tests. Table 2 explores this illustration of the current findings in further detail, making reference to selected previous research in relation to the test experience for children where relevant.
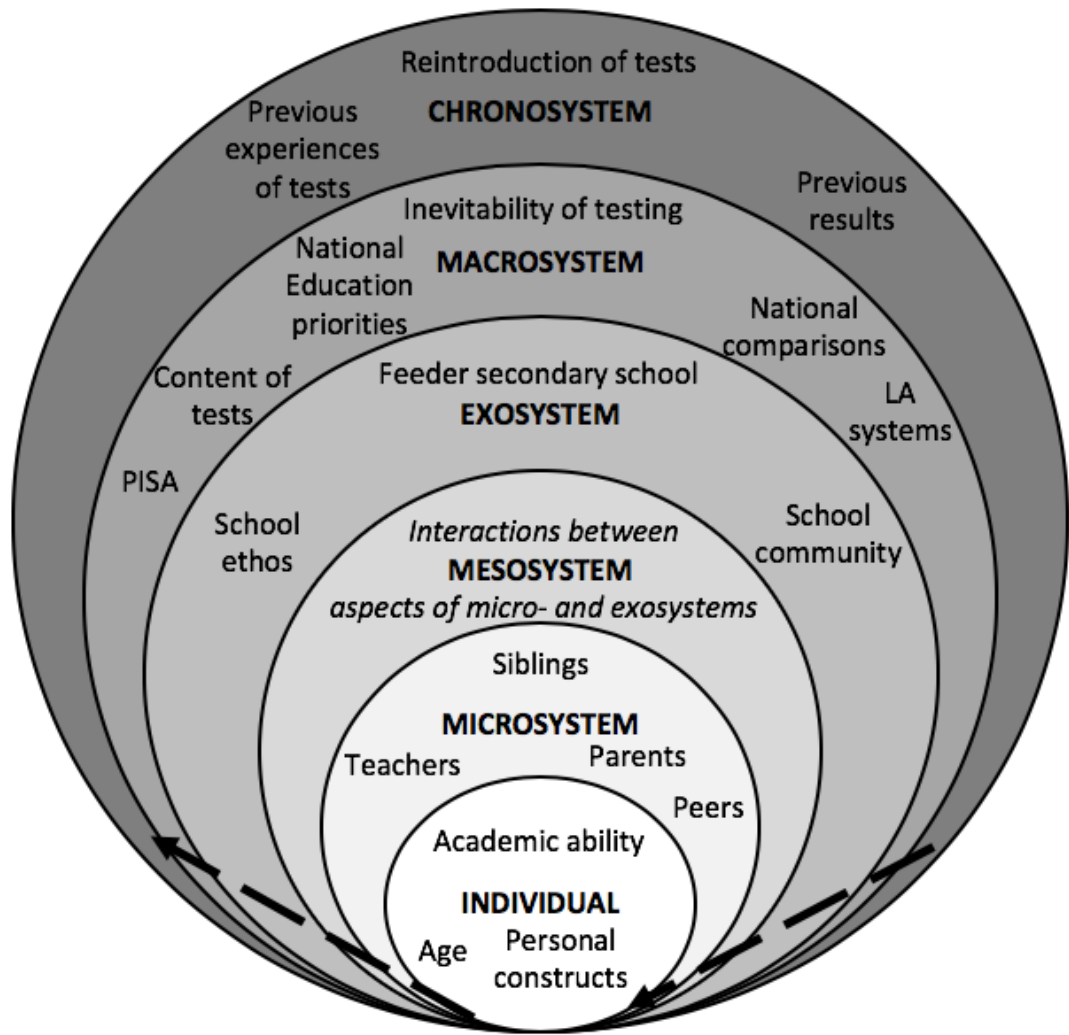
Figure 5: A bioecological systemic model for the national test experience.

Subsystem	Links to Current Findings and Existing Research
Individual	Although the current research did not include the children themselves, many parents discussed the **'internal attributions'** considered to be relevant for their child or children within the test experience, e.g. *'academic ability'*, *'personal constructs'* and *'age'*. Several parents highlighted their child's *academic ability* as being an importance factor influencing the experience; although the majority of these parents discussed this within the context of children with ALN, one parent reflected on the possible 'protective factor' that her children's high academic ability has throughout the test experience. With regards to *academic ability*, including but not limited only to children with ALN, it may be helpful to consider the bidirectional influence of this within the other systems. Parents discussed a 'mismatch' between the child's *academic ability* and the style and *content of tests*; namely, the fact that there is one test paper for two year groups (i.e. Year 2 and Year 3 take the same test paper, Year 3 and Year 4, and so on). This was discussed both in terms of *academic ability* and the child's *age* at the time of testing. Several parents also discussed the relevance of a child's *personal constructs* towards tests. Parents highlighted a variety of different child constructions of the test, both positive and negative, which would support previous research conducted by Connors et al. (2009) and Putwain et al. (2012) that reports children had a mixture of positive (e.g. excited) and negative (e.g. nervous) emotions towards SATs in England, depending on how the child appraised the test experience. This difference in approach and perception of the tests may be indicative of the *personal constructs* that a child has towards the test experience, and may be a useful area for further exploration.
Microsystem	The microsystem refers to the "activities, social roles and interpersonal relations" that an individual experiences directly with his/her immediate environment, including family, peers and school (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1645). Viewing the tests within a bioecological paradigm highlights how the constructions of the test held by others within the child's ecology (i.e. teachers and parents) may influence how the child constructs and experiences the test. The super-superordinate theme of <u>**RELATIONSHIPS**</u> seems to be pertinent when

considering the impact of the microsystem on the child. Parents in the current study described the **parent-child relationship** as being underpinned by *support* and *communication*. The parents described *support* as offering the child reassurance throughout the test process, including when the results were distributed. *Support* was also constructed by parents as how they helped the child access the test, whether that be through attempting to gain additional support and adjustments during the test itself due to the child's *academic ability,* or helping the child understand the *content of test* e.g. how to understand and answer test-style questions. Raufelder et al. (2015) constructed parental support as socio-academic support, including both behavioural and emotional components such as helping a child prepare for the test, and offering reassurance and encouragement with regards to the child's self-belief. This appears to be similar to the *support* described by the parents in the current study. However, the balance between parental support and parental pressure to achieve was also evident in the parents' **cognitive dissonance** towards their *approach to tests;* several parents described the conflict between wanting their child to perform well in the tests without putting on additional pressure or high expectations.

The **external attributions** that the parents felt were pertinent to the test experience could arguably be placed within the microsystem. For example, the *teacher's constructions of test* highlighted how all the parents perceived the teacher to construct the tests in a particular way. For instance, several parents discussed how teachers seemed to be deliberate and careful in their choice of language when discussing the tests with children, particularly in Year 2, for example referring to the tests as a fun competition/game, or avoiding using the word 'test' and constructing the process as an activity that is part of the school day. This appears to offer support for Mamaniat's (2014) claims that teachers 'fine tune' the language used with children in preparation for SATs, depending on the teacher's judgement of the desired outcome on the children. One parent discussed the construction that teachers 'cascade pressure' down onto the children, by discussing the importance of children attending school during the testing period and 'doing their best'. Connors et al. (2009) claimed that anxiety experienced by primary school children taking SATs may partly be accounted for by a transmission of

pressure from teachers due to that fact that SATs results play a part in target setting and school league table position. However, unlike in England, the WG does not publish league tables of schools based on results from the national tests (Donaldson, 2015), and define the purpose of the national tests as a "diagnostic" tool to allow teachers to "have a common understanding of strengths and areas for improvement" in reading and numeracy skills (WG, 2017a, p. 2). Therefore, it may be useful to further explore the perception of pressure on children to participate in the tests, and achieve well, if the results are not to be used as an accountability measure of schools, similar to SATs in England. It is acknowledged, however, that there was variety between parents' discourses in describing the detail of the *teacher's construction of the tests*, with some parents highlighting how teachers appeared to communicate the tests as another part of the school day. This may offer a further line of research inquiry with teachers to explore how they communicate with children about the tests, perhaps to add to, and further extend, the existing literature exploring fear appeals in English primary classrooms (e.g. Mamaniat, 2014; Putwain & Best, 2011).

'Constructions of classroom' captured parents' perceptions that there were changes to the classroom routine in preparation for the tests, including 'coaching' and practising tests in the weeks leading up to the tests, both in school and at home through homework tasks. Although no parents referred directly to "teaching to the test", this discussion around preparation tasks specifically aimed at the tests resonates with Donaldson's (2015) comments in the recent review of curriculum and assessment in Wales, which highlighted how the national curriculum has narrowed, and argues that "the mission of primary schools can almost be reduced to the teaching of literacy and numeracy" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 10), as well as research considering this issue in England (e.g. Boyle & Bragg, 2004; Connors et al., 2009; Education Committee, 2017; Frankham & Howes, 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Torrance, 2004; Troman, 2008). However, it should be noted that one parent described the preparation as useful as she perceived this to be helpful in allowing the children to be more confident in the test experience, highlighting the variety of perceptions in how preparations for tests could be considered helpful or unhelpful. This

also reflects comments from Connor (2001), who suggested that stress surrounding SATs was minimised in certain primary schools that had attempted to normalise the routine of testing, for example by practising with past papers.

In addition, several parents also discussed changes to the teacher role during the test itself, for example, describing how their child was unable to ask for help in reading, which they would usually have access to, and the expectation to complete the test in silence. It could be argued that this offers support to the work of Silfer et al. (2016) with Swedish 9 and 10 year old children taking national tests, which highlighted how the child-teacher relationship is impacted on within the testing context because the teacher, who would normally offer help and scaffolding to the child within the classroom, is positioned as a test administrator and invigilator, and gave the message that pupils "had to struggle by themselves, as individuals, without support" (Silfer et al., 2016, p. 249). This may be a useful area for future research with teachers, as it also resonates with comments made by parents in the current study on the perceived incongruency of the national tests with the Foundation Phase (FP) approach that has been implemented for three to seven-year-olds (WG, 2015). This issue will be explored further within the 'Macrosystem'.

Finally, within the superordinate theme of **results**, parents made *comparison to teacher reports*, suggesting parents prefer to focus on the written end-of-year comments from the class teacher rather than the national test scores. This arguably supports the findings from Murphy et al.'s (2010) research exploring the views of parents and pupils on the use of science SATs in Year 6, which found that parents of children in Wales thought teacher assessment was the optimal way to assess science, whereas parents of children in England thought SATs were better. Murphy et al.'s (2010) findings corresponded with the method of assessment in the respective countries at the time of research, whereas in the current study, parents claimed they preferred to focus attention, and possibly value, on the teacher assessments when presented with both the end of year report and national test scores. This subordinate theme could arguably be part

	of the **parent-school relationship** as it could constitute part of the *communication* between the school and home systems, but as the reference to teacher's reports was made in comparison to the test results, it was felt it would be captured better within the framing of the **results** superordinate theme. However, this discussion point highlights the connections between, and inter-related nature of, the three overarching super-superordinate themes as illustrated in Figure 4.
Mesosystem	The mesosystem refers to connections between two or more environments that the individual exists in (Bronfenbrenner, 1994), for example, the **parent-school relationship**. Parents in the current study highlighted how *communication* between the parent and school staff may have also informed the parents' perceptions of how school staff were constructing the tests. Similar to the **parent-child relationship,** parents also discussed the construction of *support* from the school; however, this was deemed to be present or not by different participants. Where parents felt a lack of *support,* for example in seeking adjustments to the test to make it more accessible for children with ALN, this may be indicative of the influence of wider systemic aspects from the exosystem (e.g. school ethos), and/or the macrosystem (e.g. the lack of choice to participate in the tests and/or the fact that the tests are created by systems outside of the school). In addition, the parents' discourses tended to focus more on *communication* between the home and school systems, as opposed to *support,* perhaps indicating how parents' construct the nature of the boundary between home and school systems.
Exosystem	The exosystem refers to connections between two or more settings, where at least one environment does not directly contain the individual, but involves social structures that may indirectly impact upon the individual (Bronfrenbrenner, 1994), for example, structures within the community, the school ethos, and the feeder secondary school. Several parents made a **comparison with other parents.** The parents in the current study seemed to construct, and possibly justify, aspects of their own experience and perception in comparison to others by referencing parents who could be considered to be at either extreme of a 'continuum' of parents' perceptions of the tests: parents who are perceived to "coach" children in preparation for the

tests, compared to parents who disagree with testing and wish to remove their children from school during the testing period. It would have been helpful and insightful to discuss the perceptions and experiences of those parents who do take these perceived approaches. In addition, a minority of parents compared the national tests in Wales to SATs in England, constructing SATs to be more challenging that national tests in Wales. Understanding the perception and experiences of parents in England in the context of SATs, perhaps in comparison to that of parents in Wales, may be a useful area for further research.

In addition, the *value* that parents placed on the **results** may be indicative of aspects of the exosystem. Parents discussed whether the **results** had an impact on the school system, with varying reports of support being implemented as a consequence of low marks. This may reflect the school's ethos in how the tests and results are viewed as valuable. This would be an interesting area to explore further with school staff. In addition, one parent highlighted the significance of his daughters' *age* now the children are in Year 6, as he constructed the **results** as possibly influencing what ability groups the children will be placed in when transitioning to secondary school. This echoed Connors et al. (2009) who reported Year 6 teacher's perceptions that parents attribute "considerable importance to their children's performance in the KS2 SATs, seeing it as a potential means of securing a good start to their children's high school education if the children did well enough to be placed in a good set" (Connors et al., 2009, p. 8). This may be a construction unique to Year 6 parents; however, it should be noted that this perception of the **results** influencing secondary school was not held by all parents of Year 6 children who were interviewed in the current study.

Furthermore, some parents referred to the **external attributions** based within school, for example the *teacher's construction of tests* and *constructions of classroom*, which may be influenced by the school ethos toward testing. This was also reflected within the subordinate theme of *acceptance* when considering the **inevitability of testing**; some parents referred to how the tests had become

	part of the school culture and structure, which may therefore impact on how the teacher constructs the tests. This may provide support for Connor's (2001) findings that suggest stress surrounding SATs was minimised in certain primary schools that had attempted to normalise the routine of testing, with an emphasis on "'keeping things low key'" (Connor, 2001, p. 106). However, without exploring the teachers' constructions directly, the researcher can only suggest tentative possibilities of how the *teacher's constructions of tests* are formed and/or what factors may influence these constructions.
Macrosystem	The macrosystem refers to overarching societal and cultural values, including belief systems and public policy, which contextualise the environment of the individual as "a societal blueprint for a particular culture or subculture" (Bronfenbrenner, 1994, p. 1646).

Many parents discussed how the national tests were congruent with the educational expectation and ethos, highlighting the **inevitability of testing** and a perception of *no choice* from the perspective of parents themselves, as well as the children and school staff. This may be reflective of the national education priorities in Wales that underpinned the introduction of the national tests: the national tests were introduced alongside the LNF as part of the WG's political agenda to improving levels of literacy and numeracy in Wales, partly in response to concern regarding Wales' performance in the PISA tests in 2009 (Dauncey, 2013).

Furthermore, within the subordinate theme of *acceptance,* some parents highlighted the fact that children will be expected to take formal tests throughout their school-life, and therefore shared an awareness that children would need to be prepared and experienced in taking tests at some point due to the societal expectations that children will take formal tests at the end of the academic year.

When discussing the **results**, several parents referred to the categorisation of scores in relation to *national comparisons*. The majority of parents did not like the fact that their child's score was compared to an average of children of the same age, due to the fact that they |

	cannot tell if the average score is particularly high or low for that specific year and age group. This issue was highlighted by Taylor, Rhys and Waldron (2016, p. 306) who commented, in relation to the Year 2 tests in particular: "each pupil is provided with an age-adjusted score, demonstrating how they achieved against the average child of their same age (in months). Not only does this mean that 50% of all pupils will always be 'below average', it also reinforces the notion that learners…are expected to reach certain levels of ability based on their age rather than their stage of development". Some parents made specific reference to the Year 2 tests when considering *constructions of classroom*. This seemed to centre on the perceived incongruency of the national tests with the FP approach that has been implemented for three to seven-year-olds (WG, 2015). Several parents highlighted how the FP approach emphasises learning through play, and so was at odds with the process of completing a test at a desk in silence without support from classroom staff. This concern supports the comments made by the OECD (2014, p. 95), who identified the possible tension in Year 2, where "the Foundation Phase curriculum emphasises opportunities to explore the world, learning by doing, understanding how things work and finding different ways to solve problems".
Chronosystem	Finally, the chronosystem refers to how the individual and his/her system changes or remains consistent over time (Bronfenbrenner, 1994). Several parents referred to the *value* of the **results** due to the fact parents can make comparisons and track progress from year to year because of how the child's results are presented. This highlights how the passage of time, and changes within the child's system, can influence how the experience is perceived. Many parents discussed their child's *age* as not only influencing their **CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILD'S EXPERIENCE**, but also how the child and parents' perception and experience changed over time due to their child's increased exposure to the test scenario. This was simultaneously captured by several parents within the subordinate theme exploring the *value* of the **results**; these parents in particular

had experienced the national tests for a number of years due to having older children currently in secondary school, and therefore, it could be argued these parents had the ability to reflect back on their experience over a greater number of years in comparison to others in the sample who had younger children. This suggests that parents' perceptions of the tests change over time as they (and their children) experience the test each year; it could be argued that a parent's first experience of the tests in Year 2 would differ from their fifth time of taking the tests when the same child reaches Year 6. In addition, the children's apparent growing awareness and experience with the tests was captured in the subordinate theme of *age.* This supports claims made by McDonald (2001), who posits that, as a child (and their parent(s)) progresses throughout education, their past experiences and beliefs regarding tests will impact upon their reactions when placed in a test situation. Furthermore, within the 'test anxiety' literature, Segool, Nathaniel, Mata and Gallant (2014) considered a cognitive-behavioural perspective to exploring the construct, suggesting that cognitions and prior learning experiences could be combined with the social context the individual is placed in as a means of explaining, and further understanding, the construct of test anxiety (Von der Embse et al. 2018). This same perspective could arguably be applied to the wider construct of 'test experience'.

