Do 'employability skills' matter?

How important are employability skills to teachers, young people and employers today?

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Abstract

This thesis seeks to find out what teachers, young people and employers understand by the term 'employability skills'. It goes on to look at how young people gain these skills and explores the implications of any mismatch in understanding between the three groups. The literature on the topic suggested that employability skills could be defined either as an evolving list of work-related skills, including teamwork, communication and leadership etc., or as a mindset demonstrating an awareness of a complex employment landscape and the skills required to succeed in it.

Data was collected through semi-structured interviews with seven employers and with teachers and young people in three schools (a sponsored academy, a comprehensive school and an independent school). The study found that teachers, employers and young people interpreted employability skills as life skills but often did not fully appreciate the role of employability skills in the context of widening participation to higher education, a more flexible market place and increased competition for jobs.

The three schools used different methods to teach skills that could be described as employability skills. The sponsored academy used business as a context for learning to make clear links between academic learning and its relevance to employment opportunities. The comprehensive school combined discrete business events with embedding skills throughout the curriculum. The independent school focused on transferable skills in the context of academic study. This indicated a hierarchy of need, with the young people in the sponsored academy requiring the most support to navigate the employment market.

The employers expected all young people to have a good basic education and reasonable communication skills. They were keen to work with schools to help young people gain employability skills, however, most did not offer employment opportunities to young people in significant numbers. This suggested that a lack of employment opportunities was a far more serious issue than any perceived lack of skills.

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Author's declaration

I declare that the work presented here is my own and that none of it has been

presented previously for publication or for any examination.

Chapter 1: Introduction

This thesis is about employability skills and young people. It aims to find out:

- What do teachers, employers and young people understand by the term employability skills?

- How do young people in secondary schools gain employability skills and do they recognise they have these skills?

- Is there a mismatch in understanding between schools and employers?

Through my involvement with education/business activity in schools over a number of years, I have been aware that both schools and businesses devote time and resources to teaching young people the skills they need to enter the world of work. I have also been aware of the rhetoric from governments and business lobbying organisations that schools are failing young people and the broader economy by not making the teaching of employability skills a priority. Reports from business lobbying organisations invariably lead to headline-grabbing articles on the subject. The Sky News headline is typical: "Young People Lack Skills Needed For Jobs" (Moussly, 2011). This article reported the Chartered Management Institute's findings that:

> 76% of executives agreed that failures in the education system were
> fuelling a skills crisis that was damaging the economy.

In May of the same year, Richardson, writing for the BBC continued the rhetoric with:

> School leavers lacking basic skills, bosses group says
>
> Too many young people are leaving school without adequate basic skills, a
> survey of business leaders suggests. More than four out of 10 are unhappy
> with youngsters' use of English, while 35% bemoan their numeracy skills.
> The annual study of 566 UK employers for the Confederation of British
> Industry also heralds a shortage of high-skilled employees, particularly in
> maths and science.

From a professional point of view, I was interested in exploring the reality of the situation, whether the business activity in schools was actually supporting young people to gain employability skills or if it was somehow missing the mark. This research project afforded me the opportunity to explore the subject in some detail.

This chapter introduces my thesis by:

- Providing a synopsis of the research project

- Summarising the background to the project

- Stating the research questions

- Outlining the strategies and techniques used

- Describing the content of the thesis.

1.1 A synopsis of the research project

In recent years, I have encountered the phrase 'employability skills' with increasing regularity. Local councils and universities have recruited staff into employability posts and successive governments and business lobbying organisations have continued to bemoan a lack of employability skills in young people (for example, Confederation for British Industry (CBI), Skills Report from 2006 to present). There is an often-repeated narrative that the UK economy will only achieve its full potential when schools make teaching employability skills to young people a priority. The first question that I wanted to explore was what exactly is meant by 'employability skills'? If teachers were being tasked with teaching these skills, it would be helpful to have a clear definition of what was required.

It was difficult to find literature on the topic relating specifically to young people in schools. There was a lot of 'grey literature' from governments, industry bodies and the media and there was evidence of a growing interest in employability skills in the context of higher education. The impression given by the literature was that there was much more to employability skills than simply a set of skills needed for employment. Wolf (2002) pointed out that skills would change depending on the employment sector and job. More recently Brown and Hesketh (2004) have discussed employability more in terms of a mindset than a set of skills:

> Employment increasingly focuses less on filling predetermined work roles, and more on cultivating and using skills and capabilities. In the process, employment is coming to mean something at once more exciting and more temporary, driven by shifting personal competencies, by project activities…

> However the acid test of employability is employment. (p. 18)

Brown and Hesketh suggested the changing nature of employment meant that employability skills would become increasingly important not only for people to gain employment but also for them to maintain it and seek out new employment opportunities. This implied that teachers would have to prepare young people for a working environment that was constantly changing and very different from the world of work even ten years ago. I was interested in finding out what teachers and businesses were putting in place to help young people. I was also interested in whether or not young people had an understanding of the importance of these skills.

1.2 Summarising the background to the project

The project took place against a backdrop of huge change in both education and the economic environment. The UK Coalition Government formed in 2010 had set in train a number of reforms to education including:

- Revision of the National Curriculum (September 2013)

- The Wolf Report (2011), Review of vocational education

- Introduction of the academies programme (Academies Act, 2010)

- A significant increase in higher education tuition fees (Department for Education, 2010)

- Raising of the participation age in full time education from 16 to 17 in 2013 and 18 in 2015 (Department for Education).

This educational change was coupled with a tough economic climate and high unemployment. Unemployment was particularly high amongst young people (Potton, 2012). Within this context, I was interested in finding out if teaching employability skills was a priority in schools.

1.3 Stating the research questions

I was interested in investigating:

- What do teachers, employers and young people understand by the term employability skills?

- How do young people in secondary schools gain employability skills and do they recognise they have these skills?

- Is there a mismatch in understanding between schools and employers?

Through the first question I aimed to find out if teachers and employers had a shared understanding of what employability skills encompassed. The second question explored the commitment of the businesses and schools to teaching employability skills to young people, with a focus on whether or not young people recognised employability skills in themselves. The third question led to the wider debate on employability skills. I realised employability skills had significance in terms of skills and confidence for young people but that politically and economically, it was a loaded phrase.

Employability skills could be viewed simply as a list of desirable skills for young people to have, or they could be discussed in the context of a supply or demand side issue of employment. There appeared to be an onus placed on young people to gain employability skills as a means of taking responsibility for their own employment. This is typical of the rhetoric from the Confederation of British Industry (CBI, *Action for Jobs,* 2011) around the subject:

> Almost one million young people aged between 16 and 24 are unemployed, with most of these neither in education or training. Yet even in these tough times, jobs are being created across the private sector. The stark reality is that too few of our unemployed people – especially among the young are positioned to get these jobs. (p. 4)

However, in a difficult economic environment, with few jobs available, employers appeared not to be recruiting staff in large numbers and if they were choosing to recruit they were understandably keen to select the best person from a large pool of candidates. Often employers were setting criteria for employment so high that it was out of the reach of the majority of young people and far higher than was actually

necessary for the jobs on offer. At the age of 16, 18 or 21, straight out of school or university, young people were at an obvious disadvantage to older, more experienced people (Potton, 2012). Although employers were attributing high youth unemployment to a lack of skills in young people, it appeared that the real problem was that employers, however unintentionally, were closing down employment opportunities to them. Added to this was the illusion that employers were keen to support young people into the world of work through a plethora of education/business initiatives in schools.

1.4 Outlining the strategies and techniques used

I began the research project by following media stories and exploring the literature to set a loose framework for the study. This was helpful but also confusing as the topic was complex. To gain a fuller understanding of what was happening in schools and businesses, I realised it would be necessary to interview a number of participants including teachers, young people and employers. I designed semi-structured interviews around my research questions and attempted to select participants randomly. In a tough economic climate, the gatekeepers of companies and schools told me that staff were too busy to talk to me. I reverted to using my business and education contacts to find willing participants. This approach had the benefit of allowing me to engage, quickly, a range of employers, teachers and young people in contrasting settings. I selected seven small, medium and large companies in North and West Yorkshire and three different schools:

- A sponsored academy in a deprived area
- A comprehensive school in a market town

- An independent school in an historic city.

Although I used my contacts, only four of the people who agreed to be interviewed were known to me previously.

I interviewed four teachers, with slightly different roles, and I conducted group interviews with young people in all three schools, using a skills grid (Appendix 1) to explore their understanding of employability skills. I then coded and collated the data. Through the interviews I tried to establish if teachers, young people and employers had a common understanding of employability skills, how the skills were taught to young people and how they were recognised. Having coded the data, and pulled out a number of themes, I then went back to the literature to explore these themes in some detail as I began to write up my findings. As a research project, it developed and evolved over a number of months.