Table 2: Findings of the current research discussed in relation to selected existing literature, presented in a bioecological paradigm.

4.2. Strengths and Limitations of the Research

Strengths and limitations of the current research are presented in Table 3.

Strengths	Limitations
• The current research has offered an insight into the perspectives and experiences of parents of children taking national tests in primary schools in Wales, something that appears sparse within the existing research on primary school testing in the UK (Appendix A). In addition, the current research offers an insight into national tests in Wales, as opposed to SATs in England which are distinctive in comparison. Whilst existing research considering the experience of primary school children taking formal tests has tended to focus on stress and anxiety (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain et al., 2012), the current research explored the wider experience of test taking from the perspective of the parent. This is acknowledged to be the researcher's unique contribution to the existing literature. • A semi-structured interview approach was deemed a strength within the methodology as it offered flexibility and freedom to explore different topics that each participant chose to raise within the interview (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Additionally, by interviewing participants in their	• Due to the small sample size that had a bias towards mothers (7 mothers, 1 father), and interpretative nature of the data analysis, these findings cannot be generalised to all parents of primary school-aged pupils across Wales. • All of the participants' accounts included aspects that reflected the experience their children had had with the national tests in primary school, therefore creating an additional level of interpretation to the "double hermeneutic" which underpins IPA (Smith et al., 2009). The limitations associated with this form of interpretative data analysis are acknowledged; the researcher played an active role during the interview and analysis processes, and the constructed themes are limited to a reflection of the researcher's interpretation. This may have been influenced by the researcher's previous role and experiences as a primary school teacher in Wales, which is explored further in Part Three of this thesis.

own homes, the researcher avoided any possible bias or further implication of interviewing parents within the school setting. Furthermore, in line with the principles of IPA, semi-structured interviews ensured the researcher would be able to understand each participant's world by asking open-ended and non-directive questions, promoting the role of the participant as the 'expert' on the topic of discussion (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Willig, 2013). This meant the research could focus on the participants' individual experience and perceptions, rather than being influenced by pre-existing literature within this research area. Indeed, participants described a variety of experiences and perceptions, both positive and negative, which has been insightful.

- Conducting face-to-face interviews, as opposed to administering an online qualitative questionnaire for instance, not only allowed for greater freedom to explore topics that were initially mentioned in passing by the participant, but also meant the researcher could gauge an understanding of non-verbal cues that added additional information and context to the participant's narrative, which would be subsequently analysed; for example, the use of linguistic characteristics such as laughter and sarcasm (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

- The sampling method limited participation to parents within schools who agreed to take part. As the majority of Headteachers who were approached for recruitment of parents from their schools did not give consent, either by not replying to the researcher's recruitment email or actively withdrawing consent, it could be argued that parents at these schools may have wanted to take part in the research but were unable to do so due to the lack of gatekeeper consent from the Headteacher.

- It is possible that those participants who volunteered to take part in the study had a particular interest in national tests in primary schools.

- The assumed homogeneity of the participants in the current study may also be considered a limitation; although each participant had experienced the national tests, this varied considerably as the researcher did not control for parents who had older children in secondary school who had previously experienced the national tests in primary school. In addition, three of the eight participants discussed their experience of working or volunteering in primary schools as teaching assistants, and it is acknowledged how this perspective that crosses the boundary between home and school systems may have influenced their lived experiences.

• The sample of participants had a variety of different aged children, with the youngest child having just finished Year 2 and the oldest child in Year 10. This meant that participants could speak across a broad range of experiences, as opposed to being restricted to a single age group of children. • As all children in Years 2-6 in primary schools across Wales are expected to take the national tests every year, this research topic is currently relevant, and may provide opportunities for further research within this area. • A summary of considerations addressed throughout the research process, in line with Yardley's (2000, 2008) framework for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research, is detailed in Appendix O.	• The current research is based on interviews with eight participants, which produced an abundance of data. Although Smith et al. (2009) posit that there is no correct sample size for IPA, analysing the experience and perceptions of eight participants within a short report risks losing the complexity and richness of the individual cases due to the overwhelming amount of data generated. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2009) acknowledge how qualitative analysis, such as IPA, is very time consuming. The researcher would have liked to have revisited the participants to check they agreed with the researcher's constructions of the final themes.

Table 3: Strengths and limitations of the current research.

4.3. Implications for the Educational Psychologist (EP) and Suggestions for Future Research

It is acknowledged that the findings of IPA analysis cannot be generalised due to the ideographic nature of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). However, tentative suggestions will be made for how the findings from the current study, framed within a systemic perspective, can be applied to professional practice and inform future research (Table 4).

Implications for EP Practice	Cameron (2006, p. 292) argues that the unique contribution of an EP, in applying psychology, is "to provide an integrated and coherent perspective of complex environments,…the complex problems and situations which occur in such environments…and the complex needs of people which results from such problems". In applying concepts from cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and a joint family and school system approach (Dowling & Osborne, 2003) within a bioecological paradigm (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), links between a variety of personal, interpersonal and contextual factors reported from the perspective of the parent have been illustrated, and may offer opportunities for EPs to work in a variety of different ways to explore how the test taking experience is understood. A selection of possible ways in which EPs can work at a number of different levels within this context is presented below. <u>Individual and Microsystemic Levels:</u> • Engaging with children at an individual level to explore *personal constructs* around themselves as learners and the experience of taking tests, as well as possible assessment work to ascertain factors that may impact upon a child's *academic ability.* • Use of tools within consultation with children, parents and/or school staff to draw attention to and illustrate conflicting or polarizing views that may allow for exploration of **cognitive dissonance** across the system. Such tools could include: activities underpinned by concepts from personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955), such as a repertory grid method or Moran's (2001) drawing the ideal self; and practices within motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991), which is arguably underpinned by cognitive dissonance theory, such as amplified reflection to emphasise the dissonance, and reframing

when individuals use statements to justify behaviour as this could be considered to be adding consistent cognitions in an attempt to reduce dissonance (Draycott & Dabbs, 1998).

- Use of questioning techniques within consultation, such as circular questioning (Dowling, 2003; Tomm, 1988), which originates within the field of systemic family therapy and therefore has relevance to the current study's application of Dowling and Osborne's (2003) joint family and school systems approach. Circular questions are used to explore the relationships between individuals, a super-superordinate theme in the current research, as well as considering different individuals' beliefs and subsequent behaviour, placing the focus on connections between these factors rather than attributing causes of behaviour (Campbell, Draper & Huffington, 1991; Dowling, 2003). If appropriate, an EP could utilise this approach in group consultations with parents and school staff when discussing the impact of the test experience.

Exosystemic Level:

- EPs are arguably well-placed to work at a whole-school level and explore what impact the tests may have on the school environment, illustrated in the current study through the parents' **external attributions** informing **CONSTRUCTIONS OF CHILD'S EXPERIENCE**. EPs could adopt a researcher role in exploring the test experience within a particular school from the perspective of different individuals within the school community, with the aim of understanding how the test experience impacts across the system. This could possibly follow an action research process, as developed by Lewin (1946) to support the development of relationships between different groups and sustain co-operation and communication (Adelman, 1993), with the EP supporting school staff, and possibly parents and pupils, to engage in the cycle of exploration of how the test experience is impacting upon that specific school system, and what could be done differently as a result of the findings.

Macrosystem:

	• Given the proposed changes to the national curriculum in Wales and the current changing context of education nationally (WG, 2017b), it may be appropriate for EPs to engage in dialogue with individuals within Welsh Government responsible for devising the national tests to offer feedback on how the national tests are perceived and experienced by parents, as well as other key individuals within the system if further research in this area is undertaken.
Suggestions for Future Research	As acknowledged within the limitations of the current research, many parents' accounts reflected their interpretation of their child or children's experience of the tests. It would be valuable to explore, in detail, children's experience and perceptions of the national tests. In addition, the findings, and subsequent discussion within a systemic perspective, highlighted the role of the school within the test experience. School staff do not have a voice in the current research, although the role that teachers play within the test experience has been acknowledged by the parents, both in terms of the parent-school relationship and the impact of teachers' constructions of the test towards children. Therefore it would be apposite to consider the perspectives of staff throughout the hierarchy of the school system in relation to the national tests, in an attempt to triangulate information to contribute further to the examination of the experience of national tests in primary schools. This could be achieved through a case study approach within one school setting, exploring the perspectives of various individuals within the school community. In addition, given the current study's findings regarding cognitive dissonance, it may be useful to explore this hypothesis further to examine if cognitive dissonance is apparent in other aspects of the system e.g. across school staff and children. Finally, given the paucity of research exploring the parental voice within the test experience, it may be informative for a similar replication study exploring parents' perceptions of SATs to be undertaken in the English context in order to fill the gap in the existing literature of SATs specifically.

Table 4: Suggestions for how the current findings can be applied to EP practice and informing future research.

4.4. Summary

This research aimed to explore parents' perceptions and experiences of the national tests in primary school in Wales. The findings suggest that, from the perspective of parents, relationships with school staff, children and other parental peers are an integral part of how national tests are perceived and experienced by parents. In addition, parents' own constructions of the child's experience, including the internal and external factors that parents attributed to impacting on this experience have offered an insight into aspects of both the individual and wider systemic factors that parents believe to be influential on their child's experience of the tests, and subsequently how they form their own perception of the tests. Parents' constructions of the test itself appeared to be underpinned by cognitive dissonance, particularly across the areas of the purpose of the tests and parents' own approach to the testing period, as well as a perception that tests are inevitable throughout a child's school career, and the specific experience of receiving the test results.

Within the existing literature considering the test experience in primary school, there is arguably a bias toward exploring test stress and anxiety (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain et al., 2012). Putwain (2009a, 2009b) emphasised how the experience of taking formal tests is subjective to the individual, and therefore exploring this experience across a broader range of students (and their individual family systems) would offer "the development of a fuller theorisation into the nature, subjectivity and antecedents of stress" in high-stakes testing situations (Putwain, 2009a, p. 409). Although the current research did not explicitly consider the construct of 'stress' within the context of national tests, it is hoped that the findings offer a systemic perspective to the social context in which the test experience occurs (Denscombe, 2000), illustrating not only the parents' perceptions and experiences of the national tests, but

also the bidirectional influence of relationships, wider systems and development of perceptions and experiences over time.

In adopting this perspective, informed by Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory and Dowling and Osborne's (2003) joint family and school system approach, a number of suggestions for implications for EP practice have been suggested. This includes ways in which EPs could explore cognitive dissonance with key individuals across the system through practices from personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955) and motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991), as well as opportunities to use questioning techniques such as circular questioning (Dowling, 2003; Tomm, 1988) within consultations with parents and school staff to discuss the test experience more systemically.

It could be concluded that, by applying a systemic perspective with an understanding of the implications of cognitive dissonance, the test experience for not only the parent, but also the child can be illustrated in a wider, systemic context. It is hoped that this current research not only helps fill the gap in the existing literature on the experience of testing in primary schools from the perspective of the parent, but also is able to inform EP practice and further research in the area of testing experience in primary school.

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Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of National Tests in Primary School in Wales: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

Part 3: Critical Appraisal

Word Count: 6,677

Part Three: Critical Appraisal

1. Introduction

This critical appraisal is presented in two sections. The first section provides an overview of how the present research contributes to the existing knowledge on parental perceptions of national testing in primary schools in Wales. The following will be discussed: the inception of the research topic, a summary of the current gaps in the literature in this area, the development of the current research question, the approach to conducting the major literature review, how the current research findings contribute to existing knowledge as well as ideas for future research, and the relevance to practice for educational psychologists (EPs).

The second section provides a critical account of the research practitioner and the research process. This section will discuss the ontological and epistemological positions of the researcher and subsequent methodological decisions, including participant selection and recruitment, and data collection and analysis. Throughout this section, possible alternative methodological decisions will be critically discussed, in order to offer the reader an insight into why the researcher made certain research decisions, ultimately leading to the current research project. A summary of considerations addressed throughout the research process, in line with Yardley's (2000, 2008) framework for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research, is detailed in Appendix O.

The critical appraisal is written in the first person, in order to provide a reflective and reflexive insight into the development of both the research project and the research practitioner. As posited by Pellegrini (2009, p. 272), "a direct consequence of self-reflexivity is the use of the first person to discuss the authors 'embedded' role in the case study, not as an 'objective' outsider but as a practitioner affecting, and being affect by, the system".

2. Contribution to Knowledge

2.1. Inception of the Research Topic

The current research project initially developed from a piece of casework I completed during my first fieldwork placement as a trainee educational psychologist (TEP). I was facilitating a small group intervention with Year 6 pupils, focusing on exploring self-esteem. I became aware that many of the pupils would discuss the concept of the national tests, specifically focusing on feeling pressure to obtain a certain score in practice tests that were being administered at the time. I wondered how the experience of taking the national tests was impacting not only on the pupils, but also the wider school and family systems.

2.2. Identifying and Exploring Gaps in the Literature

During an initial literature search to explore children's experiences of national testing, I was interested in how the majority of existing research had chosen to focus on the experience of test taking from the perspectives of pupils and/or teachers, through the 'lens' of test anxiety and similarly related constructs (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012).

Through further detailed searches, I became aware that there was limited empirical research considering the experience of primary school testing in general; research in the UK appears to have typically focused on secondary school pupils and older (e.g. Owen-Yeates, 2005; Putwain, 2008, 2009a, 2009b, 2011). The small amount of literature that considered testing in primary schools continued to focus on exploring test-related stress and anxiety in relation to the standard assessment tests (SATs) in England (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain et al., 2012); there was a paucity of research considering the unique experience of Welsh schoolchildren taking the national tests (see Appendix A for literature search procedure). After reading Putwain et al.'s (2012) paper that considered the stress and anxiety surrounding SATs in English primary school children, I was struck by the researcher's assertion that "the greatest

amount of pressure brought to bear on pupils was believed by teachers to come from their

parents" (Putwain et al., 2012, p. 296). I became interested in how parents, in this specific

study, had been constructed as a source of pressure for pupils during the test experience, and

how I could develop a research project to consider the parental perspective in more depth in

order to add to the existing literature.

2.3. Development of the research question

As posited by Robson and McCartan (2016), the type of research question being asked

is determined by the purpose of the research, which is inevitably influenced by the

researcher's ontology and epistemology, and the wider area of research within which the

current project sits. I felt, due to the lack of research accessing the parent voice with regards

to national testing in Wales, the research question should be exploratory in nature.

I decided to keep the research question broad, encompassing parents' experiences

and perceptions of national testing without a specific bias or construct through which to view

such an experience. My epistemological position of social constructionism (which will be

discussed in further detail in subsequent sections) was felt to be incompatible with the existing

literature's focus on measuring test anxiety; it would be inappropriate to attempt to measure

a variable such as this as if it were objective (Willig, 2013), and I felt it would be more

appropriate to explore the various ways in which such a construct is, or is not, part of the

experience of tests for parents. As a result, I chose not to explicitly explore test anxiety within

the research question.

Putwain (2011) suggests that the subjective nature of test experiences remains poorly

understood within the area of research, due to a paucity of in-depth, qualitative research. I

therefore felt there would be value in exploring the experience of testing qualitatively, through

the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA), in order to understand the

experience at an idiographic level.

2.4. Conducting the literature review

Due to the fact I was aware the research question had apparently not been explored previously, and the existing literature within the broader research area was sparse (Appendix A), a narrative approach to conducting the literature review, as opposed to a systematic approach, seemed an appropriate format to synthesise and present the current research project perspective from many different sources of literature (Green, Johnson & Adams, 2006).

It could be argued, however, that a narrative review, in comparison to a systematic approach, depends on the researcher's subjective selection of particular articles, without consideration for explicit inclusion and exclusion criteria (Green et al., 2006). In order to protect against this, I formulated a list of appropriate search terms (Appendix A) that were used to explore the selected databases.

A narrative approach also allowed me to construct the context of the research project from alternative sources of information or 'grey literature', for example from government websites, for specific information relating to procedures of national testing in both England and Wales. I acknowledge that the narrative approach may include researcher bias, as I selected which aspects I wanted to focus on in order to construct the literature review (Cipriani & Geddes, 2003); however, by adopting a critical stance towards the literature discussed, I hope I have been able to present a balanced review of existing literature within this area.

During the literature search, I was particularly interested in comments cited in Putwain (2007): Hart (1998) suggests that particular research areas (such as test anxiety and/or the test-taking experience in school) can develop a *modus operandi* in how to approach the exploration of a topic, and therefore fail to consider how research questions and methodological approaches could be alternatively conceptualised as a means of broadening the research area from a different perspective. I therefore felt there would be value in exploring the experience of formal tests qualitatively, in order to understand the experience at

a detailed and idiographic level within a wider, systemic context, and without a predetermined construct or hypothesis.

2.5. Contribution of research findings to existing knowledge

The current research project identified three inter-related super-superordinate themes that underpinned parents' perceptions and experiences of the national tests: relationships, constructions of the child's experience, and constructions of the test itself. In exploring the inter-related nature of these overarching themes, I found the application of circular causality (Dowling, 2003) was particularly insightful. Viewing behaviour in terms of cycles of interaction (i.e. A affects B affects C), rather than a linear causation (i.e. A causes B) arguably draws attention towards the interaction between the various individuals (parent, child, school staff) that exist within the child's system during the test experience, rather than making claims and apportioning blame or causation to one individual in particular (Osborne, 2003). This also offered an alternative perspective from which the test experience can be understood; as the literature review demonstrated, the majority of existing research in this area has tended to focus on the experience of test taking from the perspectives of pupils and/or teachers, through the 'lens' of test anxiety and similarly related constructs (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain, Connors, Woods & Nicholson, 2012).

Dowling (2003) highlights how adopting a systems perspective ensures "the behaviour of one component of the system is seen as affecting, and being affected by, the behaviour of others" (Dowling, 2003, p. 3). Part Two explored, in detail, how the super- and subordinate themes could be presented within a bioecological paradigm adapted from Bronfenbrenner (1979) and Bronfenbrenner and Ceci (1994) as a means of understanding the bidirectional influence of relationships, wider systems and development of perceptions and experiences over time.

Aspects of the current findings were consistent with previous literature, such as the influence of a child's personal constructs on how they appraise the test experience (Connors et

116

al., 2009; Putwain et al., 2012), the impact of the teacher's language and constructions of the tests towards the child (Mamaniat, 2014), changes to the classroom in preparation for the tests (Boyle & Bragg, 2004; Connors et al., 2009; Education Committee, 2017; Frankham & Howes, 2006; Hall et al., 2004; Torrance, 2004; Troman, 2008) and changes to the role of the teacher during the test itself (Silfer et al., 2016).

Furthermore, the balance between parental pressure and support, as described by Raufelder et al. (2015), was also apparent in many of the parents' discourses. In particular, this conflict in how to approach the tests was discussed in relation to Festinger's (1957) cognitive dissonance theory. This was illustrated through parents' apparent dissonance in wanting their child to perform well in the test, which requires work and preparation beforehand, whilst not being responsible for creating additional pressure on the child which may inadvertently negatively impact on the child's performance. This may reflect the 'effort-justification paradigm', which posits that cognitive dissonance is heightened when an individual engages in an unpleasant activity (e.g. pressurising a child to prepare for a test) to obtain a desirable outcome (e.g. child's high test scores) (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). As the parent acknowledges that the cognition to pressure a child to prepare for a test is unpleasant, it follows that the parent would not engage in the activity, regardless of the desirable outcome perceived. Alternatively, it could be argued that the cognitive dissonance interpreted from several parents' accounts is reflective of Aronson's (1968, 1992) self-consistency interpretation of cognitive dissonance theory, which posits that a situation (e.g. a parent preparing a child for the national tests) creates dissonance because the situation itself forms inconsistency between the parent's self-concept and the behaviour towards the child (Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999).

What makes the findings from this research particularly compelling is the overall systemic picture of the test experience illustrated, from the parent perspective. The current research has offered an insight into the perceptions and experiences of parents of children taking national tests, something that appears sparse within the existing research on primary

school testing in the UK. In addition, the current research offers an insight into national tests in Wales, as opposed to SATs in England, which are distinctive in comparison. Whilst existing research considering the experience of primary school children taking formal tests has tended to focus on stress and anxiety (e.g. Connor, 2001, 2003; Putwain et al., 2012), the current research explored the wider experience of test taking from the perspective of the parent. This is acknowledged to be the unique contribution to the existing literature.

2.6. Contributions to Future Research

At present, all children in Years 2-6 in primary schools across Wales are expected to take the national tests every year (Welsh Government (WG), 2017a). The recent independent review into the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales, commissioned by WG and led by Professor Graham Donaldson, suggested that the current "assessment arrangements are not making the contribution they should to improving learning" and therefore "the current national curriculum and assessment arrangements no longer meet the needs of the children and young people of Wales" (Donaldson, 2015, p. 10-11). As a result of Donaldson's (2015) review, the WG (2017b) are currently developing a new curriculum, but as of yet, there is little information on how this will impact on the current national testing system. Given the ongoing developments, this research topic is arguably relevant to the current education context in Wales, and may provide opportunities for further research within this area.

As highlighted in Part Two, a reasonable next step would be to triangulate the information by ascertaining the views of primary school-aged children and school staff who have experienced the national tests. As discussed by Smith et al. (2009, p. 52), "the exploration of one phenomenon from multiple perspectives can help the IPA analyst to develop a more detailed and multifaceted account of that phenomenon". By triangulating the views from a variety of individuals, for example through a case study approach within one school setting, the variance across different systems could be observed and further enhance our understanding of the test experience in primary school.

The discussion of cognitive dissonance in relation to how parents in the current research constructed the test itself may also offer an opportunity for further study. Research could explore whether cognitive dissonance is present among other aspects of the system within which the test experience occurs, for example amongst children, school staff and the school community as a whole.

Furthermore, it is acknowledged within the limitations of the current research that, due to the small sample size that had a bias towards mothers (7 mothers, 1 father), and the interpretative nature of the data analysis, these findings cannot be generalised to all parents of primary school-aged pupils across Wales. The two schools selected for participant recruitment were English-medium primary schools in Wales with low rates of free school meals (FSM) and achieving 'Good' ratings through Estyn inspections. It may be informative to explore the experience of test taking in different geographical and socio-economic areas.

In addition, as discussed within the literature review, pupils in Key Stage 3 (KS3) in Wales continue to take the national tests each year (WG, 2017a). As previously highlighted, many parents discussed the experience of older siblings who were in secondary schools, and made reference to the inevitability of testing within the school system. Conducting exploratory research within this specific age range may help to further understand the test taking experience, prior to Key Stage 4 (KS4) assessments.

It is also suggested that the current study provides an illustrative example of how qualitative research could be completed within the research area of test experience. A similar replication study exploring parents' perceptions of SATs in England may be a valuable addition to the existing literature of SATs specifically.

2.7. Relevance to EP Practice

It should be acknowledged that the findings of IPA analysis cannot be generalised due to the ideographic nature of the analysis (Smith et al., 2009). However, tentative suggestions can be made for how the findings from the current study, framed within a systemic

perspective, could be applied to professional practice for EPs. Cameron (2006, p. 292) argues that the unique contribution of an EP, in applying psychology, is "to provide an integrated and coherent perspective of complex environments,…the complex problems and situations which occur in such environments…and the complex needs of people which results from such problems". Through the application of Bronfenbrenner and Ceci's (1994) bioecological paradigm, and considering the implications of the findings regarding cognitive dissonance theory (Festinger, 1957) and a joint family and school system approach (Dowling & Osborne, 2003), a number of possible implications for EP practice are offered at a variety of systemic levels.

When working at the individual child level, EPs could explore a child's personal constructs regarding the test experience, as well as wider concepts about how the child views themselves as a learner. Given the parents' discussion around the impact of a child's academic ability on the test experience, it could also be suggested that EPs are well-placed to offer further insight into a child's ability through appropriate assessment work. Furthermore, when considering working at the individual child and microsystemic levels, for example with parents and school staff, EPs could use a variety of tools to explore cognitive dissonance around the test experience. As highlighted in detail in Part Two, these tools could include activities rooted in personal construct psychology (Kelly, 1955), and techniques used within motivational interviewing (Miller & Rollnick, 1991).

In addition, when working at the exosystemic level, the EP is arguably well-placed to consider the factors influencing the whole-school context. Through the use of an action research approach (Lewin, 1946), EPs could support school staff, and even parents and children within the school community, to engage in their own research cycle to explore how the test experience is impacting on that specific school system. This may help explore some of the external attributions that the parents in the current research discussed as impacting on the child's experience of the tests. Furthermore, it could be suggested that it may be appropriate

for EPs to engage in dialogue with individuals within Welsh Government responsible for devising the national tests to offer feedback on how the national tests are perceived and experienced by parents, as well as other key individuals within the system if further research in this area is undertaken. This seems particularly pertinent given the current proposed changes to the national curriculum in Wales (WG, 2017b).

In summary, Pellegrini (2009) highlights how EPs can utilise systemic theory to acknowledge the fact that "a child's life is mostly played out in two main arenas, the home and the school, and what happens in one setting can have a substantial effect upon the child's functioning in the other" (Pellegrini, 2009, p. 271). When working at a group level, for example through consultation with a parent and teacher, the EP is arguably well-placed to include approaches to exploration such as circular questioning (Dowling, 2003; Tomm, 1988). Circular questioning aims to consider the interaction between relationships, beliefs and behaviour from each individual's perspective, placing the focus on connections between these factors as opposed to attributing causes of behaviour (Campbell, Draper & Huffington, 1991; Dowling, 2003). Where a 'within-child' model is applied to understanding a child's experience of formal tests, for example, through the lens of test anxiety, the EP and other key stakeholders fail to understand the complexities of the systems within which a child exists (Pellegrini, 2009), and instead risk "putting people, and children in particular, into categories and labelling them" (Osborne, 2003, p. 33). Furthermore, by adopting a systemic approach to the test experience and exploring the interactions between systems, it is argued that the EP is well-placed to focus intervention towards the interaction that is most amenable to change, rather than focusing on changing the individual (whether that be the child, parent or teacher) (Osborne, 2003).

3. Critical Account of Research Practitioner

3.1. Methodological Considerations

3.1.1. Ontology & Epistemology

The aim of this research was to explore the perceptions and experiences of parents who have children in primary school who have taken the national tests in Wales. As such, a social constructionist epistemological stance, underpinned by a relativist ontology, was adopted and therefore influenced subsequent methodological decisions. The relativist ontological position emphasises the subjective value of the data and recognises the multiple ways in which individuals interpret experiences (Willig, 2013). In addition, social constructionists posit that knowledge is co-created through social processes and interactions (Burr, 2015), for example between the parent and the child. I valued the fact that different parents would suggest a variety of equally valid realities when considering their individual experiences and perceptions of the national tests, and that it would be the purpose of the research to identify the different ways in which this experience is constructed within the specific social reality, and any subsequent implications these experiences have (Willig, 2013).

In keeping with my ontological and epistemological positions, a qualitative methodological design of IPA was adopted, in order to explore the idiographic nature of parents' perceptions and lived experiences (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

3.1.2. Alternative methodologies

As outlined by Willig (2013), a researcher's ontological and epistemological position, and subsequent methodological choice, can then determine, or limit, which methods of data collection and analysis can be used. Therefore, use of alternative methodologies would have likely arisen from adopting alternative ontological and/or epistemological positions.

A positivist position, for example, suggests that "the external world itself determines absolutely the one and only correct view that can be taken of it, independent of the process or

circumstances of viewing" (Kirk & Miller, 1986, p. 14). In research, adopting a positivist approach would suggest that the aim is to provide objective knowledge from 'an outsider's' perspective, in order to offer proof of an absolute (Willig, 2013). I did not feel this would fit with my underlying assumptions as a researcher: to promote and give attention to individual lived experiences of the particular phenomenon of national testing in primary schools in Wales.

I considered adopting a mixed-method approach, where I could have administered a large scale questionnaire with closed questions or rating scales, and then followed this with in-depth interviews with a smaller selection of participants. Although the large scale questionnaire would have possibly been easier for parents to complete in comparison to an interview, resulting in a higher number of responses, it would risk reducing a complex and idiographic experience into data that did not fully capture the essence of each participant's particular experience (Silverman, 2000). I also felt that, because the research question was exploratory in nature and without a directional hypothesis, I would be unsure of how to construct a set of questions to capture the broadness of the research question, and would consequently restrict the responses of participants (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Similarly, I felt a structured interview approach would have been more in line with a survey or questionnaire, and would not allow flexibility for either the participant or me to further explore topics that were deemed important or interesting as they arose (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.1.3. Semi-structured interviews

I therefore chose to use semi-structured interviews, supported by an interview schedule (Appendix F), to gather the data. I constructed two main interview questions, which were open in nature, in order to encourage participants to talk at length and in depth, with interruptions from me kept to a minimum. This approach also offered me flexibility and freedom to explore different topics that each participant chose to raise within the interview (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Furthermore, in line with the principles of IPA, semi-structured interviews ensured I would be able to understand each participant's world by asked open-ended and non-directive questions, promoting the role of the participant as the 'expert' on the topic of discussion (Smith & Osborn, 2007; Willig, 2013). The interview schedule (Appendix F) was designed to be simple, with a set of suggested probes I could offer each participant in order to explore pertinent aspects of the discussion further: however, I was aware that when approaching each interview, I would be guided mostly by the participant's responses within the sequence of topics discussed (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Conducting face-to-face interviews, as opposed to administering an online qualitative questionnaire for instance, not only allowed me greater freedom to explore topics that were initially mentioned in passing by the participant, but also meant I could gauge an understanding of non-verbal cues that added additional information and context to the participant's narrative, which would be subsequently analysed; for example, the use of linguistic characteristics such as laughter and sarcasm (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

Focus groups were considered as a method of data collection due to the fact I could collect several people's views at the same, and the group dynamic may have allowed for the most pertinent themes to be highlighted through group discussions (Robson & McCartan, 2016). However, I also considered how any possible group dynamics may have actually restricted participants feeling able to speak openly and honestly about their thoughts, feelings and experiences (Willig, 2013). I was also aware that the research topic may possibly elicit some negative affect for some participants discussing their experience, or at least feel very personal, and therefore some participants may have felt reluctant to discuss this personal experience in front of other parents, who were likely to be from the same school. As a result, conducting individual interviews aimed to reduce the impact of these possible issues, and to try and encourage the participants to speak as openly, honestly and in-depth about their

personal experience as possible, which would be appropriate given the data analysis approach of IPA (Smith et al., 2009).

Semi-structured interviews, however, have a number of limitations. Interviews are time-consuming, for both the researcher and the participant. In the recruitment letter that was distributed to all parents in both participating schools, I had suggested the interview would take no longer than an hour. It may be the case that this was felt to be overly demanding for busy parents, therefore suggesting a possible explanation for the small number of volunteers that were willing to participate (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.2. Selection and Recruitment of Participants

3.2.1. Inclusion and exclusion criteria

In line with the principles of IPA, a purposive approach to sampling was adopted with specific selection criteria to ensure a fairly homogenous group was selected (Smith & Osborn, 2007). Participants had at least one child in Year 2-6, in a primary school in Wales, who had experienced taking the national tests. This purposive sampling approach "enables the researcher to satisfy their specific needs in a project" and is not necessarily focused on statistical generalisation from the sample to population (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 281).

Although there is limited research focusing on primary school pupils' experience of taking standardised tests in the UK in general, there is currently a paucity of research that considers the unique experiences of Welsh primary school pupils, which provides reason to explore this specific group further. Putwain et al. (2012, p. 293) argued that "the Year 6 SATs seemed to represent [the pupils'] first experience or awareness of high-stakes testing and the experiences and views described by pupils were framed by a sense of novelty and discovery". However, it could be argued that the experience of Welsh primary school pupils (and their parents) is different from that of their English counterparts due to a different approach to testing: Welsh primary school pupils take National Reading and Numeracy tests at the end of

every academic year from Years 2-6, whereas English pupils are currently expected to only take SATs in Years 2 and 6, with legislative changes suggesting this may only be in Year 6 by 2023 (Department for Education (DfE) & Standards and Testing Agency (STA), 2017).

Due to the second recruitment phase in school B taking place at the start of the academic year, I asked that the participant information sheet and consent form be distributed to all parents of a child or children in Years 3-6, as opposed to Years 2-6. Parents who had a child or children only in Year 2 were not included because these children would not have experienced taking the national tests at the time of interview.

I chose to recruit parents from primary schools, as opposed to approaching parents in secondary school to discuss the experience of primary national testing retrospectively. This was for a number of reasons: the national tests in Wales are administered from Years 2-9, and yet I was specifically interested in the experience of national testing in the primary school context (i.e. Years 2-6). Given the phenomenological underpinning of IPA, which is concerned with understanding "how participants are making sense of their personal and social world" (Smith & Osborn, 2015, p.25), I felt it was apposite to only recruit current primary school parents. However, it was the case that five of the eight participants made reference to older children who were now in secondary school, in order to compare the older child's experience with the experience of the primary school-aged sibling. I wondered whether this was felt to be useful for the participants in further illuminating the holistic experience of national testing in primary school, particularly considering how this comparison between children shapes the parent's perspective and experience. This broad range of children's ages (Year 2 to Year 10) meant that participants could speak across a broad range of experiences, as opposed to being restricted to a single age group of child. However, I wondered how the variance between each participant's experience with national tests challenged my initial assumed homogeneity of the sample group; I did not control for parents who had older children in secondary school who had previously experience the national tests in primary school. Furthermore, three of the eight

participants discussed their professional experience of working or volunteering in primary schools as teaching assistants, and it is acknowledged how this dual perspective that crosses the boundary between home and school systems may have influenced their lived experiences.

3.2.2. Recruitment

After gaining ethical approval from Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Committee for the research project in April 2018, and in the early stages of considering recruitment, I encountered some resistance from a chief education officer (CEO) within one local authority (LA) about the topic of the research. After seeking supervision, the gatekeeper letter to Headteachers was amended to include a paragraph highlighting the possible sensitive nature of the research and suggested that Headteachers discuss the research proposal with the school's Governing body and/or LA officers if they felt it appropriate to do so (Appendix B). The implications of this will be discussed within 'ethical considerations'.

Once final ethical approval was gained at the end of June 2018 with the appropriate amendments to the gatekeeper letter, I approached 49 Headteachers from schools across different LAs in Wales, via email, to take part. I received nine replies: three Headteachers agreed to take part, one school asked to be contacted in September to consider participation at that time, one school wanted further information on the project, and four declined to take part. I stopped sending invitations to Headteachers to take part in the research once I had the first response agreeing to take part.

I recruited the four parent volunteers from school A, and a further four participants agreed to take part from school B. Due to the small number of participants recruited from school A, it was felt a second recruitment attempt from a different school would strengthen the research. The total number of participants was within the range that I had initially planned for: Smith et al. (2009) suggest that IPA studies for professional doctoral research should aim to collect data from 4-10 individuals. The small numbers of volunteers may be due, in part, to the nature of the research requiring time from the prospective participants to take part in the

interview. It could be argued that the small participant group may be biased, as volunteers

may have had a particular experience which therefore formed part of their personal

motivation to take part in the interview: advice to researchers proposed by Robson and

McCartan (2016, p. 287) suggest that "just as you are hoping to get something out of the

interview, it is not unreasonable for the interviewee to get something from you".