1.5 The structure of the thesis

The next chapter examines the literature around the topic from a number of perspectives. The nature of the literature provided clues to the substance of the topic. The topic had attracted the attention of politicians, business-lobbying groups and academics who were interested in vocational education, skills teaching and poverty or employability skills for young people in higher education. Chapter 3 explains the methodology chosen, the challenges with these methods and how the research projected unfolded. I was interested in exploring the views of three distinct sets of people of different ages, interests and backgrounds, so tried to ensure the questions could be cross-referenced and that the language used was appropriate to each group.

Chapters 4, 5 and 6 look at the detailed findings of the data collected. The chapters are organised thematically, allowing for an examination of:

- Understanding of employability skills

- Methods of teaching these skills

- Employers' engagement with young people in schools.

The final chapter summarises the main arguments and offers some conclusions and recommendations.

1.6 Summary

Having worked in the education business field for several years, I was interested in exploring employability skills and whether or not the activity I witnessed and to which I contributed, actually helped young people to gain the skills they needed to enter the world of work. Having identified themes through an initial literature review, I then designed and implemented an investigation into the topic by interviewing teachers, young people and employers from a range of backgrounds. I then returned to the literature to inform my findings. The next two chapters provide detailed explorations of the literature and the methodology before going on to examine the findings.

Chapter 2: Context and literature review

In this chapter I explore literature relating to employability skills, to gain an understanding of scholars' views on the topic and to provide a context for this study. When searching for literature I was particularly interested in:

- Definitions of employability skills

- The relevance of employability skills to young people

- The understanding of employability skills in the context of schools and businesses.

2.1 The nature of the literature

The nature of the literature on employability skills provided some clues to the significance of the topic. Although there was no shortage of grey literature from government and industry bodies, up-to-date academic literature on the specific subject of teaching of employability skills in secondary schools was much harder to find suggesting the topic might be of more interest to politicians and lobbying organisations. I was interested in looking at employability skills for all young people but the literature often appeared to blur the lines between vocational education and employability skills. Ainley (1990) argued that all education was in fact pre-vocational, and, recognition of this, he suggested, would lead to a new and unified system of vocational education. I was interested in how young people were gaining the skills required to secure employment.

2.1.1 Recent academic literature

Although there was a lot of academic literature on the theme of employability in general, much of the more current literature tended to focus on:

- How employability skills could be manipulated as a political tool

- The value of employability in the context of higher education institutions.

Moore (2007) discussed employability as a political tool used by governments to reduce the welfare state's financial liability. She suggested that New Labour's policy to persuade the population to become lifelong learners was a way of encouraging workers to take responsibility for their own employability by becoming ever more flexible and entrepreneurial in their attitude to employment. She described this as "the explicit creation of educational environments aimed at training workers towards a new genre of individual employability or entrepreneurialism of the self, which in effect allows ongoing retrenchment of the welfare state." (p. 265)

Ainley and Allen's work, discussed in greater depth in this chapter, echoed this theme but in the context specifically of young people. Moore quoted Wrigley (2007) who suggested that "capitalism needs workers who are clever enough to be profitable, but not wise enough to know what is really going on." (p. 243)

More recently Atkins (2013) explored employability skills in relation to young people who leave education at 16 +. She examined the confusion created around employability skills or vocational education as tools to engage young people in danger of being excluded from mainstream, more academic education. She suggested that

employability skills could be seen as a tool to marginalise young people who were already in danger of disengaging and condemn them to low paid, low skilled work. She suggested employability skills could be viewed as a tool for social control.

A number of academics, including Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009); Speight, Lackovic & Cooker (2013) and Tomlinson (2008), discussed employability in the context of higher education. It could be argued there is a more urgent need for academic research on employability skills in higher education because of recent changes including:

- Labour Government's Widening Participation policy following the Dearing Report on Higher Education (1997)
- Coalition Government's policy to increase university fees in England
- High youth unemployment.

It makes commercial sense for higher education establishments to make a link between studying for a degree and equipping young people with the skills required to secure employment. In a higher education market where young people are now being asked to pay fees of up to £27,000 for a degree, it is reasonable to assume many young people will expect to see a return on their investment in the form of improved employment opportunities. Since 2012, universities have had to provide statistics on employability and earnings as part of the Higher Education Funding Council for England's Key Information Sets for applicants.

Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) used an explanatory case study approach to explore how largely business students engaged with a business simulation model to

develop their employability skills. The study concluded that providing students with a realistic business model helped the students "to both articulate the skills and knowledge that they had as well as to see how these are transferable to the work environment" (p. 305). Although this research related to higher education it was of interest as I was aware that schools used business simulations to encourage young people to consider the skills they might need for the world of work.

Tomlinson (2008) questioned the value of a degree in the context of employablity through a series of semi-structured interviews with students at a pre 1992 university. He explored "human capital", how young people perceived their own potential to be successful in the careers market and what he described as the "positional conflict" which concerned grade of qualification, reputation of the higher education institution and subject studied. His report was written before the 2011 increase in tuition fees and explored the conundrum whereby young people believed a degree to be essential for career success whilst also appreciating that widening access to higher education had led to an employment market flooded with graduates. It also highlighted the perception that employers can now use employment practices that demand candidates to demonstrate skills and qualifications way beyond those required for the actual job being offered. This paper referred to Brown and Hesketh's work which is discussed later in this chapter. Tomlinson concluded that although widening participation to higher education might give the impression of opening up opportunities to more young people who may not traditionally have gone on to university, many will be excluded from graduate roles in other ways.

The associated risks of participating in higher education for these students are also considerably higher than for those positioned more strongly in the higher education and labour market field (Archer and Hutchings 2000). The evidence clearly shows that employers play an active role in reinforcing patterns of labour market inequality amongst different graduates. (p. 60)

Speight, Lackovic & Cooker (2013) explored the "relationship between academic learning and learning for employability" in higher education. So again although this related to Higher Education, it had some relevance to my study in that it explored different models of teaching employability skills. It looks at:

- a bolt-on approach where employability skills were taught separately from the academic curriculum

- a hidden approach where students learned skills that could be described as employability skills but these skills were not highlighted or referenced particularly by lecturers

- an approach that embedded employability skills into the curriculum.

The study was carried out through 29 semi-structured interviews with academics, administrators, students and employers. It looked at curricula and extra-curricula activity. Its findings were that the teaching of both an academic curriculum and employability skills were not mutually exclusive or detrimental to each other.

The themes explored in these papers were relevant to this study. The main themes were:

- The political nature of employability

- Perceived value of qualifications and skills

- Supply or demand side issues of employment.

All of these themes are revisited in some depth.

2.2 Defining employability skills

Although the terms 'employability' and 'employability skills' appeared frequently in

the literature, it was difficult to find precise definitions. Politicians, business people

and academics have been trying to define employability for a number of years.

Kenneth Baker, the Secretary of State for Education (1986 to 1989) talked about core

skills, a version of employability skills, in 1989:

> As I see it, there are a number of skills… which young people and adults in
> the future will all need. They could be expressed as a list of core skills…say
> the following:
> -communication –written and oral. How to explain a complicated working
> procedure, or deal with a tricky customer.
> - numeracy. Not simply adding a column of figures, but understanding
> orders of magnitude.
> - personal relations – team working and leadership.
> - familiarity with technology…
> - familiarity with systems…
> - familiarity with changing and social contexts… especially foreign language
> knowledge.
> (Wolf, 2002, p. 118)

According to Wolf, Baker's speech preceded the launch of a Confederation of British

Industry (CBI) task force report *Towards a Skills Revolution*. Wolf suggested that the

core skills and key skills debate was only relevant to political or industrial bodies and

not young people or even businesses necessarily:

> The core-/key-skills story teaches some interesting lessons, but they are far
> more to do with the nature of bureaucracies – private or governmental –
> than with the skills the economy needs. It is absolutely true that employers
> are interested in a range of qualities and skills that are not covered by
> formal academic qualifications. That is why they do not generally hire
> people sight unseen; and why many not only interview candidates but set
> up selection tasks or group discussions, and administer personality tests.
> (p. 125)

Wolf's view that employers were interested in a range of qualities and skills suggested that these skills were not easily defined and changed depending on the jobs on offer.