Reflecting on the process of recruitment, I acknowledged that I felt the perceived

barriers to accessing the prospective participants frustrating and disheartening, both from the

initial resistance from the CEO and then the lack of response from Headteachers. However,

this also offered me an insight into a deeper understanding of exactly what I was researching.

Robson and McCartan (2016) highlight how the relationship between the researcher and

others within the research process have an emotionally dynamic component, which may

heighten a sense of anxiety in the researcher: "the emotional ante is raised for all concerned

when sensitive topics are the focus of the study" (Robson & McCartan, 2016, p. 396). I soon

realised that the research topic was, by some, considered to be politically sensitive, and

therefore may have been unappealing for schools to agree to take part.

In addition, with regards to the resistance from the CEO in the early stages of the

research, I reflected upon the systems theory concept of punctuation: "every item of

perception or behaviour may be stimulus or response or reinforcement according to how the

total sequence of interaction is punctuated" (Bateson, 1973, p. 263). I had discussed my

research idea with the CEO in the middle of the national testing fortnight for the academic

year 2017-2018, and therefore I wonder whether the research may have been viewed in light

of the reality of national testing at that time; there is no correct or incorrect punctuation to a

situation, only a reflection of how that individual is viewing reality at that time (Dowling,

2003).

In summary, Hodgson and Rollnick (1995, p. 3) illustrate my reflections on the

recruitment process by suggesting that "trouble awaits those unwary souls who believe that

research flows smoothly and naturally from questions to answers via a well organised data collection system".

3.3. Data Collection

Potter and Hepburn (2005) highlight how researchers should consider the various contextual features of an interview, for example, the interaction between interviewer and interviewee, the perceived status of the 'conversation' between two individuals, and how both interviewer and interviewee will benefit from the process (Willig, 2013). I felt it was crucial to remain aware of how the experience of the interview was understood, from both the perspective of the interviewer and interviewee, in order to avoid assumptions being made that the responses given by the interviewee were to be taken at 'face value' as a true and direct reflection of his/her thoughts and feelings (Willig, 2013). This will be discussed in further detail in the following section concerning data analysis.

In addition, it may have been helpful to conduct a pilot study or interview to allow me time to practise the interview schedule and receive feedback from the participant in order to adjust my interview technique in subsequent interviews (Robson & McCartan, 2016).

3.4. Analysis of Data

Smith and Osborn (2015) highlight how IPA is an appropriate approach to exploring, in detail, how individuals make sense of their personal world and lived experience. The role of the IPA researcher is to attempt to understand the participant's perspective of the world (i.e. phenomenological), which is dependent on the researcher's own position (i.e. interpretative) (Smith et al., 2009; Willig, 2013). This was therefore felt to be an appropriate form of data analysis that was in line with the researcher's relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology: I was interested in how parents' subjectively experienced national tests and wanted to ensure I could capture the different ways in which parents perceived and experienced the same event, whilst acknowledging that I could only ascertain these insights

through "engagement with and interpretation of the participant's account" (Willig, 2013, p. 97). Furthermore, IPA was considered apposite given the research question, which does not attempt to explore a predetermined hypothesis regarding parents' perceptions and experiences of primary school pupils' taking national tests (Smith & Osborn, 2015).

The interview transcripts were analysed in accordance with Smith et al.'s (2009) suggested IPA procedure (Appendix H). The current research is based on interviews with eight participants, which produced an abundance of data; although Smith et al. (2009) posit that there is no correct sample size for IPA, analysing the experience and perceptions of eight participants within a short report risks losing the complexity and richness of the individual cases due to the overwhelming amount of data generated. Furthermore, Smith et al. (2009) acknowledge how qualitative analysis, such as IPA, is very time consuming. I would have liked to have revisited the participants to check they agreed with my constructions of the final themes after the analysis and prior to the final report being written up.

The possible limitations associated with IPA, namely the interpretative nature of the analysis, are recognised. IPA acknowledges the 'double hermeneutic' within this type of exploratory research, whereby the researcher attempts to interpret the participant's interpretation of his/her own experience (Smith et al., 2009). I was aware of my active role throughout the interview process and subsequent analysis, and the constructed themes are limited to a reflection of my interpretation. The potential impact of my own position and possible biases, which are explored in a subsequent section of this critical appraisal, was acknowledged and monitored throughout data collection and analysis through the use of a research diary (Appendix N).

Alternative approaches to data analysis were considered, for example grounded theory (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). Grounded theory developed as an alternative to hypothesis-testing and applying existing theories to new data, in an attempt to explore social processes in a 'bottom up' approach (Willig, 2013). Grounded theory was dismissed as methodology

approach due to its realist ontological position: as posited by Willig (2013, p. 80), "grounded theory assumes that social events and processes have an objective reality in the sense that they take place irrespective of the researcher and that they can be observed and documented by the researcher". In comparison, I had adopted a relativist ontology and social constructionist epistemology which, as previously discussed, would be more in line with IPA (Willig, 2013).

Nevertheless, Smith et al. (2009, p. 202) highlight the "considerable overlap" between IPA and grounded theory. Although the findings of the current research have been discussed in relation to psychological theory and concepts (e.g. cognitive dissonance theory, circular causality and a bioecological paradigm), this aimed to illustrate and explore the findings further, rather than develop a new and distinctive theory (Willig, 2013) to understanding the test experience in primary schools from the perspective of parents. Fundamentally, the aim of the current research was the exploration and presentation of the lived experiences of a small sample of parents, highlighting the convergence and divergence between each experience (Smith et al., 2009). Furthermore, the research question was concerned with understanding parents' perceptions and experiences, rather than exploring social psychological processes which may be more appropriately studied through grounded theory (Willig, 2013). It is acknowledged, however, that an IPA study, such as the current project, could lead to a subsequent grounded theory study (Smith et al., 2009).

3.5. Ethical Considerations

In accordance with the ethical guidelines from the British Psychological Society (BPS, 2014), I considered a number of ethical issues from the inception of the research proposal (Appendix G).

Although the research project had been ethically approved to have Headteachers as gatekeepers to parents, I had inadvertently been restricted to gain parents' perceptions based on the approval from the CEO in my initial attempt to recruit; however, I remained unchanged

in my perspective that a CEO within an LA should not act as a gatekeeper to conduct research with parents. I considered other ways in which I could access parents directly, without necessarily needing permission from a gatekeeper who will have their own political agenda from which to view the research project. I contemplated advertising on parent forums or social media for volunteers. However, due to the specific nature of the participant group (parents had to have children of a certain age in a primary school in Wales) and the possible biases that may be present when recruiting through such forums, I decided to amend the original gatekeeper letter to Headteachers, highlighting how the Headteacher could use his/her own professional autonomy to decide whether his/her school's parents could take part, based on the information provided in the gatekeeper letter. I felt this addition to the gatekeeper letter was an appropriate way to ensure Headteachers were able to give fully informed consent to allowing the parents to participate, given the initial concerns that had been raised by the CEO.

As I was recruiting parents through schools, I wanted to ensure that prospective participants understood they would remain anonymous throughout the research process, and that the school would not know which parents had volunteered to participate. I made this explicitly clear in the gatekeeper letter to Headteachers (Appendix B), information sheet and consent form to participants (Appendices C & D), as well as reiterating the point prior to commencing the interview and again during the debrief information (Appendix E). I suggested that parents return the consent form in a sealed envelope to ensure anonymity; on reflection, this could have been enhanced further by offering participants the opportunity to return the consent form via email, thus not implicating the school at all.

3.6. Researcher's Position

Smith et al. (2009) highlight how the process of IPA is fundamentally concerned with how the researcher is trying to make sense of the participant trying to make sense of what is happening to them, otherwise known as the 'double hermeneutic'. This process of interpretation must therefore "implicate the researcher's own view of the world" (Willig, 2013,

p. 87). I kept a research diary to record pertinent reflections in relation to my personal perceptions (Appendix N) as a means of maintaining a critical stance towards the research process. The reflective and reflexive comments noted throughout data analysis in particular aimed to ensure my interpretations were kept as close as possible to the parents' narratives (Appendix N). Due to the significant role the researcher has within IPA, my personal position is presented to offer transparency to the reader. It should be noted that, although I was familiar with the area that one of the participating schools was located in, I was not working with the schools, pupils or families involved in the current study.

Prior to commencing postgraduate doctoral training to become an EP, I had worked as a primary school teacher in Wales from September 2014 – July 2016, including a year of Post-Graduate Certificate of Education (PGCE) training. During these two years, I had experienced the national tests being administered in Years 3 and 5. My perceptions and experiences of the national tests as a teacher were mixed: I recall a feeling of professional pride when my class was highlighted by the school's senior leadership team as having particularly high scores at the end of a challenging year as a newly qualified teacher (NQT), and finding the results of the national tests to be a useful quantitative measure to help inform my teacher-based assessments. However, I remember seeing a child in tears during one test, looking to me for help in answering questions, which I was unable to offer because of the strict test conditions. I felt a complicated sense of responsibility: was the child upset because I hadn't done enough to prepare them for the questions?; yet, watching a child become upset when all she needed was reassurance that she was on the right track was in total conflict with my values as a teacher. I also remember a conversation with a parent who wanted permission to remove her child from school during the testing period, due to his additional learning needs (ALN). Listening to an upset and frustrated parent share her concerns about how the tests would negatively impact her son and how the results would mean nothing to her anyway, whilst knowing the

Headteacher of the school expected me to ensure all pupils in my class took the tests in the given timeframe, was particularly challenging, professionally and personally.

I am consciously aware that my background and previous experience as a teacher, and subsequent experience as a TEP, has contributed to my interest in the topic of national testing in Wales. Prior to beginning the interviews, I was prepared to expect a largely negative perspective from parents; however, as the findings suggest, the test experience for parents is far more complex and intricate than simply agreeing or disagreeing with national tests in primary schools.

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Appendices

Further appendices are attached on a USB due to their length. These appendices contain the following information:

Appendix A: Search Terms for Literature Review

Literature searches were conducted between December 2017 and April 2019. The table below represents the search returns recorded in April 2019. Searches completed from PsycINFO, included keywords and subject headings, ERIC included keywords only, and ASSIA searched within abstracts. Given the high number of articles returned by some searches, the titles and abstracts were examined for their relevance to the current study. The search terms focused on "national test*" (truncated to include other phrases, such as "national tests" and "national testing") and "SATs" as these are the current phrases used for formal testing in primary school in Wales and England respectively. These phrases were then combined with contextual search terms, such as "primary school" and "parent*" to search for literature related to the current research question.

In addition to searches of databases, relevant literature was selected through the reference lists of primary sources. Relevant English and Welsh Government legislation and documentation was accessed through focused online searches, as were press releases and reports from relevant teaching unions.

Database	Search terms	Results
PsycINFO 1806-2019	National test*	281
	National test* AND Wales	8
	SATs	188
	SATs AND England	9
	Standard assessment test*	24
	Statutory assessment test*	8
	National curriculum assessment*	47
	High stakes test*	1356
	GCSEs	33
	(National test* OR SATs OR standard assessment test* OR statutory assessment test* OR national curriculum assessment OR high stakes test*) AND (England OR Wales)	57
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum assessment OR High stakes test*) AND (Primary school OR Key stage 1 OR Key stage 2 OR Foundation phase)	53
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum assessment OR High stakes test*) AND Parent*	159
Education Resources Information Center (ERIC)	National test*	31
	National test* AND Wales	2
	SATs	4
	SATs AND England	2
	Standard assessment test*	0
	Statutory assessment test*	0
	National curriculum assessment*	1
	(National test* OR SATs OR standard assessment test* OR statutory assessment test* OR national curriculum assessment) AND (England OR Wales)	6
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum	0

	assessment) AND (Primary school OR Key stage 1 OR Key stage 2 OR Foundation phase)	
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum assessment) AND (Parent*)	0
Applied Social Sciences Index and Abstracts (ASSIA)	National test*	40
	National test* AND Wales	0
	SATs	37
	SATs AND England	0
	Standard assessment test*	4
	Statutory assessment test*	3
	National curriculum assessment*	4
	High stakes test*	109
	GCSEs	24
	(National test* OR SATs OR standard assessment test* OR statutory assessment test* OR national curriculum assessment OR high stakes test*) AND (England OR Wales)	3
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum assessment OR High stakes test*) AND (Primary school OR Key stage 1 OR Key stage 2 OR Foundation phase)	7
	(National test* OR SATs OR Standard assessment test* OR Statutory assessment test* OR National curriculum assessment OR High stakes test*) AND (Parent*)	10

Cardiff University Centre for Human Developmental Sciences (CUCHDS)
School of Psychology
Park Place
Cardiff
CF10 3AT

[School Address]

[Date]

Dear [Headteacher],

My name is Emily Clement and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at Cardiff University. As part of the doctorate, I am conducting a major research project. I am interested in exploring parents' perceptions and experiences of their children taking National Tests in Wales. I am writing to enquire whether you would be willing to allow me to include the parents of your school in this study.

The title of the proposed research will be:

'An Exploration of Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of their Children Taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales.'

I will be supervised throughout the project by Dr Dale Bartle who is a professional tutor for the Doctorate in Educational Psychology course at Cardiff University.

I would require an information letter and consent form to be distributed to all parents who have a child or children in Years 2, 3, 4, 5 and/or 6. This information letter will outline the proposed aims and methodology of the research and explain how parents can volunteer to take part in the study. Those parents who choose to volunteer in the study will be asked to return the consent form in a sealed envelope, addressed to the researcher, to the school office by a particular date. I will then collect these forms and randomly select a maximum of 8 participants to take part in the study; it will be explicitly stated in the recruitment letter that volunteering to take part in the study does not necessarily guarantee the individual will be selected if the number of volunteers exceeds 8. If the number of volunteers exceeds 8, then I will randomly select participants using a random number generator.

Once the final sample has been selected and each individual has given fully informed consent, I will conduct in-depth semi-structured interviews with each individual. These interviews will take place in the participant's home. Each interview should take around an hour. Taking part in the interview is voluntary and the parent can leave at any time. The interviews will be recorded on a dictaphone, which will be kept in a locked drawer until the recordings can be transferred to a password-protected computer to be transcribed. After all the interviews have been anonymously transcribed, the recordings will be deleted. All identifiable information, including information relating to the parent's child or children, the school and the Local Authority, will be removed to ensure anonymity.

The information provided will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (inforequest@cardiff.ac.uk). The lawful basis for processing this information is public interest. This information is being collected by Emily Clement. The information on the consent form will be held securely and separately from the research information. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The research information you provide will be used for the purposes of research only and will be stored securely. Only Emily Clement

will have access to this information. After 14 days the data will be anonymised (any identifying elements removed) and this anonymous information may be kept indefinitely or published.

The information obtained during the interviews will be analysed to explore any themes. This will be written up as part of a report for my doctoral studies. This information may form the basis of a research paper, which may be submitted for publication, for example in a research journal.

Clearly there may be some sensitivity around this research and you may think it prudent to discuss this with your Governing body and/or Local Authority officers as you deem appropriate.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project. Please let me know if you require any further information or clarification.

Kind regards,

Emily Clement

Emily Clement, Trainee Educational Psychologist
School of Psychology
Cardiff University
ClementES@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr Dale Bartle, Research Supervisor (DEdPsy)
School of Psychology
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029 208 70360
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Appendix C: Information Letter to Parents

Dear Parent,

My name is Emily Clement and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist at Cardiff University. As part of the doctorate, I am currently conducting a major research project and I am writing to invite you to take part in this study. The title of my project is:

'An Exploration of Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of their Children Taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales.'

You will be asked to take part in an interview that should last for around an hour. Taking part in the interview is voluntary. You can choose to not answer questions and can end the interview at any time without giving a reason. During the interview, you will be asked to discuss your experiences, thoughts and feelings regarding your child or children's experience of taking the National Tests in Wales.

The interview will take place in your own home. If you would like to volunteer to take part, you can inform the researcher of a suitable date and time. The interview will be recorded on a dictaphone, which will be kept in a locked drawer until the recording is transferred to a password-protected computer at the end of the day. This is to ensure confidentiality. You will have 14 days after your interview to decide if you would like to withdraw your interview from the study. After this time, your interview will be anonymously transcribed and the recording will be deleted. During the transcribing process, any identifying information, such as names or places, will be removed to ensure anonymity. The anonymised transcripts will be stored on a password-protected computer for 5 years and then be destroyed. At no point will the researcher inform the school that you took part in the study.

The information provided will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (inforequest@cardiff.ac.uk). The lawful basis for processing this information is public interest. This information is being collected by Emily Clement. The information on the consent form will be held securely and separately from the research information. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The research information you provide will be used for the purposes of research only and will be stored securely. Only Emily Clement will have access to this information. After 14 days the data will be anonymised (any identifying elements removed) and this anonymous information may be kept indefinitely or published.

The information from your interview will be used as part of a research project. You should be aware that the information you provide may form the basis of a research paper that may be submitted for publication, for example in a research journal. Once the final report has been completed, the researcher will be able to share and discuss an overview of the findings with you if you choose.

If you would like to volunteer for this study, please read and complete the attached consent form and provide your contact details. Please return this consent form in a sealed envelope addressed to Emily Clement (Trainee Educational Psychologist) to the school's office by **Friday 20th July 2018**. The researcher is hoping to interview between 4-8 individuals. Therefore, if the number of volunteers exceeds this range, individuals will be assigned a number and randomly selected to take part in the study using a random number generator. You will be contacted by the researcher to confirm whether you have been selected to take part in the study and to arrange a date and time for the interview by **Friday 27th July 2018**.

If you would like to ask any questions about the study, or make a complaint, you can contact the researcher, Emily Clement (Trainee Educational Psychologist), Dr Dale Bartle

(Research Supervisor) or the Cardiff University School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Please see the contact details below.