In its 2012 Skills Review, *Learning to grow* the CBI claimed that 71% of employers would like to see schools and colleges prioritising the teaching of employability skills. In this document the CBI defined employability skills as:

- A positive attitude

- Self-management

- Team working

- Business and customer awareness

- Problem solving

- Communication and literacy

- Application of numeracy

- Application of information technology. (p. 32)

In the same year the CBI published its Education Report *First steps: a new approach for our schools,* where it actually contradicted its previous messages and appeared to come to the conclusion that employability skills were not easily defined but combined knowledge, behaviours and skills that might be developed over a child's school career:

> In the past, the CBI has tended to discuss many of these areas in terms of 'employability skills'. This terminology was misleading, giving the impression that they could be taught separately in the curriculum. That is not the case – the curriculum is the space in which we deliver core knowledge and enabling subjects. Behaviours can only be developed over time, through the entire path of a young person's life and their progress

> through the school system. Everything that happens in a school should embed the key behaviours and attitudes. (p. 32)

In this report the CBI talked about young people gaining a range of skills through core subjects, which it defined as English, Maths, Science and Computer science, and enabling subjects (Humanities, Languages, Art, Design Technology, Economics, employer-led apprenticeships and BTECs and GNVQs). So although the CBI claimed that the companies it represented bemoaned the lack of employability skills in young people in one report, in another it appeared to acknowledge some difficulty in defining these skills.

Academic research on employability skills relating to higher education was interesting as it appeared to acknowledge the complex nature of the skills and attempted to view the issue from a young person's perspective.

Yorke (2006) described employability skills as the potential of young people to secure employment suggesting that employability skills were about securing a job rather than functioning in a job role. He suggested the term covered more than just core or key skills, but that these skills were multifaceted and included a range of subject disciplines as well as soft skills such as teamwork and communication skills. He suggested they encompassed both academic intelligence and practical intelligence. In his view "employability and good learning are seen as being closely aligned and not as oppositional constructs" (p. 2).

Ehiyazaryan and Barraclough (2009) suggested that there were a number of employability models but concluded that these models generally include transferable skills, employability attributes and an increasing awareness and self-confidence in their skills and abilities.

Overtoom (2000) defined employability skills as:

> Transferable core skills groups that represent essential functional and enabling knowledge, skills and attitudes required by the 21st century workplace. They are necessary for career success at all levels of employment for all levels of education. (p. 1)

The definitions from Yorke, Ehiyazaryan & Barraclough and Overtoom suggested that employability skills included skills, knowledge and self-awareness relevant to securing employment and becoming a successful employee. They also suggested that these skills were relevant to all young people not just those who were not pursuing academic qualifications. They indicated that employability skills went further than the core skills or key skills discussed by successive governments. These definitions were less focused on the needs of private or governments' bureaucracies (Wolf 2002) but more on supporting young people in gaining employment.

The search for definitions for employability skills seemed to suggest there was no clear definition of the term. There appeared to have been a move away from trying to define employability skills (core, key or employability) as basic communication, teamwork, time management, computer skills etc, to an understanding that young people needed a range of skills, knowledge, self-awareness, attributes and attitudes to equip them to make the transition from education to employment.

The literature suggested that the skills young people needed to gain meaningful employment had changed over time, responding to a changing employment market. Although the term employability skills appeared to be used more and more frequently, it also appeared that there was some confusion around what the term actually covered and so this was an area I was keen to explore further.

2.3 The political nature of education for employment

A brief examination of employability skills indicated that the main drivers for these skills were political or economic. Taking the literature as a whole, a number of themes emerged from a range of authors including: Ainley (1990); Ainley & Allen (2010); Ahier & Esland (1990); Atkins (2009); Brown & Hesketh (2004) and Wolf (2002). The arguments focused largely on the political nature of employment with particular emphasis on:

- The assertion that education is failing young people
- Lack of skills in young people is damaging the economy
- A debate about whether youth unemployment is caused by issues of supply or demand.

2.3.1 The assertion that education is failing young people

The main commentators on vocational education and skills traced the start of the debate about (employability) skills back to a speech made by Labour Prime Minister, James Callaghan in 1976, at Ruskin College Oxford. Ainley (1990) suggested that at this time, high youth unemployment was threatening confidence in the secondary school system, where it became clear that working hard at school would no longer guarantee

a good job. He suggested that Callaghan's speech questioned the purpose of

education:

> Callaghan said that schools and colleges were out of touch with the
> changing world of work and blamed them for not teaching the attitudes
> and abilities which would help their students to get a job when they left.
> This speech changed the agenda of education for a decade. (p. 12)

In this speech Callaghan talked about the skills young people would need for future

employment and made the connection between poor economic performance and

schools not equipping young people with the skills required to obtain work, creating

the narrative that youth unemployment was driven by lack of suitably qualified and

skilled young people.

However in his report *The Schooled Society and beyond* commissioned by the

Department of Children Schools and Families, Baker (2009) suggested an alternative

perspective. He suggested that in the last 100 years education had changed to such an

extent that the true benefits of much wider access to education in general had gone

unnoticed and were largely taken for granted. He went on to say that, within the

context of this sweeping educational revolution, there was an interesting paradox

about schooling in modern society.

> On the one hand, we attribute many powers to schools: teaching children
> to read, to understand mathematics and science, … But on the other hand,
> schooling is frequently portrayed as failing modern society in fundamental
> ways, leaving the educational revolution under-appreciated, and the wider
> dimensions of the schooled society have gone mostly unnoticed. (p. 4)

He illustrated his point by quoting Bill Gates, founder of Microsoft, who

claimed at the National Education Summit on American Secondary Schools in

2005 that that American schools were "broken" and "obsolete":

> Training the workforce of tomorrow with the high schools of today is like
> trying to teach kids about today's computers on a 50-year old mainframe.
> It's the wrong tool for the times. (p. 4)

Baker claimed that great things were expected from schools and they were often criticised for not fully delivering, but the reality was the global population as a whole was far more educated than it had ever been and that this was good for society. He had interesting views on whether schooling determined society or the other way around. He suggested that the schooled society could play out in one of two ways:

- The over education scenario: which implied that education soon would reach its highest point and the only trajectory would be downwards, and this could well result in inflated schooling that "dumbs down" education

Or

- that education had not reached its highest point and the schooled society would lead to a revolution in learning as the benefits of more education would increase exponentially.

This argument suggested that it was in everyone's interests to continue in education and learning for the benefit of society as a whole, in which case the 1997 Labour Government's policy of encouraging 50% of the population into higher education would not be the issue that some had predicted, the inference being that it would create an army young people who were over qualified for the type of employment they were likely to secure.

These two arguments showed different views: one suggesting that the main purpose of educating young people was to help them to secure employment; the second that education was for the good and advancement of society as a whole and not necessarily just a form of training. In this study I am not arguing that education should be all about either employability skills or academic achievement. I am interested in how young people develop the skills they will need to move on from education to employment.

2.3.2 Is a lack of skills in young people damaging the economy?

Governments and lobbying organisations argued that employability skills were relevant to young people because it was their lack of skills that was weakening the economy. Academics have pointed out the obvious flaw in the argument. Holt (1987) sums this up:

> The vocational solution to complex and many-sided problem is not only wrong-headed, it is deeply dangerous. For it allows us to sidestep important questions both about education and training, and about British industry. It is not just the fact that no connection has ever been demonstrated between a particular form of curriculum and economic success; it is the error of shuffling off responsibility for our industrial weakness on to schools, when a moment's thought indicates that the root causes must lie elsewhere. (p. 2)

Holt asserted that young people and schools had been scape-goated for poor economic performance when the blame actually lay elsewhere: with successive governments' lack of foresight and planning and businesses' lack of creativity to seek out new markets. These factors, he argued, had led to a lack of employment opportunities for young people.