Thank you for taking the time to read this information,

Emily Clement

Trainee Educational Psychologist
School of Psychology, Cardiff University
ClementES@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr Dale Bartle, Research Supervisor (DEdPsy)
School of Psychology, Cardiff University
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Appendix D: Consent Form to Parents

Consent Form

By consenting to participate in this study, I understand that:

- I agree to be involved in an interview with Emily Clement, Trainee Educational Psychologist, about my perceptions and experiences of my child or children taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales.
- Taking part in the interview is voluntary. I can choose to not answer any questions and I can end the interview at any time without giving a reason.
- At no point will Emily inform the school that I will be taking part in the study.
- The interview should take around an hour of my time.
- The interview will take place in my own home.
- My interview will be recorded on a dictaphone, which will be kept in a locked drawer until the recording is transferred to a password-protected computer at the end of the day. This is to ensure confidentiality.
- I have the right to ask for my interview to be withdrawn from the study for 14 days after my interview takes place. I will contact Emily within 14 days if I would like to withdraw my interview.
- After this time, my interview will be anonymously transcribed and the recording will then be deleted. Any identifying information, such as names or places, will be removed during the transcribing process to ensure anonymity.
- The information I provide in the interview will form the basis of a research paper, which may be submitted for publication, for example, in a research journal.
- If I want to talk to someone about the study or make a complaint, I can contact Emily Clement, Dr Dale Bartle (research supervisor) or the School of Psychology Research Ethics Committee. Please see the contact details below.
- If more than 8 individuals volunteer to participate in the study, the researcher will randomly select 8 participants. I will be contacted by **Friday 27th July 2018** to confirm if I have been selected to be interviewed or not, and if so, to arrange a date and time for the interview.
- I understand that the personal data will be processed in accordance with GDPR regulations (see privacy statement below).

I _____(name) would like to take part in the study with Emily Clement (Trainee Educational Psychologist).

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Privacy Notice:

The information provided will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (inforequest@cardiff.ac.uk). The lawful basis for processing this information is public interest. This information is being collected by Emily Clement.

The information on the consent form will be held securely and separately from the research information. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years.

The research information you provide will be used for the purposes of research only and will be stored securely. Only Emily Clement will have access to this information. After 14 days the data will be anonymised (any identifying elements removed) and this anonymous information may be kept indefinitely or published.

Personal Details	
Surname:	Forename(s):
Preferred Name (if applicable):	Title:
Age of child/children:	Year Group of child/children:
Preferred method of correspondence (delete as appropriate): Postal / Telephone / E-mail	
Home Address: Postcode:	
Home Telephone:	
Mobile:	
E-mail address:	

Please return this form in a sealed envelope addressed to Emily Clement (Trainee Educational Psychologist) to the school's office by <u>Friday 20th July 2018</u>.

Emily Clement, Trainee Educational Psychologist
School of Psychology, Cardiff University
ClementES@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr Dale Bartle, Research Supervisor (DEdPsy)
School of Psychology, Cardiff University
BartleD@cardiff.ac.uk

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http://psych.cf.ac.uk/aboutus/ethics.html

Appendix E: Debrief Letter

<u>An Exploration of Parents' Perceptions and Experiences of their Children Taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales.</u>

Thank you for taking part in the interview. The aim of this was to explore your perceptions and experiences, as a parent, of your child or children taking the National Reading and Numeracy Tests in Wales. I hope that the experiences, thoughts and feelings you shared with me within this research will help us to better understand the experience of taking National Tests in Primary School.

At no point will I disclose to the school that you took part in this study. The experiences, thoughts and feelings you shared with me have been recorded on a dictaphone, which will be kept in a locked drawer until the recording can be transferred to a password-protected computer to ensure confidentiality. You now have 14 days to decide if you would like to withdraw your interview. After this time, your interview will be anonymously transcribed and the recording will be deleted. Any identifying information, such as names or places, will be removed during the transcribing process to ensure anonymity. The anonymised transcript will be stored on a password-protected computer for 5 years and then deleted. The personal details you provided to take part in this study will now be deleted.

The information provided will be held in compliance with GDPR regulations. Cardiff University is the data controller and Matt Cooper is the data protection officer (inforequest@cardiff.ac.uk). The lawful basis for processing this information is public interest. This information is being collected by Emily Clement. The information on the consent form will be held securely and separately from the research information. Only the researcher will have access to this form and it will be destroyed after 7 years. The research information you provide will be used for the purposes of research only and will be stored securely. Only Emily Clement will have access to this information. After 14 days the data will be anonymised (any identifying elements removed) and this anonymous information may be kept indefinitely or published.

As discussed, if any of the topics in our interview have caused you to feel upset or worried, you can contact the school's Headteacher to discuss these issues further. Alternatively, you are welcome to contact Emily Clement (Trainee Educational Psychologist) or Dr Dale Bartle (Research Supervisor) to discuss any issues.

If you would like any further information about this research, have any queries, or would be interested in receiving further information regarding the results of the study, please feel free to contact Emily Clement or Dr Dale Bartle on the contact details listed below.

Thank you again for taking the time to participate in this research.

Yours sincerely,

Emily Clement

Trainee Educational Psychologist
School of Psychology, Cardiff University
ClementES@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr Dale Bartle
Research Supervisor (DEdPsy)
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http://psych.cf.ac.uk/aboutus/ethics.html

Appendix F: Semi-Structured Interview Schedule

<u>Before commencing interview:</u>
- Introduce myself more fully and explain why I am doing this research.
- Give the participant an opportunity to re-read the consent form, and explain the limits of confidentiality.
- Give the participant the opportunity to ask any questions that they may have.
- Inform the participant that there are no right or wrong answers to questions and that I am interested in their individual views and experiences.
- Remind the participant that they may take a break at any time if they wish, and they have the right to not answer a question or end the interview at any time, without providing a reason.

<u>Plan for interview:</u>
1. Can you tell me about how your child/children have experienced taking the National Tests?

2. Can you tell me about what it was like for you as a parent whilst your child/children were taking the National Tests?

<u>Possible prompts:</u>
- Can you tell me a little bit more about that?
- Could you give me an example?
- Could you tell me a bit more about what you meant by _____?
- What was that like?
- Why do you think things were like that?

<u>End of interview:</u>
- Inform the participant that I do not have any more questions to ask.
- Thank the participant for their time.
- Ask the participant if they have any questions.
- Discuss the information in the debrief sheet.

Appendix G: Ethical Considerations

Gatekeeper Informed Consent

A gatekeeper letter (Appendix B) was sent to the Headteacher of 49 Primary schools across Wales. This letter outlined the aims of the research project and the proposed methodology.

Participant Informed Consent

Once informed consent was gained from the Headteacher, an information sheet (Appendix C) and consent form (Appendix D) was distributed to all parents of pupils in Year 2-6 in school 1, and all parents of pupils in Year 3-6 in school 2, as pupils in these year groups would have had experience of taking National Tests at the time of recruitment.

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The interviews were recorded on a dictaphone, which the researcher kept in a locked drawer until the recordings were transferred to a password-protected computer. At this point, the recording was deleted from the dictaphone. Fourteen days after the interview, the recording was transcribed and identifiable information, such as names or locations, was removed or replaced with pseudonyms. The anonymous transcripts have been securely stored on a password-protected computer and will be destroyed after five years. At no point during the research process were either school informed of which parents had been selected to be interviewed to ensure anonymity was maintained. This point was reiterated to participants prior to the start of the interview to ensure this would not impact on how openly participants spoke during the interview.

Data Protection and Compliance with GDPR

The collection and processing of personal information was compliant with GDPR regulations and this was approved as part of the Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Committee. The researcher included information about how personal data would be held in compliance with GDPR regulations in the gatekeeper letter (Appendix B), recruitment letter and information sheet to parents (Appendix C), consent form (Appendix D) and debrief sheet (Appendix E).

Risk of Harm

The researcher decided to conduct individual interviews as opposed to a focus group, as some participants may have been reluctant to discuss personal thoughts and feelings in front of other parents. Although the likelihood of harm to participants was deemed low, the researcher remained vigilant throughout the interview in case any participant became distressed or expressed concern about the discussion topic. In the debrief discussion after the interview ended, the researcher reminded the participant who she could contact if she had any questions or issues about the topics discussed in the interview (Appendix E).

Right to Withdraw

Participants were reminded of the right to withdraw when the information letter was distributed, at the point of informed consent and immediately prior to the interview commencing. Each participant was reminded that she could choose to not answer any questions and could send the interview at any time without giving a reason. In addition, each participant was informed that she could withdraw her interview up to 14 days afterwards. After this point, the interview was transcribed and any identifiable information was either removed or replaced with pseudonyms. No participants withdrew from the research.

Debriefing

      After the interview ended, all participants were fully debriefed and provided with a debrief sheet (Appendix E). This included information about points of contact should any issues have been raised as a result of taking part in the research.

Appendix H: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) Procedure

The IPA procedure that the researcher undertook, informed by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), is detailed below.

Step 1: Transcription
- The researcher transcribed each interview verbatim from the audio recordings. This involved repeatedly listening to each participant's recording.

Step 2: Reading and re-reading
- The researcher familarised herself with the data by reading and re-reading the first transcript in detail. The researcher chose to analyse the longest and most complex transcript first, in this case participant 2, following advice from Smith et al. (2009).

Step 3: Initial noting
- The researcher made initial notes on the first transcript on aspects that were of interest: these notes were categorised as descriptive, linguistic and conceptual comments (see Appendices I and K for two examples).

Step 4: Developing emergent themes
- The researcher attempted to reduce the exploratory comments of this first transcript into a set of succinct themes that summarised the importance of details at particular points in the transcript.

Step 5: Searching for connections
- The researcher then began to search for connections across the emergent themes of this first transcript. This included using abstraction (putting similar themes together), polarisation (putting themes together from highlighted difference), contextualisation (exploring the temporal and narrative nature of themes) and numeration (considering the frequency of a particular theme). Each participants' individual analysis is presented in Appendix M.

Step 6: Moving to the next case
- Once the individual analysis was complete, the researcher repeated the process (steps 1-4) with the next transcript that was the second longest (participant 4), and continued to follow this approach across the remaining transcripts. The researcher used a research diary to illustrate reflections of ideas that started to emerge from previous transcripts (see Appendix N). This helped to analyse each case in its own individuality.

Step 7: Looking for patterns across cases
- Once all eight transcripts had been individually analysed, the researcher began looking for patterns across all cases. The researcher attempted to adopt a more theoretical level to identify similarities across individual cases, highlighting both the individuality of each parent's transcript, whilst noticing instances of higher order concepts that were present across multiple cases.

Appendix I: Example of Extract of Transcript for Sian (Participant 3) with Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes

Emergent Theme	Transcript	Exploratory Comments
Some disruption to school day increases child's awareness of tests Disappointment that school prioritise tests over swimming	The structure of school, I mean it's certainly very different from when I was at school because they kind of do things in topics and it's quite normal for something to come up and they focus on it for a few weeks, um, and then that's done and they move on to something else. So it was almost as if it was another topic that they were, that they were doing really. Um, and I think, the only way my older daughter, she sort of noticed it, because I think it did disrupt the sort of the small and regular things that they do. They have a better structure to the morning and things were moved around a bit to accommodate that they were sitting the test. Um, so she was sort of aware that there was sort of a bit of change there. Um, my youngest daughter, the only impact she had was she missed her swimming lesson the week they were doing a test. She was a bit disappointed about that and it did seem a shame that they had to…to come and cancel that for something that was taking up quite a small part of the day…but that was something the school felt was necessary…so, um… So yeah, um…so I think, I didn't think it had a	D = Descriptive comments L = Linguistic comments C = Conceptual comments D – Structure of schools in teaching topics meaning that tests are seen as part of the school structure, like "another topic". D – "only way" older daughter noticed the tests was because "it did disrupt the sort of the small and regular things that they do. They have a better structure to the morning and things were moved around a bit to accommodate that they were sitting the test" C – Tests disrupt the school day, which makes children more aware they're happening. D – Younger daughter missed swimming lesson during the testing week, which she was "a bit disappointed about". C – A shame that school prioritise tests over other aspects of school e.g. swimming.

154

	particularly strong impact on them either way but it was something that they were aware…was happening, um. But they were both interested to see, see the results…um, of that, um… In terms of that impact I don't know-. They're both very bright children, um, so it doesn't have-…it had quite a nice ending for them because they get their things and they can look and see how they…well my older daughter could look and see how she'd done compared to last year. Um, and you know, see if you can see if you're doing above average, that's a nice thing. I can imagine if it's the other way it might not be such a…positive experience, I don't know but, um…but it's, it's a weird thing. I mean as a parent you don't want to compare your children to other children, but instinctively you kind of, you do. You try not to. [Laughs] Um, even when they're small, don't you, you know, when they start crawling, when they're doing all these things and you chat to other mums and you start thinking "Ooh, mine's a bit late doing that", so I suppose you'll always be making those comparisons, but, but it's um…yeah so I think the impact for my children…is probably different for them than maybe children that struggle with, with school…but that's just my assumptions of that.	D – Test experience didn't have an impact (positive or negative) on children, but they were aware of them happening.
Children interested in results		
		D – Both children were interested in seeing their results.
		D – Because both children are "very bright children… it had quite a nice ending for them"
Relationship between daughters' high ability and positive experience of looking at results		C – Impact of daughter's ability on positive experience of looking at results.
		D – Older daughter could compare this year's result with last year.
		D – "see if you can see if you're doing above average, that's a nice thing. I can imagine if it's the other way it might not be such a…positive experience"
		C – Relationship between daughters' high ability and positive experience of looking at results.
Comparison between children is instinctive as a parent		D – "as a parent you don't want to compare your children to other children, but instinctively you kind of, you do. You try not to."
Relationship between child's ability and impact of test experience		D/C – Making comparisons between children (as parent) is inevitable.
		C – Linking impact of tests with child's ability.

Child-parent communication showed increased awareness of tests	I: Ok, um, so, when you said that they've become more aware of them…especially your older daughter…how did you notice that she was becoming more aware this year of taking the test?

P3: I think she's talked about them a little bit more. Um, she told us a little bit more about what she'd been doing, um…and, I think there was one of the tests where she sort of run out of time and she hadn't finished…and she was kind-, it bothered her a little bit because she sort of was feeling that it might not…reflect accurately what she knew because she hadn't had time to finish, um, what she was doing so, um… Yeah, so she just talked about it that bit more at home. And so as I said my daughter, my younger daughter, she | D – Older daughter talked about the tests a little bit more.

C – Child-parent communication showing increased awareness of tests.

D – Older daughter ran out of time to finish the test and was bothered "it might not…reflect accurately what she knew because she hadn't had time to finish"
C – Child feeling time pressure of tests? |
| **Impact of school's construction of Year 2 tests on child** | was…kept talking about this, like secret spy stuff they were doing and I initially didn't know that that was to do with the testing because the school hadn't mentioned it to us, and I just thought must be the topic that they're doing and then slowly it kind of, I | D – Younger daughter talking about "secret spy stuff".
C – Impact of how school is constructing the tests for children. |
| **School-parent communication about Year 2 tests** | twigged that that was what, what they were talking about, um…and then as it got closer to the time the school let us know that that's what they were, that's what they were doing with the younger ones, so yeah she was talking…yeah, and then she brought home, um, a | D – School didn't initially mention how they would be discussing the tests with Year 2 children.
C – Impact of school communications with children.
D – School informed parents of approach to communicating Year 2 tests to children closer to the time.
D – Children brought home "a couple of like older |
| **School encouraging year 2 children to** | couple of like older papers that they would use so that we could see | papers that they would use so that we could see and sort of if they wanted to kind of practise them at home" |

practise tests at home	and sort of if they wanted to kind of practise them at home, um...which I, that surprised me a bit because I thought for somebody in Year 2...to be practising...[laugh]...for an assessment at home...it just didn't sit very comfortably for me. But it didn't bother her, she wasn't that interested in them if I'm honest [laughing]. We sat and looked at one and...by about the third question she had lost interest and she really didn't want to look at any more, so we didn't bother. Um, so I think within the school environment, it was, it was fine for her, but she didn't really want to be thinking about her school stuff at home really, other than to tell her about what she had done. She didn't want to start looking at them at home. And my older daughter, I don't think, she didn't say that she'd been given any old papers or anything, so either she was given them and didn't want to bring them home, um, or they didn't feel that it was, maybe because they done things in previous years they didn't feel it was necessary for the older ones, um, but, um, but yeah, there was definitely more communication with us about them this time. But I dunno, It could be because there's two of them talking about it I suppose...	C – School encouraging children to prepare for tests at home. D – Surprise at practise tests being sent home for Year 2 children. D – younger daughter "wasn't that interested" in doing practise papers. L – laughter – indicating how little her daughter wanted to do the practise tests? D – Looked at one practise test together. L – "we" – shared experience between child and parent of doing the practise test. C – School encouraging children to practise tests at home – with parents? D – "within the school environment, it was, it was fine for her, but she didn't really want to be thinking about her school stuff at home really, other than to tell her about what she had done" C – Construction of child's separation of home and school systems regarding tests. D – Older daughter didn't bring any practice tests home. D – School may not have sent practice tests home for older pupils because the children are used to doing tests from previous years. C – Change in school approach as children progress through school? D – "there was definitely more communication with us about them this time" C – Impact of both siblings doing tests at the same time?
Child constructs home and school systems as separate		
Change in school's approach to test preparation throughout ages		

Appendix J: Example of Superordinate and Subordinate Themes with Supporting Quotes for

Sian (Participant 3)