2.3.3 Youth unemployment: an issue of supply or demand?

Callaghan's 1976 speech came at a time of high unemployment and created a narrative that it was the lack of skills in young people that was leading to their unemployment and that these skills should become a priority for education. This is a popular theory, still being repeated today by the Coalition Government and business organisations. However, according to figures from the Office of National Statistics 2012, youth unemployment was at the highest it has been for some time. Interestingly youth unemployment figures, although higher than those for the rest of the population, tended to follow the same pattern as those for adult unemployment until 2007.
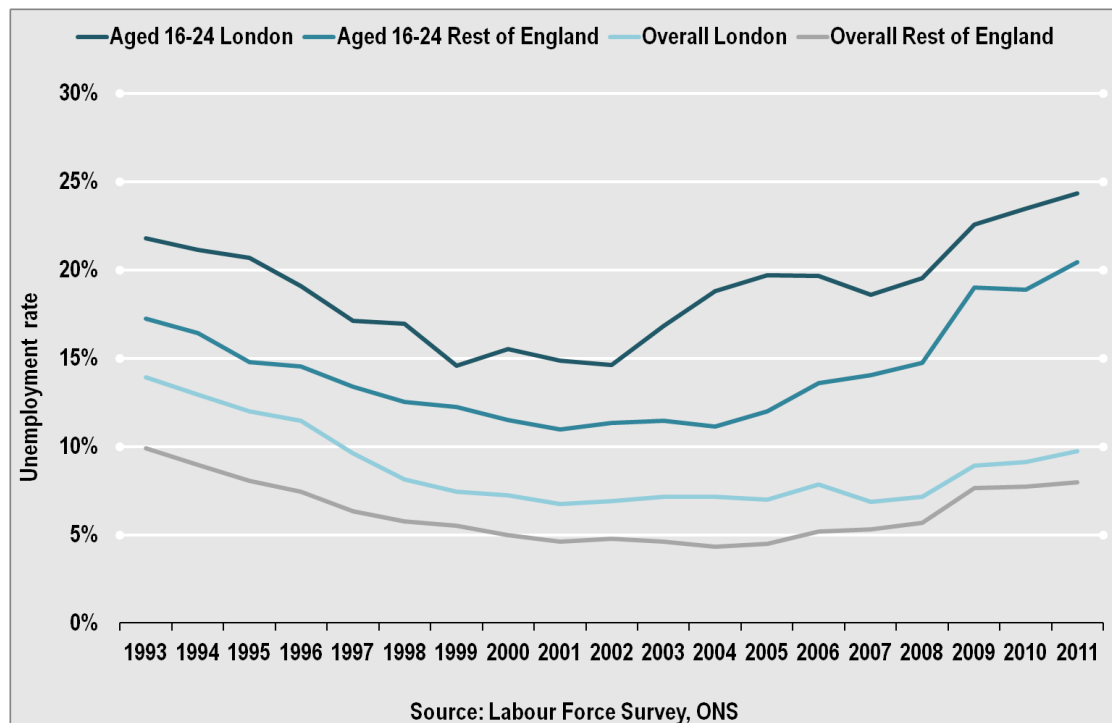
Figure 1. Unemployment rate patterns from 1993. Source: Office of National Statistics, Potton 2012

According to Potton, on the UK Parliament website, it was the recession that caused high youth employment and not the lack of employability skills in young people.

> The effect of the recession and downturn in the UK has particularly hit young people in the labour market. 929,000 people aged 16-24 were unemployed in December-February 2010, equivalent to 13% of the whole age group and a rise of 220,000 compared to three years ago. Although there have been significant rises across all age groups, young people make up 38% of the 2.5 million people of working age who are unemployed.   Potton (2012)

The article suggested that in a recession employers might reduce or freeze employment and recruitment which in turn reduced opportunities for young people to enter the labour market. Younger people were often easier to make redundant because the redundancy process was less costly for younger employees than older employees. The article also claimed that employers retained more experienced and trained employees than had been the case in previous recessions, which again affected the opportunities available to young people.

This implied that issues around the employability of young people were more about lack of demand than any greater lack of skills than had previously been the case. This put the ball firmly back in the court of businesses and governments to support young people into the labour market by creating employment opportunities for them or help young people to create employment opportunities for themselves.

2.4 Teaching employability skills to young people: The Wolf Report

In the last 25 years there have been a number of government reports exploring skills and education including the Tomlinson Report (1996), the Leitch Report (2006) and now the Wolf Report (2011). Wolf (2002) gives the following as reasons for these reports:

For over a quarter of a century, British governments have been making determined attempts to enlarge, redesign and promote vocational education. They have been convinced that this is necessary if the economy is to reach the apotheosis of a 'high skills' equilibrium, as well as being in the best interests of the nations young. The activist policies of one minister after another have reflected the parallel belief that the education system, left to itself, is incapable of recognizing economic imperatives… Central government must intervene. (p. 56).

She then goes on to list the number of government pledges to achieve parity of esteem for vocational and academic qualifications. Michael Gove MP, Secretary of State for Education commissioned Wolf to look at the provision of technical and practical education.

2.4.1 Identifying key issues

Gove's motivation for commissioning the report, similar to his predecessors, was the belief was that poor vocational education was at the heart of England and Wales' lack of manufacturing industries and weak economic growth, so continuing the narrative started by Callaghan. The Wolf Report identified 24 issues to address. In this report rather than addressing how young people's lack of skills were failing the economy she focused on how the education system was failing some young people, largely those not going on to study academic qualifications. Her findings related to:

- Funding of qualifications, and the number and quality of qualifications

- Exam boards setting the curriculum rather than government

- Weak regulatory bodies

- Quality of teaching of the lowest achieving quintile of young people

- Perpetuated misconceptions.

Wolf argued education systems in most other European countries focused on giving young people the tools to gain a good basic education which broadened out when they reached 14 or 16. In England and Wales, the focus was to narrow down options from 16. There was a clear path for young people who want to go on to academic study: five good GCSEs A-C being the formal qualifications required to go on to study A' level and then onto University. Employers recognised these qualifications and often used them as a minimum level of entry into employment. For young people who did not achieve five good GCSEs, the picture was much less clear.

She identified funding for qualifications coupled with the commercial nature of the examination boards as a major concern. For 16 to 19 year olds funding was determined by pass rates and the number of qualifications a young person achieved. The funding did not follow a young person as it did at 14 to 16. Often these qualifications did not provide progression routes for young people who had not attained five GCSEs A to C at age 16. She identified this as a problem for the lowest achieving quintile who were taking Foundation level qualifications. She suggested that passing these qualifications gave some young people a false sense of their level of achievement, leading them to struggle when trying to move on to the next level. This system of qualifications was driven by examination boards and funding, but it did not serve young people well. To address this issue Wolf recommended changing funding so that it followed the young person, cutting the number of exam boards and offering only good quality, rigorous qualifications.

2.4.2 Employability skills and poverty

Atkins (2009) had a slightly different perspective on this issue and made direct links

between qualifications offered to young people and social class. Her arguments

concerned young people from deprived areas being encouraged to study vocational

qualifications regardless of how fit for purpose these qualifications might have been.

She asserted that young people were being encouraged to study second-rate

qualifications. Referring to the debate on the parity of esteem between academic and

vocational qualifications she made the following observation:

> the parity of esteem debate is of little relevance for programmes which lie
> at the bottom of an educational hierarchy at a point where no 'academic'
> alternative is available. What matters here is the nature of the relationship
> between the progamme and social class. Lower level vocational
> programmes follow a narrow, occupationally based curriculum which
> socialises young people to certain types of occupation and reinforces
> existing social class divisions. (p. 17)

In a more recent study (Atkins 2013), she continues this theme but suggested that

employability skills were being used a tool to marginalise young people who were

already disengaged from mainstream education.

2.4.3 The value of education and the promotion of the highly-skilled economy

Wolf's observations on youth unemployment were interesting. A popular argument

being put forward by governments and OECD (2010) was that the labour market was

changing. There would be no low skilled jobs and, to compete, the UK needed highly

qualified people. The visual impression of the labour market was an inverted pyramid

with many highly skilled jobs and no low skilled jobs. The reality of the situation

according to the Wolf Report was that the economy was more like an hour-glass than a

top heavy pyramid. Brown and Hesketh (2004) agreed that the demand for highly-

skilled jobs in a knowledge-based economy had been exaggerated by governments but

they suggested it was to distract from a less palatable reality:

> If it is assumed that there are plenty of good jobs for people with the
> appropriate credentials then the issue of who gets the best jobs loses its
> political sting. But if good jobs are in limited supply, how the competition
> for a livelihood is organized assumes paramount importance. (p. 6)

Wolf suggested that more young people were staying in education and as a result the

perceived value of education had changed. Employers who previously would have

taken on young people at 16 or 18, with GCSEs or A levels were now asking for much

higher qualifications as an entry point to work. She suggested that such high level

qualifications, in many instances, were not needed for the type of work required.

> the more young people stay in education, the more employers perceive the
> remainder as 'low quality'. This does not mean these young people are,
> necessarily, without the skills needed to do the jobs they are applying for –
> but they are perceived as likely to be. …

> It is difficult to quantify the effects of such perceptions. They are, however,
> a mirror image of what seems to be happening at the graduate
> employment end of the market, where many jobs which were once open to
> 18 or even 16 year old leavers are now 'graduate entry', without actually
> having changed substantively. (p. 35)

Although there was no evidence to suggest a degree was an actual requirement for

many jobs, Wolf suggested employers viewed a degree as a quality marker of young

people. The assumption was if young people did not stay on in education, they must

be of lower ability. Ainley and Allen (2010) explored this theme, looking at

employability skills in the context of a "lost generation" of young people exploring the

transition of young people as they became adults:

> Skill in its traditional craft meaning has been systematically dismantled over
> the last 30 years with the growth of services and the way new information

and computing technology has been applied in employment… This process of deskilling is now reaching up the employment hierarchy to reduce many non-manual so-called professional and 'middleclass' occupations to the level of wage labour i.e. to jobs, not salaried careers with security. (p. 4)

They summed this up by saying:

Thus, rather than education professionalising the proletariat, there has been an actual proletarianisation of the professions. (p. 5)

This is actually the opposite of what Ainley (1990) predicted when he saw technology as a way of liberating the workforce and vocational education as a means of breaking down class barriers and opening up opportunities for young people:

The development of new technology has the potential not only to simplify tasks but also for them to be shared and integrated, thereby increasing productivity with less laborious and repetitive effort. It thus presents a real opportunity for the transformation of the ancient division of labour between workers by hand and by brain. (p. 125)

He described this change as an historic opportunity which would require a revolutionary approach to education and training through a unified system of vocational education and training which would break down the traditional offering of an elite education for people going into the professions and a more skills based approached for people working in trades or crafts. He went onto say that this focus on vocational education would eventually break down class barriers.

Ainley and Allen (1990) made interesting points about the current generation of young people being able to make a definitive step to adulthood.

Recent academic work about the changing nature of 'transition' from youth to adulthood, though not describing young people as lost also raises the question whether young people are any longer able to make the sort of

definite transition to adulthood that used to be the norm in post war years.
(p. 156)

The implication here was that several factors have conspired together with the result that it is now much more difficult for young people to make a number of changes from childhood to adulthood and so from school/education to work. The acquisition of employability skills was just part of a much more complex picture facing young people.

2.5 The understanding of employability skills in the context of schools and businesses.

In this chapter I have discussed the different types and themes of literature relating to employability skills. Initially I suggested that much of the literature I found was grey literature which was interesting from a contextual point of view. When looking at employability skills in relation to schools and businesses I found the 2013 report *Employers are from Mars, Young people are from Venus: addressing the young people/jobs mismatch* by the Chartered Institute of Personnel Development to be more relevant and helpful because it identified a mismatch in expectation and understanding between both schools and businesses that appeared to be a plausible explanation for the difficulties around teaching and acquiring employability skills. It also put the onus on supporting young people to gain employment on businesses and adults. It explains*:*

> There is a real mismatch between employers' expectations of young people during the recruitment process and young people's understanding of what is expected of them, …

> Most employers don't specifically target young people with their recruitment practices, although some have started to change the ways in which they recruit young people to get the best out of young candidates? (p. 6)

This report focused on 30 employer case studies based on businesses of different sizes from several business sectors and found that young people struggled to get into the job market because:

- They lack confidence

- They are inexperienced

- There is a large unemployment problem in the UK at the moment.

The report went on to suggest helpful ways in which employers could make the recruitment process easier for young people to understand by, for example, telling them about dress codes, explaining what would happen during the interview and so on. It recommended that employers:

> Adapt your expectations of young people so that you are realistic about how work-ready they will be when they first arrive. Young people don't always know how to behave in the recruitment process but managers should be encouraged to look beyond first impressions, such as the way people are dressed, and give young people a chance.

> Think about the roles and access routes for young people into your organisation. As well as obvious options such as graduate schemes, think about whether other routes such as apprenticeship schemes or school-leaver programmes could work for your business. (p. 4)

This approach appeared to be more pragmatic and young person-friendly, identifying specific areas where businesses could adapt their practise with a view to supporting young people. It also acknowledged what Brown and Hesketh (2004) referred to as the duality of employability.

> Virtually all policy statements on employability fail to grasp this duality of employability. Policy debates have concentrated on the issue of whether

those in the job market have the appropriate skills, knowledge,
commitment, or business acumen to do the job in question. (p. 24)

They suggested that employers had a role to play also in providing employment

opportunities. In an increasingly flexible market employment market, the

demand side of the issue could equally mean equipping young people to create

their own employment opportunities.

2.6 Summary

The literature review for this study was complex. Employability skills feed into

so many different agendas and areas of interest:

- Economics

- Politics

- Poverty

- Skills debate

- Academic and vocational education

- Widening participation to higher education.

Having a clear understanding of employability skills is important if teachers are

to teach these skills to young people but definitions varied, encompassing

vague terms around a range of skills and aptitudes. Exploration of the literature

indicated that several organisations, including government departments,

industry bodies, lobbying organisations and higher education institutions had a

vested interest in employability skills or sharing opinions about them.

Definitions motivated by myths and political agendas were not helpful to young

people. Youth unemployment had become such an issue that most parties

were beginning to see that it was a complex area and not just a question of a lack of skills in young people. There appeared to be a growing awareness that young people needed support in gaining skills and opportunities that would help them to navigate an employment market very different from the one experienced by their parents and grandparents.

Chapter 3: Methodology

Having conducted a literature review, it appeared that providing young people with employability skills was part of a complex picture involving: theories on the purpose of education, views on vocational education, government policy, issues of supply and demand, and practice and philosophy in both schools and businesses. In this chapter I justify my choice of research methodology and methods.

3.1 Selecting the methodology

Thornberg (as cited in Arthur, Waring, Coe & Hedges, 2012) discussed the importance of a researcher understanding the philosophical context of their research project:

> Whether or not the philosophical positions determine the research approach, it is important for researchers to understand their own and others' views about the nature of reality (ontology), how we can know about it (epistemology) and the different values (axiology) that may underpin enquiry, along with a number of other differences. (p. 5)

The research questions for this study were:

- What do teachers, employers and young people understand by the term employability skills?

- How do young people in secondary schools gain employability skills and do they recognise they have these skills?

- Is there a mismatch in expectation between schools and employers?

My research questions were designed to explore employability skills and what the term meant to three very different but related groups: young people, teachers and employers. I was interested in what the term meant to them both in theory and in practice so my research approach had to be flexible, allowing me to explore the

thoughts behind actions. The methodology for the study was idiographic rather than

nomothetic. According to De Vaus, (2001):

> A nomothetic explanation would examine a few causal factors in an
> attempt to provide a partial explanation whereas an idiographic
> explanation would explore a full explanation of a particular case. (p. 22)

I was interested in exploring how the three groups interacted to support young

people in gaining employability skills so the approach for this study is

idiographic. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) described an idiographic

study as an exploration of:

> the subjective meanings which individuals place upon their actions.
> Discovering the subjective rules of such actions. (p. 8)

Within the context of my research project, there were a number of variables in terms

of participants and practice, and each influenced the others in different ways. Through

my research, I was not trying to test one theory; rather by exploring the interactions

between three distinct groups, each containing participants who had different

experiences, I expected that theories would emerge to define employability skills and

the implications of teaching these to young people. Therefore the most appropriate

methodology was inductive, allowing me to determine the sort of data I required in

order to form theories. Grounded theory was appropriate because it is a method that

allows theories to develop from data. Creswell (2009) described grounded theory as:

> a strategy of enquiry in which the researcher derives a general, abstract
> theory of a process, action, or interaction grounded in the views of
> participants …Two primary characteristics of this design are the constant
> comparison of data with emerging categories and theoretical sampling of
> different groups to maximise the similarities and the differences of
> information. (p. 13)

All of these features were relevant to my research project. The context for the research was complex. I was aware that there were a number of issues and opinions around employability skills but did not have any pre-defined theories to test.

Having worked in the education/business field for most of my career, I was aware that there were many occasions when businesses engaged directly with schools.

I was interested in the actual experiences of businesses, schools and young people and the efficacy of this activity in supporting young people to gain the skills to help them secure employment. By collecting and comparing the views of the three key sets of participants I aimed to gain an insight into the teaching of employability skills. I intended to compare views by asking each group of participants a series of questions that were broadly similar.

3.2 Choosing research methods

Having established my research questions and methodology, I then considered how best to gather the data. My research project required qualitative rather than quantitative data. I was not trying to gather large amounts of data to test a theory; I was interested in a range views from people, in different contexts, with contrasting experiences.

When considering methods for collecting data, several possibilities were open to me:

- survey
- questionnaire

- observation

- interview.

Surveys or questionnaires may have been an option but I was not trying to establish what percentage of employers held a certain view, I was interested in what employers understood by employability skills and how this related to supporting young people to gain these skills. According to Bell (2010) surveys were useful to find the answers to the "What? Where? When? and How," questions but less so if the researcher was aiming to find out "Why?" She suggested "Causal relationships can rarely, if ever, be proved by survey method. The main emphasis is on fact-finding"

(p. 14).