Superordinate Themes Subordinate Themes	Page/Line Number	Original Transcript Extract
Constructions of child's experience		
Increased awareness	1/14-15	*This year, I think they both seemed to be a bit more aware of the fact that they were happening…*
	1/19-22	*And then I think my other daughter having had the results of the one year before, she was a bit more aware of them this year as well. Um, so I think, yeah they certainly, they have certainly been aware of them going on.*
	2/40-42	*So yeah, um…so I think, I didn't think it had a particularly strong impact on them either way but it was something that they were aware…was happening, um.*
	3/84-86	*…but yeah, there was definitely more communication with us about them this time. But I dunno, It could be because there's two of them talking about it I suppose…*
	7-8/222-226	*Um…and trying to reassure her that it wasn't…overly important, but obviously for her at that moment…it's important isn't it, and that goes right through, you know, your GCSEs are really important but then when you're doing your A-Levels your GCSEs don't matter [laughing]. Um, so for her at that particular moment, that was really important.*
	9/255-258	*Yeah, suppose it might be slightly different because you know, they've both got a bit more understanding of them now and they've both experienced them. So yeah I suppose it'll be slightly different, they maybe will be more interested, I don't know. And hopefully, my youngest daughter will find the process a bit simpler.*
Personal constructs	5/143-148	*…I mean, as I said my oldest daughter is really bright. But I see the effect it has on her if she finds something difficult. If she struggles she'll come home and she'll you know, tell me after "I've had a really bad day at school" you*

		know. "I couldn't get this bit of work finished" or "the teacher was talking about this and they didn't explain it properly" or "I didn't understand and they didn't have time to tell me again"…and she finds it very demoralizing as somebody who copes pretty well, most of the time.
	5/148-152	Um…my younger daughter, I think, I, I don't know if it has such an impact on her age, or if it's just her because she's…she's a bit of a free spirit [laughs]. She doesn't, things don't sort of play so much on her mind. She'll very much deal with something and then it's done. She doesn't really sort of worry about things as much.
	7/209-212	Um…but as I said my oldest daughter has always been very academically focused, you know, she was like, at the age of 3 she would have gone to school if she could [laughs]…and, and she loves positive feedback, you know, she looks for that, she likes that kind of reinforcement, um.
	12/352	…they brush things off very, very easily, um.
Ability	2/43-48	They're both very bright children, um, so it doesn't have-…it had quite a nice ending for them because they get their things and they can look and see how they…well my older daughter could look and see how she'd done compared to last year. Um, and you know, see if you can see if you're doing above average, that's a nice thing. I can imagine if it's the other way it might not be such a…positive experience, I don't know but, um…but it's, it's a weird thing.
	2/53-55	…yeah so I think the impact for my children…is probably different for them than maybe children that struggle with, with school…but that's just my assumptions of that.
	5/128-137	Um…my older daughter, Lowri, she's very very bright so, you know, even, because I think some of the ones she was doing, I think do they go up to the end of Year 7? I: Yes, yeah. P3: Um, and fortunately for her, she can cope with that because she's kind of functioning

		near that level. But again I was thinking for some of the children in her class, that must be really demoralizing to be, again, looking at things, as you're getting ready to go into Year 6, you're thinking last year of juniors and doing this. And thinking, "God, I can't answer most of these questions"…or they can't finish them because they're taking up so much time.
Results	2/42-43	*But they were both interested to see, see the results…um, of that, um…*
	7/213-219	*It was kind of…a double-edged thing because a couple of the things she'd done really well last year and she'd done even better this year. Like one of them she was off the scale, she was like, "yay!", but then one, she hadn't scored quite as highly, she's still scored…well. But she hasn't scored quite as highly, um, and I could see, just, she didn't say anything, but I just saw as she looked at them that she was like, "oh…" And then, and then she started sort of, she was trying to understand why she wouldn't have done as well this time, you know.*
Home and school as separate systems	3/76-81	*But it didn't bother her, she wasn't that interested in them if I'm honest [laughing]. We sat and looked at one and…by about the third question she had lost interest and she really didn't want to look at any more, so we didn't bother. Um, so I think within the school environment, it was, it was fine for her, but she didn't really want to be thinking about her school stuff at home really, other than to tell her about what she had done. She didn't want to start looking at them at home.*
Role of school		
Preparation for tests	1-2/32-36	*Um, and I think, the only way my older daughter, she sort of noticed it, because I think it did disrupt the sort of the small and regular things that they do. They have a better structure to the morning and things were moved around a bit to accommodate that they were sitting the test. Um, so she was sort of aware that there was sort of a bit of change there.*
	2/36-40	*Um, my youngest daughter, the only impact she had was she missed her swimming lesson the week they were doing a test. She was a bit disappointed about that and it did seem a*

		shame that they had to…to come and cancel that for something that was taking up quite a small part of the day…but that was something the school felt was necessary…so, um…
	3/72-75	*…yeah, and then she brought home, um, a couple of like older papers that they would use so that we could see and sort of if they wanted to kind of practise them at home, um…which I, that surprised me a bit because I thought for somebody in Year 2…to be practising… [laugh] … for an assessment at home…it just didn't sit very comfortably for me.*
	3/81-84	*And my older daughter, I don't think, she didn't say that she'd been given any old papers or anything, so either she was given them and didn't want to bring them home, um, or they didn't feel that it was, maybe because they done things in previous years they didn't feel it was necessary for the older ones…*
	3-4/91-97	*I think initially it was the sort of surprise that…at this young age, it kind of felt like you know, like they were coaching them to do well at the test, which I don't really agree with, I don't think that's a positive thing, and especially at that young age, I just thought to me the testing at that young age really should just be observation of what they're doing in a normal environment I think. Um, and it just felt that, as I say, they were preparing them for about two weeks, to do these two little half hour, well however long they take, tests at that age.*
	6/161-169	*Um, but it's hard to really know if these tests are…just to give a reflection of the school. Um, in which case, does the, you know, my perception definitely was that the school were, were coaching them, for the tests. Um, in which case, it's not giving a fair reflection…um, because there literally was these two or three weeks when everything was about that, um, and the normal sort of school day went out the window, um… You know, they had different teachers because the teachers were out doing things,*

		preparing, so they had supply teachers, um, or teaching assistants, kind of you know, for the afternoon, which was quite disruptive for them.
	6/171-174	*But, in the sort of infants side of school, when you've got, you know, sort of ask who you had, which teacher she had today, and she said "well I don't know what their name was", or "who have you got tomorrow?", "I don't know"…and they were sort of, for a few weeks, not knowing who was going to be teaching them.*
	6/176-177	*So, so I think there's, there's a wider impact than actually the day they sit and do the testing, um.*
	11/321-324	*And as I say, more about the intense focus that came around with it with, you know, disruption to their kind of, what I would call the softer side of education, like they're swimming and, um, things…where it actually disrupted the kind of normal school week.*
	11/326-339	*They do swimming in the morning, um, but then they said they wanted to do the testing in the morning cos they felt the children were…more alert, and I thought well when they're 6, does it really make that big a difference, but as I say, for them obviously, it's a really important thing. Um, but I just felt, you know, that was a bit unnecessary really. To say that the testing had to be done in the morning, because the children would perform better…at that age group, um. And that, you know, I think they had from…the Wednesday til the following Tuesday to do the tests, um, but they wanted to do, to start on the Wednesday morning so that they could pick up any children that missed…the test. So again I thought, the whole class missed their swimming…for the fact that maybe one person would not be in and would need to redo the test the following week. So again I, I felt it was out of proportion to how valuable the testing is to the children, um, in terms of the impact it had on them, in terms of missing their swimming, and um, other sort of bits that were missed out of the school day with that being done.*

Part of the school year	1/9-13	*…and I think at that time, I didn't really feel that aware of it really, I knew they were happening…but our daughter had not long moved into the school as well and, so I think it very much felt just a part of…her settling in and getting used to a new way of doing things rather than, you know, a big change in the school year or a big event that was happening.*
	1/27-32	*…I don't think that they'd particularly had…a negative or positive impact on them. I think it was just a part of, this is what we're doing at school now. The structure of school, I mean it's certainly very different from when I was at school because they kind of do things in topics and it's quite normal for something to come up and they focus on it for a few weeks, um, and then that's done and they move on to something else. So it was almost as if it was another topic that they were, that they were doing really.*
Impact of school's construction of Year 2 tests on child	1/14-19	*This year, I think they both seemed to be a bit more aware of the fact that they were happening, and I don't know if that's because my younger one…they kind of tried to make it as if it was a bit like a sort of fun games thing, their teacher told them they were doing secret testing for the government. That they were like being spies and tried to make it into like a, yeah like a bit of an adventure in the class so she was talking about them quite a lot.*
School-parent communication	3/66-71	*And so as I said my daughter, my younger daughter, she was…kept talking about this, like secret spy stuff they were doing and I initially didn't know that that was to do with the testing because the school hadn't mentioned it to us, and I just thought must be the topic that they're doing and then slowly it kind of, I twigged that that was what, what they were talking about, um…and then as it got closer to the time the school let us know that that's what they were, that's what they were doing with the younger ones…*
	11/324-329	*…cos I did actually raise it with the school about the swimming because I thought it was a shame, that there were two, no three afternoons they were going to do testing. They do swimming in the morning, um, but*

		then they said they wanted to do the testing in the morning cos they felt the children were…more alert, and I thought well when they're 6, does it really make that big a difference, but as I say, for them obviously, it's a really important thing.
Pressure on teachers	6/174-176	*Because the pressure obviously on the teachers around testing time is, is immense and they're having to, I don't know what they're doing, but they're, you know, have to prepare and get things ready.*
Results	8/231-235	*It's just sort of, try and show them that making a good effort, trying your hardest, is the most important thing, um, and obviously that doesn't, we don't get any reflection on that in the test [laughing]. Um, but, it's probably more of the reflection of the effort that the teachers were putting in [laughing] in the run up to the tests, I should think.*
Purpose of test		
Conflict between assessment of individual or school	1/22-26	*The emphasis that the school put on, very much I think was that they are as much a test of the school as they were of them so that it was to see how the school were doing, um, rather than them as individuals. But obviously when they get results…and they're looking, and it's about them and so, so they do feel that…their performance is important I think.*
	6/161-162	*Um, but it's hard to really know if these tests are…just to give a reflection of the school.*
	12-13/379-385	*…all you see is your child's results, and yet you're always kind of told, you know, "well it's more about how the school's performing" so it doesn't fit together really, because you only ever see…that tiny little snippet, which is obviously they're not gonna tell you every children's, but it might be nice to kind of, get some idea of, you know, the whole school performance. Um…although I did say that I don't really think much of those, didn't I [laughs], looking at league tables and things. But I don't even know if they use those in if the leagues tables actually…*
Difficult to rationalise	5/154-157	*Um, so yes, I think as a parent, I just find it hard trying to rationalise…really, what the purpose of the tests are. Because I know we kind of look at league tables of schools and things, but you know, schools wave up and down don't they, you know.*

Value	6/177-186	*And as I say, just as a parent, I don't really see…the value of it, at this age, particularly, um. I think children are…better to be just educated…for the value of educating them, rather than educating them to pass a test to say the school is doing well at this. Um, but I can obviously see value because you know, if as a school you see that lots of children maybe are struggling in numeracy, that a few years ago, maybe they weren't and maybe you changed your teaching approach to numeracy and then you can look and think maybe this isn't actually working as well as we hoped. Um, but I would imagine teachers are pretty good at making that sort of thing out anyway. Um, and I think I'm a believer of leaving teachers to teach really [laughing].*
	8/229-234	*But, I mean we've always with the reports, we always focus on the effort. That's always the first thing we look at, we make a point of looking at that before we even think about the achievement. It's just sort of, try and show them that making a good effort, trying your hardest, is the most important thing, um, and obviously that doesn't, we don't get any reflection on that in the test [laughing].*
	8/241-243	*Um, and they, we got [the results] alongside the school reports. So they were sort of…an afterthought in a way. So we were able to just focus on her report.*
	12/358-362	*…but yeah I mean, it's… education is such a complex thing these days, isn't it, and you know, we know that in secondary school there's lots of testing, and then you sort of think do they need to be prepared for that…but if that's the only reason for it then, you know, you're just testing for…for no good reason, um…perhaps they should try to test them less at secondary school instead [laughing].*
	12/370-372	*…I'd be interested to know what they, what they do with all the tests. All that stress that they put themselves through really, cos, I know they don't have a choice, I know they have to do the testing…*
Parent-child relationship		

Reassurance	2-3/61-66	I think she's talked about them a little bit more. Um, she told us a little bit more about what she'd been doing, um…and, I think there was one of the tests where she sort of run out of time and she hadn't finished…and she was kind-, it bothered her a little bit because she sort of was feeling that it might not…reflect accurately what she knew because she hadn't had time to finish, um, what she was doing so, um… Yeah, so she just talked about it that bit more at home.
	7/219-223	We just sort of talked about, it might have just been, you know, because they just pick out little bits of subject matter don't they know, and it was just maybe a couple of questions that didn't suit her, or maybe she didn't have enough time to answer fully, you know. Trying to explore what the reasons might have been. Um…and trying to reassure her that it wasn't…overly important…
	11/347-350	…when one of the days you know, she'd come home saying she hadn't been able to finish again, I was, sort of, worried how much that would bother her, because I know she can, sort of dwell on things a little bit. But again, we talked it out and…as far as I know, it didn't cause her any further worry because she didn't really mention it again.
No emphasis on results	8/243-245	Um, and we did just kind of, use the thing of, well they're more about the school so that they can make comparisons about how the school are doing with things, and not to put too much emphasis on them.
Age and stage		
Language in questions and content is unsuitable	4/97-112	And, then when I read the papers I was even more surprised because I just thought they were horrendous. The way they were written was really complex for somebody who's-, I mean my daughter's one of the youngest so she was still 6 at the time of doing them, and the language that they used just to actually pose the questions, I thought was really complex, like really long sentences. By the end, even me as an adult reading them I was sort of having to go back and read it again. So I just thought, so I was then, so I was surprised by the content as well as the fact that she had brought it home. Um, and there were a couple of the questions that I had to

		think actually I don't know if I'd know how to answer that. Um, because, again as I say, just the way that they'd phrased what they were trying to ask. It was an English one with sort of, you know, read a piece and then they have to answer questions about what they'd read. Um, and I know from experience that, you know, my daughter's only really just got to grips with reading...fluently anyway, and to think of her having to sit and read that, and process it and understand and then answer a question, I thought that could potentially be quite a stressful situation, or it could just make them think, "well I don't really understand this so I'm not going to bother" [laughing]. "I'm not gonna bother reading it".
	4/112-116	*...it was a Numeracy paper as well, and again it was...there was things on it that to my knowledge...I didn't know that they'd done at school. Things like, I think it was something about Venn diagrams and things. And I was thinking [laughing] I'm pretty sure she doesn't even know what that is but maybe she does. Maybe they do that sort of thing at school, um. But again, it just seems so advanced for that age group.*
One paper for two year groups	4/118-127	*...to me I just thought what a strange approach to test children at the end of Year 2 on the same thing that you're testing children a year later, because it seemed very much to me pitched at end of Year 3. And maybe if it was kind of the midway point, and you know, by the end of Year 3 you'd expect them to be, you know, find it quite simple. But yeah, I, I don't know, maybe as an adult, you over think things, but I was thinking, you know, what impact is that going to have on a child of 6, if they're faced with something and then half of it they can't answer? Is that going to have a positive impact on them? I wouldn't have thought so, from, just from knowing my own children. I would imagine it would make them feel a bit demoralized, and the next time they come to do them they're already thinking "well I'm probably not gonna be able to do this".*
	5/134-139	*But again I was thinking for some of the children in her class, that must be really demoralizing to be, again, looking at things,*

		as you're getting ready to go into Year 6, you're thinking last year of juniors and doing this. And thinking, "God, I can't answer most of these questions"…or they can't finish them because they're taking up so much time. Um, so I, yeah, I don't know who pitches them and thinks, you know, assessing these huge age blocks is a, is a sensible idea but I, I have reservations about it I think, I would say…
	9/261-264	*And hopefully, if they're still Year 2 and Year 3, she won't find it quite as challenging. That may be a positive thing, I don't know. Whether it justifies…[laughing] the extreme challenge in the first place, I don't know, I'm not so sure about that.*
	9/269-279	*The fact of, you know, you can have someone like my daughter who is at the end of Year 2, is not much older than somebody, than the oldest ones in Year 1. And is maybe, sitting the same…exam…for want of a better word, as someone at the end of Year 3 who's, potentially almost, sort of, 3 years older than her, because of the way the intake goes. Um…is…yeah, I just really struggle to get my head around it, it just doesn't make any sense to me. And I know there's always an age range and an ability range when you're doing any testing, even if you just do it on the year group. But, but the change from, particularly Year 2 to Year 3 is huge, because you see the difference towards the end of Year 2 where they start to change their classroom setup, getting them ready for Year 3 because the approach is more structured. Um, and sort of a little bit more traditional and academic I suppose.*
	10/288-297	*…yeah just about that change from Infants to Juniors and…so in infants, you know, they are fairly unstructured, you know. They have their, you know, 15 minutes of reading in the morning, and 15 minutes of numeracy and things, but other than that, their days are kind of…in terms of, obviously the teachers have got a structure, they know what they're doing, but for the children it's, it's quite sort of, play focused still. Um, so to kind of, you know, the change from that to…Year 3 where, it's a little bit more kind of, you know, more*

		time sitting, and doing work, or listening to the teacher and things like that, um…is a huge, huge jump. Um, so yeah to be focusing the same test, on children at either end of that…spectrum is, is a strange, strange thing for me as a parent. I struggle to understand the, the reasoning behind that.
Tests in Year 2 are different to usual class environment	9/257-261	*And hopefully, my youngest daughter will find the process a bit simpler. Um, cos I think even at that age, just the fact of having to do something, you know, like you've got the whole class sitting and having to be quiet and doing something to time is, is different thing cos they don't work that way generally in class…*
Impact on parent		
Difference between adult and child perception of tests	10/316-321	*…I think it probably had more of an impact on me as a parent than it did on the children. In the sort of, longer term. At the time it obviously had a big impact on them, but I think they've kind of moved on, and forgot about it very quickly afterwards. Um, whereas for me, um…you know, I still kind of, have questions about things, um, as to, you know, the reasoning about many things about the testing…*
	13/400-401	*…I think they're more of a big deal for me as a parent than they were for them, um, as children.*
Volunteering in school	6/187-190	*I do, I volunteer at the school a couple of afternoons a week, just listening to the children read and things like that. And it's given me a different perspective on what the teachers have to juggle. And I do think, you know, the pressures that they're under with…recording and…demonstrating everything is, is just immense.*
Instinctive comparisons between children	2/48-53	*I mean as a parent you don't want to compare your children to other children, but instinctively you kind of, you do. You try not to. [Laughs] Um, even when they're small, don't you, you know, when they start crawling, when they're doing all these things and you chat to other mums and you start thinking "Ooh, mine's a bit late doing that", so I suppose you'll always be making those comparisons…*
"Worrying on their behalf"	11/340-349	*Um, but…but yeah I definitely, I sort of, I suppose it was more of a potential concern, because I could see that she was more aware*

		of them, and I was concerned that it might…cause her anxiety or, um, or sort of, her start to feel stressful about going to school, um. But it didn't. As I say, she was aware of them, and she was…I suppose anxious to do well, but she wasn't kind of, anxious in that she was, had concerns about doing them, or didn't wanna go, or anything like that, um. And I think that's just, you know, her conscientious nature, you know. She wanted to, to be performing so her best, um, and so again, when one of the days you know, she'd come home saying she hadn't been able to finish again, I was, sort of, worried how much that would bother her, because I know she can, sort of dwell on things a little bit.
	11-12/350-353	*Um so, it's, yeah, I think a lot of it is more…worrying on their behalf [laughing] Um, and then actually, you know, they brush things off very, very easily, um. And you think, "well it's you know, it wasn't anything to worry about at all". But you know, that's what you do as a parent…*
Motivation to understand test	12/354-358	*…but I think probably next year I will, before the test, I will probably try and find out a little bit more about them, just for my own benefit really, um, and so that I've got a bit more of an understanding of what they're, what they're doing. Especially like the older ones really, because like I said I didn't see any previous papers so I don't know what sort of things are being expected of, of that age group.*
Positive to see children engaged with results	7/209	*Um, I mean it's lovely to know that they're interested.*
Want more feedback from whole-school results	12/363-371	*I think, maybe as a parent, it would be nice to get some more direct feedback…of what is done with the school's results, cos I don't remember getting anything last year after the ones, just saying you know, this was highlighted and you know, and maybe, you know, try and tackle particular area, but I don't know whether that's what they use them for, or if it's more of a national or the general regions picture, to sort of help highlight areas that are doing well. I'm not really sure, you know, from a Government point of view. I don't know what the Welsh Government want the information for, what*

		they do with it. Um, you know and that kind of bigger scale, um…I'd be interested to know what they, what they do with all the tests.