I was aware that business-lobbying organisations like the CBI, representing 240,000 member companies, used annual surveys to highlight a perceived lack of skills in young people. The CBI had published annual education and skills surveys since 2006. Its 2011 report promoted the view that a lack of skills in young people was directly linked to lack of economic growth in Britain. However, only 566 businesses of the 240,000 membership responded to the survey, representing a response rate of 0.23%. I was looking for a research method that would provide a more detailed picture of skills teaching.

I decided to opt for an interview format because this offered me a degree of flexibility and structure at the same time. According to Cohen et al. (2011),

> The interview is a flexible tool for data collection enabling multi-sensory channels to be used: verbal, non-verbal, spoken and heard. The order of the interview may be controlled whilst still giving space for spontaneity, and the

interviewer can press not only for complete answers but also for the responses about complex and deep issues. In short, the interview is a powerful implement for researchers. (p. 409)

Although I realised conducting interviews was time consuming and so would limit the number of participants I was able to speak to, I decided that this was the best method to gather qualitative data. My preference was for face-to-face interviews with participants in schools or in employers' places of work. In this way I was able to gather a lot of data about the participant and the context in which each participant operated such as:

- type of environment

- geographic location

- status within the business.

It would not have been possible to gather this data in any other way.

I opted for a semi-structured interview. This format is both structured and flexible. It allowed me to explore specific areas but it was flexible enough to allow me go off script and ask additional questions where appropriate. It also meant that the data collected allowed me to identify themes that could be explored in more depth at a later stage. I was interested in how the practice in three distinct groups of people affected the other and whether or not their practice was informed by an understanding of the issues that was similar or very different.

3.2.1 Constructing the interview questions

Having decided on a semi-structured interview format I drafted the questions I would like to ask interviewees. This was a complex process. Arthur et al (2012) suggested that

> Interviewing for research is quite different from common conversation and requires a well-envisioned design, a great deal of preparation, purposeful conduct and attentive listening. (p. 171)

However Barbour (2008) made the point that despite this complex process the semi-structured interview had to work in practice like a normal conversation so that both the interviewee and interviewer were comfortable and the researcher able to gather the required information.

I drafted the questions into themes for ease of comparison when coding, posing general questions followed by more specific questions; a funnel approach. I produced a slightly modified set of initial questions for each of the three sets of participants (Appendices 2, 3 and 4). The language used was appropriate to the different audiences. I used simple language backed up with illustrations or examples when talking to young people. I prepared a skills grid (Appendix 1) for the young people to use to write down their thoughts before discussion of employability in the group interviews. I used the skills grid with each group although initially I had viewed it as a back up should one interview technique fail. I tried to avoid business jargon with teachers and education jargon with businesses. Cohen et al. (2011) suggested that questions for interviews should use simple language, be clear and avoid bias or ambiguity. The questions, equally should not lead participants' responses. All of these points were taken into consideration.

Having worked with businesses and schools for many years, I was conscious of the potential for bias in my views that might be expressed through leading questions or prejudicial language. Because of the similarity of the questions but the very different contexts, there were issues of ambiguity where one term might be clear to one group, but might mean something entirely different to another. Even within each group, this proved to be the case. One question concerned the implications of youth unemployment on a sector: some employers thought the question was irrelevant; others said it was an extremely important issue because when the recession ended they would not have enough trained young people in place. So although it might have appeared to be an ambiguous question it was important to ask. An obvious example of ambiguity was the term employability skills itself which was defined in different ways by interviewees.

3.3 Sampling

In order to make the project both meaningful and manageable, I had to make decisions on sampling. Very early in the research project, I had identified three distinct groups of participants to interview:

- employers
- teachers
- young people.

As these groups represented large sectors of the population it was important to consider how to contact enough participants to gather meaningful data but also how to make the project manageable. According to Cohen et al. (2011), there were key factors to consider when deciding on a sampling strategy. These included:

- the size of the sample

- how representative the sample group may be

- how easy it is gain access to the sample

- the strategy and its appropriateness to the research being undertaken (e.g. qualitative, quantitative or mixed methods).

3.3.1 Sample size

The sample size was difficult to determine. This was a qualitative research project so I was not trying to prove a theory by gathering the views of every employer, teacher or young person; I was interested in the views of a contrasting group of people in each of three sectors. I was keen to find groups of people with both similar and different experiences within the three groups. Cohen et al. (2011) suggested that, in qualitative research, emphasis was placed on the uniqueness of a set of participants or phenomena so it was more appropriate to talk in terms of groups or individuals rather than a sample set. This was the case in my research as I was looking for participants within three broad categories that had differing experiences in the area of skills teaching and acquisition.

I decided a manageable group of participants would include:

- five to ten businesses

- up to five sets of five young people to interview as a group

- one teacher in up to five contrasting schools.

This number of participants would also provide a degree of diversity in business sectors, school type, and experience and expertise of interviewees.

3.3.2 How representative is the sample set?

In terms of time available and travel, the geographic spread of the participants had to be manageable. I decided to focus the study on York and North Yorkshire, and West Yorkshire. The two areas are quite different. North Yorkshire is England's largest county but has a population of only about 630,000 (2011 Census). The main towns, Harrogate, Scarborough and York have populations of around 157,900, 108,800 and 198,000 respectively. The rest of the population is spread over more than 800,000 hectares. It is a mainly rural county with the principal industries being agriculture, mineral extraction, power generation and tourism. It has low unemployment and a large number of small or medium sized businesses. It is an affluent county with some pockets of deprivation in rural and coastal areas.

West Yorkshire is made up of metropolitan district councils (Bradford, Calderdale, Kirklees, Leeds, Wakefield). Most of these districts have average levels of deprivation although Bradford and inner city Leeds have areas of high or multiple-deprivation. The average age of people living in Bradford is 34 so it has a young population. West Yorkshire has many service businesses and some rural areas. (Office of National Statistics, 2013).

In general, there are more large employers in West Yorkshire than in North Yorkshire. The financial sector is well represented in Leeds and the county now has many service-based companies as well as some traditional manufacturing companies. North Yorkshire has more small and medium sized businesses. Often these businesses are family-owned.

The two counties are different in terms of education. In 2011, York and North Yorkshire had 98 secondary schools, of which 25% were independent schools and there were no sponsored academies. Leeds had 43 secondary schools, of which 13% were independent and 10% were sponsored academies. Bradford had 41 secondary schools, 29% were independent schools, and 10% sponsored academies. Sponsored academies tended to be in areas of high deprivation.

3.3.3 Accessing the sample set

Initially, when starting the research project, purposive sampling appeared to be the most appropriate approach. I decided to target specific companies for "the most information rich cases" (Arthur, 2012). I drafted a wish list of organisations to interview representing different employment sectors including the National Health Service, the Museums Sector, Food Manufacturing, Construction and Creative and Media. Although I have a lot of business contacts, initially I contacted businesses with which I had had no prior contact; my aim was to avoid bias that might come from previous experience with an organisation. I took the same approach with schools. Cohen et al. (2011) cite access to participants as a key issue for the researcher and this certainly proved to be the case.

As I had no prior knowledge of the organisations, I contacted gatekeepers (receptionists in schools and businesses) in the first instance explaining that I was a student. They were not prepared to pass my request on or provide further information that I could follow up. In the middle of a recession the receptionists explained that employees were too busy to spare half an hour to talk to me. With schools, I also had

the same experience although for different reasons. The receptionists were not sure to

whom I should speak or they were following a policy of not passing on unsolicited calls.

According to Cohen et al., (2011) gatekeepers:

> may provide or block access; they may steer the course of a piece of
> research 'shepherding the field worker in direction or another'
> (Hammersley and Atkinson, 1983: 65) or exercise surveillance over the
> research. (p. 168)

I decided to change tack and use my business, school and social contacts to find

suitable people to interview. As I had some connection to the organisation, I was able

to persuade the gatekeepers to provide access. When talking to known contacts it was

also much easier to explain the study and what I was trying to achieve. According to

Cohen et al., (2011) this approach was known as snowball sampling, a method that

was based on known social contacts.

> In this respect it reduces, even dissolves, asymmetrical power relations
> between researcher and participants (p. 159)

This tactic worked. Either I was given immediate access to a potential interviewee or I

was able to ask my business and school contacts for suggestions of people who might

be suitable to interview. In this way I found seven employers who were able to spare

time to talk to me. Although this is not a large number, the employers represented

large and small businesses in a variety of employment sectors, in both North and West

Yorkshire.

Most of my contacts were aware of the subject of my thesis so the contacts

themselves or the companies they suggested may have had a greater interest or

insight into the topic than randomly selected businesses. I asked for introductions to

businesses in different sectors because I was hoping to talk to staff at a senior level

who might have an understanding of employability skills and issues affecting young people, so, to an extent, it was important to talk to people who had some understanding of the issues and how they might relate to their businesses.

The majority of the interviewees were in senior positions as directors or managers of human resources. Although all of the interviews resulted from personal contacts I had only previously met one of the teachers, three employers, and none of the young people. So my prior knowledge was not an issue in terms of bias or expectation and did not influence the questions I asked.

The sample businesses consisted of:

- A construction management company (referred to in the study as: the construction management company)

- A large engineering company in West Yorkshire (the manufacturing company)

- A small engineering design business in North Yorkshire (the engineering design business)

- A large, multi-national fast moving consumer goods company (the food company)

- A small design agency in North Yorkshire (the design agency)

- An office letting business (the office management company)

- A large regional bank (the bank).

3.3.4 How appropriate is the sample set to the research strategy?

Diversity was important to me when interviewing employers because I anticipated different responses from, for instance, large and small businesses and possibly customer-facing businesses and production companies. Diversity was equally important when interviewing young people and teachers. I wanted to interview staff and pupils at: a sponsored academy, a large comprehensive school and an independent school to see if there were significant differences in:

- approach to teaching employability skills

- the aspirations of the young people

- motivations of the teachers.

After contacting the school secretaries, I then used email as the main means of contact with teachers. The teachers had very different roles in the schools but all had some involvement in embedding transferable skills in the curriculum, teaching work-related learning, careers or business studies. All were at a senior level. This was significant, as these teachers may have had more of an insight into the topic than subject specialists who were less conversant with the world of work or business.

The teachers who agreed to be interviewed were:

- Assistant head (English specialist) with responsibility for Teaching and Learning policy throughout the school and a second teacher (music specialist), head of careers, at the independent school

- Business studies teacher at the comprehensive school

- Work-related learning specialist, embedding work related learning skills into the curriculum at the sponsored academy.

The schools agreed to set up interviews with young people for me. I opted for group interviews with the young people. Previous experience of working with children informed my approach. Group interviews can be less intimidating for young people. They can stimulate debate among the group which takes the focus away from an unfamiliar adult asking a question of one young person. A group interview is also easier for teachers to organise as they can gather the young people together, rather than taking individuals out of lessons over a longer period.

I requested groups of between four and five young people in each school preferably in Year 10 or 11. My view was that young people in Year 10 or 11 would be more likely to have considered their future paths than young people in Year 7, for example. Ideally I wanted the young people to be in the same year group, either Year 10 or 11 with a mix of abilities and aspirations, but realised quickly that I would have very little control over which young people would agree to be interviewed. This could have affected the research if, for example, I only had the opportunity to interview young people who were all similar (for example, all confident, all planning to go to university or all planning to study vocational qualifications). This would have provided a skewed picture of young people's experience or views.

During the group interviews, I opted in to include a skills grid (Appendix 1) to facilitate discussion. I explained the purpose of my research, asked a few general questions

about aspiration, plans and work experience. I then suggested that they might like to take a few minutes to look at the skills grid and fill in their thoughts before we discussed the different skills listed. Although few of the young people completed the grid entirely, it did provide enough of stimulus to spark a discussion and all were able to talk about the skills listed and how these skills might be gained and evidenced.

I collected the completed skills grids at the end of the session and this helped to further inform my research. It was particularly useful to have the completed skills grids at the independent school, as I had not been allowed to record the interviews. The grids provided a written record of the young people's thoughts. The completed grids were also useful for comparing feedback from the three different schools. The grid was simple to complete and did not require strong literacy skills.

3.4 Ethics

Before embarking on data collection, I was aware that I would have to take into account a number of ethical issues not simply because I was planning to interview young people, teachers and employers. Creswell (2009) outlined key ethical concerns for researchers:

> Researchers need to protect their research participants; develop a trust
> with them; promote the integrity of the research; guard against misconduct
> and impropriety that might reflect on their organisations or institutions.
> (p. 87)

The subject of my research project was not particularly sensitive or controversial but it was possible that teachers and employers may have felt unable to speak freely if their

views were to be attributed to them by name and company or school. I was seeking their personal views, not the views of the organisations that employed them.

3.4.1 Informed consent

Bell (2006) advocated contacting participants in writing prior to an interview, outlining the scale and nature of the project. In this way, she suggested, they have time to consider all the implications of agreeing to the project. Cohen et al. (2011) identified three main ethical areas of concern when conducting interviews for research projects: informed consent, confidentiality and any consequences that might arise from the interview.

By email, I assured the employers and teachers of confidentiality and anonymity. I explained how the interview would be used and sought their informed consent for the interview. I asked for permission to record the interview, explaining that I would provide a transcript for their approval and that none of the interviewees would be identified in the research. Six companies agreed to this format, one agreed to complete the interview questions in writing with the promise to follow up any further questions I might have.

The interviews covered a range of diverse areas so it was appropriate to record and transcribe each interview to have an accurate record of what each participant said. In this way I had expected that the data would be protected from any misinterpretation or misunderstanding from inaccurate notes. In fact some of the language used meant that the transcriptions, in some cases, appeared to contradict what the interviewees

had actually intended to say. Interviewees were free to correct any misunderstandings that occurred through the interviews but all signed off the interviews with minimum amendments. Teachers were happy with the same level of assurance offered to the businesses.

3.4.2 Ethical research issues and young people

Ethical issues with young people who were under 18 may have influenced my ability to collect data. The interviews with young people in the schools were held at:

- the comprehensive school, in one half of a hall as an enterprise activity was taking place in the other half of the hall

- the sponsored academy, in a classroom but a teacher was present throughout, sitting directly behind me

- the independent school, in a small study in the music department, with a chaperone who was not a teacher.

These situations afforded a safe environment for both the young people and myself in terms of safeguarding procedures. It is possible that the presence of teachers or other adults from the school may have influenced the way the young people interacted with me. The schools sought permission from parents before the interviews could take place with the young people and the teachers approved the transcriptions/notes of the interviews.

3.5 Research in practice

The semi-structured individual interviews with employers and teachers were relatively straightforward to: conduct, record, transcribe, submit for approval and agree. I

interviewed all the participants at their places of work, so they were relaxed and I was able to gather a lot of data about the business from observation. Having some experience of interviewing, I decided to record the interviews and transcribe them. In this way I could be sure that I had both an accurate record of the interview and rich data sets. Cohen et al. (2011) suggested that transcribing direct speech not only provides an accurate record but it also provides additional data in terms of the language chosen by the interviewee. Staff at the independent school declined my request to record the interviews, so I made sure I was able to write up my notes immediately after the interviews. In addition to making notes of what was said, I also made notes about my impressions of the participants and the situations of the interviews as an aide memoire for when I came to analyse the data. My aim was to maintain my objectivity but it is possible that this approach may have lead to a more subjective and less objective view of the data.

Interviews with young people were more difficult to set up in the state schools. All three schools were able to provide groups of Year 10 pupils. The independent school was able to set up the interviews with teachers and young people within weeks of my request. The young people, although studying for GCSEs, were taken out a music lesson. I was not able to interview the young people at either of the state schools until the end of the summer term when they could be taken out of activities that were off timetable. This ruled out young people in Year 11 as they had completed GCSEs and effectively left school.

The independent school provided two groups of young people, the first considered to be more academic than the second, although as the school selected its pupils on academic ability this may have been an arbitrary distinction. The two state schools both provided one small group of four or five young people representing a range of ability and aspiration.

In terms of numbers, the comprehensive school and the sponsored academy committed to four and five young people respectively:

- two girls and two boys in Year 10 from the comprehensive school.

- five girls from Year 10.

The independent school provided two groups of four young people.

In order to find out if young people recognised employability skills I used a semi-structured interview technique in a group interview situation. According to Cohen et al. (2011)

> Group interviewing can be useful with children, as it encourages interaction between the group rather than simply a response to an adult's question. Group interviews of children might also be less intimidating for them than individual interviews (Grieg and Taylor 1999:132). (p. 433)

The group interview was the appropriate choice for this element of the research project. The young people discussed their views among themselves and with me. They encouraged each other to speak and they listened to each other's viewpoints. The young people in the sponsored academy were more reticent than those from the other schools and initially I wondered if this was due to lack of confidence but in retrospect, it may have been due to the presence of the teacher who was acting as chaperone but sitting directly behind me. Cohen et al. (2011) advocate getting the "children's teacher

away from the children" (p. 434). In hindsight it may have been better to interview them with a chaperone present who was not a teacher.

3.6 Data analysis

Analysing the interviews was a complex process. I was only able to pilot the interview questions with the businesses but it was much more difficult to carry out pilots with the schools because of time constraints and access to students. Part of the analysis process began during the interviews themselves as I became aware of recurring themes, contradictions and viewpoints. These initial observations helped to identify areas on which to focus. According to Cohen et al. (2011), data analysis could be a complex process with a conflict between focusing on the detail whilst maintaining enough of an overview to identify themes and conclusions.