Appendix K: Example of Extract of Transcript for Zoe (Participant 7) with Exploratory Comments and Emergent Themes

Emergent Theme	Transcript	Exploratory Comments
	I: OK, so can you start by telling me how your children have experienced taking the national tests?	D = Descriptive comments L = Linguistic comments C = Conceptual comments
Attributing positive test experience to the school's 'low key' approach	P7: Um, so I've got Poppy who's now in Year 8, and Isla's in Year 6, so we've had a few years of it. Um, and it's been an, it's been absolutely fine, but a lot of that I think is due to the school, cos they did sort of, they had a really interesting approach cos it was quite, with the children, they kept it very low key. But they did brief us and say, "Right, this is coming up, you know, be ready in support", which I think	D – "had a few years of it" – tests have become more familiar due to daughters' ages? D – experience has been "absolutely fine" because of the school's approach. C – Attributing positive test experience to the school's 'low key' approach D – Teachers briefed parents on the tests to "be ready in support". C – Teacher-parent relationship
Children construct tests are part of day to day activities	was a really interesting way to do it. Um, and so it's been, um, very much matter of fact, part of the sort of day to day activities as far as the girls have experienced it, so we've been very lucky there's not been a huge amount of pressure	D – Children have viewed tests as "part of the sort of day to day activities"
Children's awareness of results increased with age	or, um, stress about it. Um, obviously as they've grown up, they're more aware of, that there are results and we've	D – Lack of pressure/stress is constructed as "lucky" from parent perspective D – As children have grown up, they've become more aware of the results.
Parental choice to share results with children	chosen to share the results with them, so they can plot their	

Results mean children can plot their own progress	improvements and sort of growth and things. So, um, so they are aware of it. Um, and I have noticed, they do put a bit more onus on, at Comp, so they're starting to, you know, because Poppy's much more aware of what tests are and things like that. So it's been really interesting because it's been very lowkey, really.	D – Parental choice to share the results with the children so they can reflect on their improvements each year. C – It is up to the parents to choose whether children see results?
Lowkey experience		C – Increased personal responsibility on achievements as children get older?
		D – Test experience constructed as "very lowkey"
	I: So, um, you said about how the school had briefed you as parents. What was that like?	
	P7: Um, the teachers were quite proactive. So obviously, the first few years, um, it was just getting the report. They didn't	
Proactive teacher-parent communication	sort of, when they were really little, there's not really much. But then as soon as we got to, it must've been Year 2, um, the teacher reached out in-. She was lovely, so we used to	D – Teachers were quite proactive in communicating with parents about testing in Foundation Phase.
Reassuring communication from teacher about tests	have weekly letters, and things, so she reached out on the letters saying this was coming up, everything was prepared, and um, also welcoming us at any time if we had questions or things like that, so. And they did, um, I did inquire at one stage, so, I knew that they had sort of incorporated similar activities into general, um, worksheets and things like that	D – Teacher "reached out" to parents in a weekly letter to inform parents of the tests. C – Teacher communication seen to be reassuring for parents? Highlighting good teacher-parent relationship and communication? D – Felt able to speak to the teacher about test preparation.

Test preparation in school made children feel more confident	beforehand so that the children did feel really confident and they did some practising cos obviously in [School B] it's tiny, so they all sit sort of, almost on top of each other, so they practise things like sitting in for a test [laughing]. Which, I was like, "What?" But I suppose, you know, children aren't sometimes used to change, I wouldn't have even thought about that, but yes, they did lots of sort of little things like about so, which was fine.	D – Teacher had incorporated similar test-style activities into worksheets as preparation.
		D – Test preparation constructed as making the children "feel really confident".
		D – Children have to practise sitting for a test because this is different to normal classroom setup.
Changes to normal classroom environment		L – surprised/shocked tone and laughter – indicating her surprise at children needing to practise how to sit for a test.
		C – Test situation is constructed as something different to normal classroom activities.
Agreement with school's approach to test preparation		D – "which was fine" – agreement with school's approach to prepare the children?
	I: Um, so it terms of, if you want to talk about the girls separately or together; how was it when that testing week came around?	
Individual differences between siblings' approach to testing	P7: Um, they, um, weirdly enough, Poppy was quite excited and then Isla was more sort of laissez faire, that's what's happening this week. Um, so, um, and, it's always a quandary as an adult, um, we've tried different things in different years, whether you make a fuss because they've done it or not, so we've tended to stay away from that and we tend to compliment them being proactive and things like that, rather than focusing on results. But obviously if they	D – Poppy was quite excited during testing week and Isla was more laissez faire.
		C – Different responses between siblings suggesting individual differences in how children approach tests?
A quandary whether to make a fuss or not		D – "it's always a quandary as an adult" as to "whether you make a fuss because they've done it or not"
		C – Difficult to know whether to make a fuss or not
		D – "tend to compliment them being proactive…rather than focusing on results"

Praise children's proactive behaviour rather than results	get, um, really good reports, um, not so much the results as in um, you know, 80 out of 100 or whatever, but more the, um, positive feedback from teachers that they've had good behaviour and things like that, that's what we tend to reward. Um, but I know, you know, other friends who do it differently.	C – Parent prioritising/valuing child's attitude towards test rather than end result – insight into parent's mindset?
		D – Reward positive teacher reports rather than results from the tests.
Value teacher reports more than test results		C – Value teacher reports more than the test results?
		D – "I know…other friends who do it differently"
		C – Comparing herself to her own peers? Acknowledging different parents approach the tests/results differently. Parent approach is personal/individual?
Comparison to parent peers		

Superordinate Themes Subordinate Themes	Page/Line Number	Original Transcript Extract
Constructions of school		
Attributing positive test experience to school's low key approach	1/6-8	*Um, and it's been an, it's been absolutely fine, but a lot of that I think is due to the school, cos they did sort of, they had a really interesting approach cos it was quite, with the children, they kept it very low key.*
	4/99-100	*Um, but yeah they've tended to have a really, all round approach to it so there's not a huge onus on it…*
	6-7/189-194	*I think there's a huge impact of what the school has. I think, um, the fact that the teachers manage expectations, but also, um, have an ability to put the children at ease, so that that when they are taking that big step to doing, um, tests for the first time, or their once a year test, they do tend to feel very confident about doing it. And, you know, I don't get to see their overall results, but I'm sure they, you know, have fairly rounded results because of the way they approach it. It's not that sort of fraught.*
	7/199-200	*…overall the teachers have always managed to keep it as an overall positive experience so…*
Test preparation in school	1/26-32	*I knew that they had sort of incorporated similar activities into general, um, worksheets and things like that beforehand so that the children did feel really confident and they did some practising cos obviously in [School B] it's tiny, so they all sit sort of, almost on top of each other, so they practise things like sitting in for a test [laughing]. Which, I was like, "What?" But I suppose, you know, children aren't sometimes used to change, I wouldn't have even thought about that, but yes, they did lots of sort of little things like about so, which was fine.*
Relationships	1/8-9	*But they did brief us and say, "Right, this is coming up, you know, be ready in support", which I think was a really interesting way to do it.*

	1/21-26	*Um, the teachers were quite proactive. So obviously, the first few years, um, it was just getting the report. They didn't sort of, when they were really little, there's not really much. But then as soon as we got to, it must've been Year 2, um, the teacher reached out in-. She was lovely, so we used to have weekly letters, and things, so she reached out on the letters saying this was coming up, everything was prepared, and um, also welcoming us at any time if we had questions or things like that, so.*
	2/52-54	*I think she had, um, her second or third year, she dipped. Um, and so, and obviously we discussed it with the teachers and things, and we did, um, sort of quietly let her know.*
	6/182-185	*Um, you know, and obviously, [School B] is just so sweet, and a little school, and you know, you have a lot of interaction, and obviously all the teachers all know the kids really well, so you do have that quality of care, that you wouldn't maybe have in bigger schools, so...*
	9/283-286	*I think that's where [School B] has exceeded the expectations where they have engaged the parents and, sort of, involved them in some of it. Um, but obviously I'm sure teachers just shake their heads when parents start getting involved, and stressed [laugh].*
	10/288-291	*But it is that one, cos it needs to be a partnership, I think, you know, to make it successful for the children. So, yeah, it's very easy to do it when you're close and involved and it's a small village school, you know.*
Child as part of class system	7/194-199	*I mean, obviously, especially Isla's class, um, there are some super super achievers in that class, um, you know. One of them's a gymnast for Wales, um, you know, so it's that kind of calibre of child [laughing]. So I noticed with her class, it definitely does get a little bit of a, um…more of a vibe about them, because, I think some of them are just that ilk of person. They are all super achievers…*
Constructions of children's experience		
Part of day-to-day activities	1/9-12	*Um, and so it's been, um, very much matter of fact, part of the sort of day to day activities as far as the girls have experienced it, so we've been very lucky there's not been a huge amount of pressure or, um, stress about it.*

	3/85-88	But she doesn't tend to get very overwrought about it, you know, there's no panic, there's no not wanting to go. It's just a case of she wants to be prepared. But I think a lot of that comes from the school, because they are so calm about it, and it's just another activity.
Increased awareness with age	1/12-14	Um, obviously as they've grown up, they're more aware of, that there are results and we've chosen to share the results with them, so they can plot their improvements and sort of growth and things. So, um, so they are aware of it.
	2/57-60	…being, so then, you know, the excitement, cos by then she was sort of further up school, she was Year 6 by then. So she could, within herself, realise that she was doing well on the test or not, you know, you're starting to get to that awareness at that age…
	3/88-91	Um, so I would say out of the two of them, she does seem to show more awareness about it, and want to be organised, um, but she's also that much younger, you know, so she hasn't reached the stage yet, I think of being more aware, you know.
Individual differences between siblings	2/37-38	Um, they, um, weirdly enough, Poppy was quite excited and then Isla was more sort of laissez faire, that's what's happening this week.
	3/81-87	Um, she is the second child, she is a real all-rounder. She's kind of…middle-to-good at everything. Um, so she is a bit more, but she is quite a worrier so I did notice with her, you know, there was a bit of focus on being prepared, so, you know, on those days she did want to be on time, she did want all her, like, pens and pencils and things, that kind of. She's very much someone who wants to be prepared, um, you know and so, that side of it. But she doesn't tend to get very overwrought about it, you know, there's no panic, there's no not wanting to go. It's just a case of she wants to be prepared.
	7/206-208	Um again, here, it tends to be the personalities come in to play. So, um, Miss Poppy, is zero communicator. She always has been, you know, I've always found out about things via other people [laughs].
Novelty of Year 2 tests	2/50-52	Um, I think it was, partly because it was a different activity, um, and then, um, after the first year of doing it where, you know, it was much more sort

		of, fun and something different and we get to sit at different desks and things…
	4/96	*Um, yeah, you know, I think it was quite a new experience for when they were little…*
Growth mindset	2/60-62	*…so then I think the excitement comes from now with her, you know, she is really proactive about that because she's had that experience of maybe having a dip and then working really hard and seeing the results.*
Parent-child relationship		
Varying levels of communication between siblings	7/206-213	*Um again, here, it tends to be the personalities come in to play. So, um, Miss Poppy, is zero communicator. She always has been, you know, I've always found out about things via other people [laughs]. So she tended to be like, "Oh yeah, yeah, no we wrote a test a few days ago," you know, and I'm like, "[laughing] what's happening?" You know, and then Isla tends to be more, coming back saying, "Mum, I have done it." And, she would normally be more of, she is a bit more analytical, so she will come back and go, you know, "There were 40 question, I only did 36," or something like that, um. So she does talk about it a little bit more, is more aware of what it is.*
Impact of child's reaction to testing on parent	8/233-236	*…I'm quite laid back, so as long as they're happy, and they're learning, you know, I'm not hugely bothered about it. And I think for me, and especially at this age, um, it's much more about having a chance to see, where they're at and do they need more support…*
Feel nervous for the child	5/130-135	*Obviously, as your children, you can't, you can't help them on the day, you can't write it for them. Um, so, you, I think you do feel nervous for them, because you can't do anything about it, you know, where normally you can stick a plaster on it, you know, so [laughing]. Um, but you just have to support them and go from there. I think as a parent, whatever they're doing, if they're happy within themselves and kind of, pleased with what they're doing, um, it's easier.*
Individual family systems will vary	9/280-282	*But…it is one of those that…is it the right thing or the wrong thing, that the parents will only know for their child, and I think there is the side of it that schooling has to be for across the board*
Results		
Comparison to teacher reports	6/177-179	*And you know, I think it is a good idea…I do think you have to measure some how… And I don't think it can only be on a transcribed opinion from a teacher. I think you actually have to have something a bit more metric.*

Share results with children	1/12-14	*Um, obviously as they've grown up, they're more aware of, that there are results and we've chosen to share the results with them, so they can plot their improvements and sort of growth and things. So, um, so they are aware of it.*
Plot progress	4/109-111	*…we've always just focused on the fact that year on year what we'd like to see is that they just go up, you know, so that they are showing improvement across the board.*
Value of results	2/40-44	*…we tend to compliment them being proactive and things like that, rather than focusing on results. But obviously if they get, um, really good reports, um, not so much the results as in um, you know, 80 out of 100 or whatever, but more the, um, positive feedback from teachers that they've had good behaviour and things like that, that's what we tend to reward.*
	4/102-103	*…the weird thing is, it's only one test once a year or so, so it's kind of Heaven help if you've got a cold or something like that, you know.*
	5/128-130	*Um, I think my big thing is, because it's only once a year. So if they're not on form that day, it's just, hang on, you know, for the next year, you're kind of, in this zone…and so I think it's that.*
	7/218	*In some ways I think it's a good idea because it gives you benchmarks.*
	9/258-263	*You know, Isla who will be back shortly, she decided, um, to, it was over while, but a friend of ours child's had cancer. Isla has, two weeks ago, shaved all her hair off to get money for her friend, for cancer in honour of her friend. And I think, those things you can't see on a national thing, but actually that would probably, you know, as long as she can read and write and talk, those are the things that might actually count more to fulfil life.*
	9/264-271	*And I think, the other thing is, with Isla, and I think this is just across the board, is they keep changing the way they measure. Um, so it's always hilarious, because the child, you know, poor Poppy comes home and is like "Oh, I got an A", and then she's like, "well that could be anything from, like a 70 or 60%" and I'm like, "What the hell, that's a fail!" [laughing] Um so, and I think that's always where I'm a bit cautious when you look at the results, kind of year on year, and I'm always like, well, how did you actually measure them, so, you know. So, but*

		yeah. I think we've got to have some sort of measurement to see how they're doing.
Lack of control	4/130-133	*Obviously, as your children, you can't, you can't help them on the day, you can't write it for them. Um, so, you, I think you do feel nervous for them, because you can't do anything about it, you know, where normally you can stick a plaster on it, you know, so [laughing]. Um, but you just have to support them and go from there.*
Vague reporting	7-8/218-224	*Um, the results tend to be, um…shared, but they, they're quite vague. You know, there's not a, you got, they got 20 out of 30 or. There's a cross over a little of a column, which could be an average or not, or, um, so you know. It in some ways, I find that bit quite frustrating, the actual reporting back to you is, um, very vague. Um, and…it's always one of those, they say the average, you know, and it's actually, you need to have a bit more of a median, or, you know, a bit more of a feel of what it is, um. So that, that, would probably be a frustration.*
	8/232-233	*…that's one of those things where I would like it to be broken down a bit more, so I can delve into the data a bit more.*
Impact	2/54-57	*And then it was quite interesting, cos we landed up, maths she was really concerned about, so we organised some extra lessons with the teacher, and she actually landed up getting the most improved student the following year…*
	4/100-101	*…but also with, think it was Isla, some of the results…definitely, there was a dip, and so they've put in extra support and things like that…*
	4/103-104	*…[the school] do tend to look at those results and then put some support in, which I think is important.*
	8/238-240	*We're now, I just think, to be able to be proactive and say actually spelling wasn't so great, so shall we do something. And it might come from the school or it might come from us, or it might come from the kids.*
Conflict		
Make a fuss or not	2/38-40	*Um, so, um, and, it's always a quandary as an adult, um, we've tried different things in different years, whether you make a fuss because they've done it or not…*
Oscillating perspective	2/74-76	*…so I always oscillate between protecting them and their childhood, to, you're gonna have to do*

	6/179-182	*this, so get on and practise because that's the only way you're gonna get good at it.*
	8/232-235	*Um, so, um, it's always interesting, cos I'm always, um, almost schizophrenic with…have a great childhood, relax and enjoy learning, to, you know, actually, we need to be able to make sure if you're making progress or not.*
		…that's one of those things where I would like it to be broken down a bit more, so I can delve into the data a bit more. Um, so, but then, also, I'm quite laid back, so as long as they're happy, and they're learning, you know, I'm not hugely bothered about it.
Balance	4/120-123	*…it's just that that side of trying to work out the best way to support them because you want them to take it seriously but you don't want to stress them out, but you also…[laugh]. So it's the normal things, make sure they get enough sleep [laughing].*
Comparison to other parents		
Comparison to parent peers in community	2/41-45	*But obviously if they get, um, really good reports, um, not so much the results as in um, you know, 80 out of 100 or whatever, but more the, um, positive feedback from teachers that they've had good behaviour and things like that, that's what we tend to reward. Um, but I know, you know, other friends who do it differently.*
	5/135-138	*Um, obviously being in [local area], um, parents are quite, sort of, competitive [laughing] and you can imagine the tests, um, the Mums get a little bit fraught because they're tests! [Laughing] But I tend to be like, yeah whatever, which you can imagine they do.*
	8/225-226	*Um, but then the overall ones in essence, I know some people say we shouldn't, but I think, we've got to start testing somewhere and see what they're doing, you know.*
	9/278-280	*But, um, and, of course, living here there are lots of teachers and doctors so they have very strict, and sort of, are very opinionated should I say.*
Comparison to England	3/65-68	*And I think for me, that's where the tests come quite well, because they don't get tested at all really. Um, which is lovely because it gives them a feeling of, um, I dunno, childhood I suppose, and not the terrible pressure where I see my friends in*

		England with, um, SATs and things where there's so much pressure on them at this stage.
	5/138-141	*Um, and I think the hard thing is, um, that the awareness that within, you know, if we had to move up to Bristol, then they would have to, they would count so much more, and they would have to perform so much more. So, there is that awareness and anxiety that they are doing OK and getting a good education, even though, because you're comparing to other people who are writing the exams, and then he's focused on how to write exams, much more schooled on exam writing. So you, you do always have that compare and contrast but, you know, of, because it's the one time there is actually a tangible comparison, um, you know. But, you know, we tend not to really compare notes with them because otherwise it just gets too fraught, you know, you're talking, um, you know, to, we've got lots of friends in London and they're all like, "Which school, which results, blah, blah, blah". You know, we tend to be a bit more like, "Oh, shall we go to the beach?" [Laughing]. Being all round, all round, rounded human beings.*
	5/155-156	*Yeah I think so because I think there's much more high stakes about what school you get in to, you know, so there's so much more focus on it.*
	6/174-175	*Um, and you know, it's one of those, I'm happy that we don't have that madness for our girls…*
Tests are inevitable		
Tests are inevitable	3/73-74	*…but they're going to have to write exams somewhere along the lines…*
Starting point	8/240-244	*But it gives a measurement, so you can see, because otherwise, you know, I think you get to 17 and think everything is fine, and then be like, "Oh my god!", a bit of a shock [laughing]. And possibly, that's because I was the world's worst student, so I had that experience of thinking, "Oh my God, where did that come from?!" [laughing].*
Comparison to GCSEs and A Levels	6/175-177	*…but somewhere along the line if they're going to go to university, or, you know, they're going to have to write GCSEs, they're gonna have to write A Levels, so they're going to have to get used to that process.*
	8/235-238	*And I think for me, and especially at this age, um, it's much more about having a chance to see, where they're at and do they need more support, you know, and it's a very different conversation I*

		think when you're at the stage of GCSE or A Levels because there's so much more at stake.
Measurement of progress	9/270-271	*I think we've got to have some sort of measurement to see how they're doing.*

Appendix M: Superordinate and Subordinate Themes for all Participants

Participant 1 'Rhiannon'								
Approach to testing	**Dissonance**	**No choice**	**Novel experience in Foundation Phase (FP)**	**Experience in Key Stage 2 (KS2)**	**Relationships with other parents**	**Parent-child communication**	**Results**	**Construction of school role**
No fuss Want Olivia to do well Tests can cause unnecessary negative affect Part of parent role Experience of working in school	Importance of tests Purpose of test and child's experience Child's performance and feeling pressure What the tests measure	For parents For children	For children For adults	KS2 classroom more congruent with testing Olivia's maturity and understanding of tests developed with age Tests aren't memorable for Olivia	Differing parental perspectives Comparison to other parents	Reassurance Discussion Normalising	Possible negative impact of sharing results Construction of categories Impact of parental construction of results More concern with teacher report Measure of teaching standards Value	Impact of how teacher's construct tests for children Change between FP and KS2 Comparison to parents evening Parent-teacher communication

Participant 2 'Jenny'									
Constructions of the child's experience	Constructions of others' perceptions	What's the purpose?	Feeling of pressure	Comparisons to GCSEs	Constructions of change and conflict with the classroom	Political context of National Tests	Constructions of the parent-child relationship	Meaningless results	Constructions of the parent-teacher relationship
Differences in siblings' responses

Daughter crying

Daughter's negative self-talk

Child who now hates tests

Daughter's anxiety

Son's nonchalant attitude | National Tests are universally hated

Media coverage | National Tests versus other testing in school

What's the purpose of the test?

Why does every child have to take the test?

The National Tests are pointless

The National Tests aren't important | Pressure for children to attend school

External pressure onto schools

Feeling bullied

National Tests are not optional | Test administration

Not a useful preparation

Not life-changing | Changes to school routine

Differentiated classroom versus one test for two year groups: Set up to fail

Preparation for tests

Changes to the teacher role

Age of testing in Year 2

Questions are difficult to understand | National Tests are part of a political agenda

Lack of information from the Government

Interfering Government | Support

No answers for child's anxiety

Maintain a positive attitude

Acceptance of poor results

Won't apologise for the Government

Shared experience | Results are meaningless

Comparison to national averages

Hard to understand results

What happens to the results?

Up and down results | Parent-teacher communication

Complaining to the school |

Participant 3 'Sian'					
Constructions of child's experience	**Role of school**	**Purpose of test**	**Parent-child relationship**	**Age and stage**	**Impact on parent**
Increased awareness

Personal constructs

Ability

Results

Home and school as separate systems | Preparation for tests

Part of the school year

Impact of school's construction of Year 2 tests on child

School-parent communication

Pressure on teachers

Results | Conflict between assessment of individual or school

Difficult to rationalise

Value | Reassurance

No emphasis on results | Language in questions and content is unsuitable

One paper for two year groups

Tests in Year 2 are different to usual class environment | Difference between adult and child perception of tests

Volunteering in school

Instinctive comparisons between children

"Worrying on their behalf"

Motivation to understand test

Positive to see children engaged with results

Want more feedback from whole-school results |

Participant 4 'Carys'						
Constructions of school	**Comparison with others**	**Impact on parent**	**Construction of child's experience**	**Parent-child relationship**	**Results**	**Distinction of National Tests**
Child-teacher relationship

Parent-school relationship

Pressure cascaded

Barriers to make test accessible | Peer comparisons

Sibling comparisons

Other parents | Change in understanding over time

Shared experience between parent and child

Separation of parent and child perception

Lack of control

Rhys' additional learning needs

Frustration

Acceptance | Increase in stress year to year

Unable to associate test experience year to year

Change in stress throughout test process

Personal constructs

Focus on taking the test

Don't understand the purpose

Inaccessible test format | Encouragement

Reassurance

Rationalising

Diffuse pressure from school

Communication | Not a true reflection

Don't matter

League table of children

Questioning how the school uses results

Individual achievement goals rather than the result

Lack of child-ownership of results

Children make observational comments

Achievement deemed as completing the test | Unusual to school expectations

Test experience

Testing process is not "whole"

"Tick that box" |

Participant 5 'Abigail'				
Constructions of children's experience	**Constructions of school**	**Results**	**Comparisons to other parents**	**Impact on parent**
Comparison between siblings' experience	Tests have become part of the annual culture of school	Useful to track child's progress	Keeping children home during testing period	Perception of tests has changed over time
Too young for peer comparisons	Change in school's approach as child gets older	Validate teacher's reports of child's progress	Parents in Year 2	Differences between siblings' experiences
Personal constructs	Changes to school system before tests	Value national comparisons	Inevitable that some parents will be against tests	Impact of changes to homework as test preparation
Younger son's frustration	School-parent communication	Parent-child discussion		Child's ability
Relationship between child's ability and test experience		Influence future choices regarding child's education		Academic background
First experience of tests				

Participant 6 'Johnathan'							
Constructions of school	**Parental approach**	**Results**	**Wider systems**	**Constructions of child's experience**	**Confliction**	**Inevitability of testing**	**Debate**
Primary school should still be fun

School placing more emphasis on the tests in upper KS2

Children are reactive to the teacher's tone and delivery of messages about the tests

Increased focus on the tests in school means children talk about them more

There should be consistency across teachers' approach to tests

Teacher-parent communication | Careful approach in how tests are discussed with children

Influence of child's age on parental approach

Change in approach to preparing the children prompted by them talking about the tests more

Fostering growth mindset

Preparation for tests did not change usual routine

Still finding out how children respond to testing scenario

Maths tutor to increase familiarity with test questions | Importance of feedback and teacher's response to the results

"A mark on a piece of paper"

Results are inconsistent year on year

"Only told me what I already know"

Comparison to other assessments | Impact on transition to secondary school

Preparation for future high-stakes tests e.g. GCSEs

Pressure coming from both the schools and the children's own personal academic constructs

Impact of other systems

Pressure on education standards in Wales | Increased awareness with age

Individual differences and personal constructs | Why and how of testing

Balanced approach | "Just something they do"

End of year tests are inevitable throughout academic career | The point of testing

Age of testing

Contentious amongst parents |

	Importance of physical and mental health wellbeing Support children to process feeling apprehensive Reassurance		Providing data for Welsh Government				

Participant 7 'Zoe'						
Constructions of school	**Constructions of children's experience**	**Parent-child relationship**	**Results**	**Conflict**	**Comparison to other parents**	**Tests are inevitable**
Attributing positive test experience of children to the school's 'low key' approach Test preparation in school Relationships Child as part of class system	Part of day to day activities Increased awareness with age Individual differences between siblings Novelty of Year 2 tests Growth mindset	Varying levels of communication between siblings Impact of child's reaction to testing on parent Feel nervous for the child Individual family systems will vary	Comparison to teacher reports Share results with children Plot progress Value of results Lack of control Vague reporting Impact	Make a fuss or not Oscillating perspective Balance	Comparison to parent peers in community Comparison to England	Tests are inevitable Starting point Comparison to GCSEs and A Levels Measurement of progress
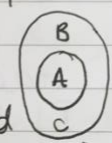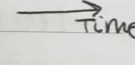
Participant 8 'Lily'				
Constructions of school	**Comparisons**	**Constructions of children's approach**	**Constructions of test and results**	**Parenting approach**
Role of school in keeping children calm Concerns about schools teaching to the test	Between son and daughter Concerned children would compare with peers Other parents and their children's experience	Relaxed Increased awareness of importance of attending school	Cynical attitude Questioning what the test measures Concerned children would be worried Concerned about son's results in comparison to other sources of information Questioning accuracy and validity of results Use to judge schools	Encouragement and motivation Expectation of test preparation Different parents with different attitudes

13/1/19

- Balance between creating enough themes to capture data and distilling a huge amount of information into something concise.
- Should I have highlighted P2's daughter's academic ability (or difficulties with reading) in the themes? Is this clear through other themes?
  ↳ Is this coming to forefront of mind because P4 speaks explicitly about her son's SEN?
- P4 - so much to analyse! Is it a 'richer' interview? Am I becoming more confident with IPA procedure?
  ↳ Is P4 just more articulate?

14/1/19

- How connected is child's experience and parent's perception? (A) (B) (^A_B)
  ↳ circular causality A→B
  ⊕ or linear?
  ↳ where does school system fit in? (C)
    ↳ More Bronfenbrenner/ ecological model?
    How does experience/ perception be impacted by time (i.e. taking test every year?) →Time
- Do I need to make detailed! notes on parts of the interview that are irrelevant to research question? e.g. sections talking about doing work together at home etc? (P4)
  ⊕ • Also relevant with results + how parents behave when processing/reading results →how does their beh. impact on child's subsequent beh./reaction?

193

P6 analysis: 17/3/19.
How much is my experience as
a teacher impacting here? →
comments about what should
be done with results etc. —
I was aware of this happen-
ing as a teacher but he
claims it doesn't happen →
doesn't matter who is right,
not the question here.
↳ does this highlight the
gap between parent + teacher
knowledge/experience etc.?
↳ may be the case that my
experience is not representative
of this school?
⟹ Need to explicitly discuss
my experience pre-DEdPsy
to offer full transparency?

How can I show how super-
ordinate themes are linked/
impact on each other
within individual cases.
e.g. changes over time +
parent-child interaction
+ secondary school +
constructions of child's
experience.
P1 Analysis 22.3.19
• How has her experience of working
as a TA in FP impacted on her
experience/perceptions of NTs?
↳ Not the only Pt where
I've asked this Q. How homo-
genous is this group?
↳ Could this be critically
discussed in research
limitations section/Part 3?

Appendix O: Validity of Qualitative Research

In adopting the four core principles of Yardley's (2000, 2008) framework for assessing validity and quality in qualitative research, further detailed in the context of interpretative phenomenology analysis (IPA) by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), the following considerations were addressed throughout the research process:

Core Principle	Evidence of Considerations from Current Study
1. Sensitivity of Context	- Clear and transparent statement illustrating the researcher's position within the research process, including acknowledgement of previous experiences and perceptions that may influence the interpretation of the data. - Thorough critical discussion of the existing literature in the research area (Part One), and careful consideration of how the current study could offer a unique addition. - Consideration of ethical issues (Appendix G), particularly with regards to informed consent, in the early stages of the study. This is discussed in detail in Part Three. - Tentative suggestions were made as to how the findings of the research could be considered within existing psychological literature in this area, as well as conceptualising the findings within psychological theories and paradigms.
2. Commitment and Rigour	- Regular supervision was sought throughout the research process, including in the formation of the interview schedule (Appendix F), to ensure the questions were appropriately worded to gain a thorough and detailed insight into participants' experiences and perceptions. - Once IPA was selected as the methodology, the researcher carefully followed guidance from Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009) (Appendix H) and continued to seek supervision to discuss reflections as appropriate. A research diary was also used throughout the research process to note pertinent reflective and reflexive comments (Appendix N). Evidence of the IPA process can be found in Appendices I, J, K, L and M, and on the attached USB. - Careful consideration was given to the recruitment procedure, including appropriate inclusion and exclusion criteria. - The findings aim to reflect the researcher's interpretation of the participants' interviews, focusing on what was meant, rather than simply offering a description of what was said. - The findings section includes extensive quotes from all participants, evenly represented, to illustrate how the findings are grounded in the parent voice.
3. Transparency and Coherence	The researcher carefully considered her ontological and epistemological positions before constructing the research question and methodological decisions. This ensured a sense of coherence throughout the study. These decisions have also been reflected upon in detail in Part Three to offer transparency to the researcher's decisions throughout the process.

		• The researcher offers a clear and transparent statement illustrating her position within the research process, including acknowledgement of previous experiences and perceptions that may influence the interpretation of the data. • The stages of IPA undertaken by the researcher are illustrated in a number of ways: detailed description of how participants were selected and recruited in Parts Two and Three, the semi-structured interview used (Appendix F) and transcripts for each participant (Appendices 1, 3, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13 and 15 on attached USB), and steps of analysis undertaken (Appendix H) with two examples of analysed transcripts (Appendices I and K), final themes for each participant (Appendix M) with supporting quotes (Appendices 2, 4, 6, 8, 10, 12, 14, and 16 on attached USB). • Supervision was sought towards the end of analysis to discuss a draft thematic map and how the findings may be linked to existing psychological theory. This process ensured the researcher had enough time to continue to work on the final thematic map, presented in Part Two, and the selected theories subsequently discussed. • Throughout Part Two, the researcher has ensured the findings are discussed tentatively rather than definitively, and acknowledges the 'double hermeneutic' present throughout IPA (Smith et al., 2009).
4.	**Impact and Importance**	• Prior to the formation of the research question and subsequent methodological decisions, the researcher carefully and critically considering the existing literature within the area in order to find how the current study could offer a new perspective. Through detailed literature searches (Appendix A), the researcher was able to identify an area that has not been explored extensively, and yet seems to be currently relevant due to the ongoing review of the curriculum and assessment arrangements in Wales (see Donaldson, 2015). • The researcher offers links between the findings and psychological theories and paradigms (i.e. cognitive dissonance theory, systems theory and a bioecological systems paradigm). • Possible areas for future research have been identified. • Possible implications for practice for educational psychologists (EPs) have also been identified.