3.7 Summary

The data I had collected was very rich and the contradictions were as interesting as the views that concurred. The simplest way of presenting the data would have been: teachers think X; employers think Y; and young people's experience suggests Z. However by comparing feedback on themes, a more informative picture was created. In order to make sense of the data, I drafted the findings into chapters and then went back to the literature with specific themes in mind to see if my findings differed or concurred with the findings academic research and policy documents.

In the next chapters I explore the findings in detail, looking specifically at:

- What the participants understand by the term employability skills.

- How teachers teach these skills and if young people understand why these

  skills are important

- How and why employers engage with schools.

Chapter 4: Defining employability skills

This chapter explores the term 'employability skills' and what it means to businesses, teachers and young people with the aim of defining the term and identifying any gaps in understanding between the three groups of people. Having conducted a literature review, I found little academic research relating specifically to employability skills and young people in schools, although there was far more grey literature. Employability skills appeared to have superseded core skills or key skills. There had been a few attempts by politicians and the CBI to define these skills by providing lists. There appeared to be a move towards looking at employability skills in terms of skills required to secure employment throughout a working life that would be more flexible than had previously been the case. The implication was that careers would involve several jobs and short-term contracts rather than one job for life. Employers also appeared to acknowledge that young people needed support in entering the employment market.

4.1 Defining and understanding 'employability skills'.

My starting point in the research project was to explore how employers and teachers used the term employability skills and what they understood the term to mean. Through interviews, I put the question to staff in seven companies and four teachers in three schools. Tables 1 and 2 provide descriptions of the interviewees and their professional contexts.

Company	Business sector/type	Interviewee
Construction management company	National construction management company employing staff mainly in management roles	Education officer
Manufacturing company	Large engineering company in West Yorkshire with over 200 skilled workers and managers	Human resources manager
Engineering design company	Small engineering design business in North Yorkshire with twelve employees	Director
Food company	Large, multinational fast moving consumer goods company	Talent and human resources manager
Design agency	Small design agency in North Yorkshire	Managing director
Office management company	Medium sized office letting business in North Yorkshire	Director
Bank	Large regional bank	Head of retail banking

Table 1: Interviews with employers

School Sector/Type	Interviewee
Selective independent school York	Assistant head teacher Head of careers/music teacher
Sponsored academy West Yorkshire	Business studies teacher Manager of local Education business partnership
Comprehensive school West Yorkshire	Business studies teacher

Table 2: Interviews with teachers

4.1.1 Who would use the term 'employability skills' and why?

Three of the seven employers and one teacher said they would use the term

'employability skills'. The employers who said they would use the term regularly

worked directly with schools. All three were at different levels in the companies: the

first was an education officer working for the construction management company, the

second was a human resources specialist looking to recruit talent into the food

company and the third was head of retail banking (the bank) and member of the

Chamber of Commerce with a commitment to interesting young people in business. The only teacher who said she would use the term specialised in education/business links and was working with the sponsored academy to embed employability skills into the curriculum from Year 7 to Year 13 and actively encouraged businesses to work with the school. This suggested that the people who regularly used the term 'employability skills' had an interest in education business partnership activity and were aware of the employability agenda.

All four individuals characterised employability skills as a combination of hard and soft skills, echoing the views of a number of organisations and commentators (Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Rudiger, 2013; Wolf, 2002). The teacher's comments focused largely on confidence. Working in an area of multiple-deprivation, many of the young people she worked with lacked confidence outside of their immediate environment. The school had a problem with attendance but the young people who did attend school achieved higher than average GCSE and A' level results and often went on to study at Russell Group universities. The school had employed this teacher because of her expertise in business education links. Her role was to embed employability skills throughout the curriculum to make obvious and direct links between subjects taught and how they related to the world of work for the young people. She worked with a defined model to achieve this, which focused on 13 different skills (Appendix 5). This teacher engaged employers to set business projects for young people at school from Year 7 to Year 13 and to provide feedback. She was creating a work-based context for learning.

When asked to define employability skills she described them as: "the skills that prepare [young people] for life, so all the soft skills". She reflected that teaching employability skills did not work in a vacuum. It was more important to work on young people's self-confidence because, she said, "unless they have confidence they are not going to be able to articulate views and opinions. They are not going to be self-managers, use their initiative." So although this teacher was delivering a model that focused on teamwork, leadership etc, her main concern was building the confidence of the young people with whom she was working. Brown and Hesketh (2004) talked about a subjective dimension to approaching the employment market. They suggested that the type of work people tried to gain was closely associated with their sense of self and social identity. They also suggested that subjectivity did not apply just to people seeking work but also to those looking to employ people so building the confidence of these young people was extremely important if they were to be able to enter the employment market.

4.1.2 Skills and confidence

Atkins (2009) explored the theme of skills teaching and parity of esteem for young people. She suggested that low achieving young people were encouraged to pursue vocational qualifications that limited their life chances. This was different from the teacher's approach in that she was using the context of work to teach academic subjects. She believed by showing young people how learning related to success in the work place, they would be motivated to study and achieve. She also suggested that introducing young people to business people would develop confidence and communication skills. She suggested that simply talking to people from outside of

school would be a challenge for some young people. The business-related activity she

advocated was aimed at all of the young people in the school not just the low

achievers.

The education officer at the construction management company also made reference

to the importance of confidence. She defined employability skills as the "Skills people

need to get a job" but she went on to say that these skills were tied into confidence

and personality. When pushed further, she said that the skills needed by the

construction management company were: "the ability to team work, to be able to

communicate in a professional manner and problem solving." She suggested that

these skills related to personality traits:

> teamwork and communication is just something people have got or they
> haven't. Either they want to work as part of team or they don't.

This appeared to be an acknowledgement that it was very difficult to teach these skills

from scratch but that they could be developed. She went on to say that if young

people were able to demonstrate a willingness to work in a team or problem solve, the

company could then work with them to develop these skills in a professional context.

> A lot of it is about personality. It is hard to quantify exactly how you would
> identify each skill, but if someone has confidence they can usually talk
> about their skills which then inspires me with confidence that they have
> those skills.

This type of circular argument could be described an illustration of what Brown

and Hesketh (2004) refer to as "the science of gut feeling" (p. 91). This manager

could not define what she was looking for but the ability to imbue her with

confidence was as important as being able to demonstrate actual skills or

knowledge. The human resources manager in the food company described

employability skills as "the basics". She included literacy and numeracy in "the

basics" but she went on to say it involved:

> Knowing how to dress appropriately, being able to hold a conversation,
> being able to maintain eye contact in an interview. Also there's an aspect
> around curiosity for individuals.

She was talking about young people aged 16 to 18 but stressed that her comments

related equally to graduates who, she suggested, often gave the impression that

having a degree was the only qualification they needed to secure employment. She

also implied that being highly qualified did not mean young people would be able to

function effectively in the work place.

> We don't expect them to be the complete package coming in. I think it is
> just knowing that there is something we can work with.

> [There] are young people with straight As at A' Level, As at GCSE and First
> class honours degrees [who] just can't hold a conversation.

This echoed the views of Overtoom (2000) who advocated "functional and

enabling knowledge, skills and attitudes" in graduates, not just academic

achievement.

The interviewee from the bank was a company director and member of the Chamber

of Commerce. He defined employability skills as falling into two categories:

> Skills as in knowledge, ability to undertake a role of any type.
> Attitude and communication skills.

He suggested it was important to have knowledge and skills on one side but emotional

intelligence was more important, adding: "You can teach skills but you can't teach

attitude and passion".

These views reflected the literature as they referenced a range of skills and attitudes but a clear definitive explanation did not emerge. The definitions included emotional intelligence, academic achievement, a range of skills, confidence, curiosity, being able to hold a conversation and the ability to dress appropriately. This perhaps reflects that employability skills need to equip young people with skills for life, and a flexible and evolving working environment.

4.1.3 General understanding of employability skills

All of the other employers and teachers provided definitions of what they understood employability skills to mean. Although they used different language, they mainly identified skills and attitudes:

- Business awareness – knowing how businesses work
- Communication skills – making eye contact, writing a letter, composing an email, communication over the phone, communication face to face, not using text speak, use of social media, presentation (how to dress, behaviour) language, listening skills, following instructions.
- Organisational skills
- Problem solving (mentioned particularly by the engineering and construction companies)
- Planning
- Presentation skills
- Teamwork

- Technology – being computer literate and understanding the difference between business and social use of social media

- Time management.

This list largely reflected the CBI definition (2012) which acknowledged that employability skills were more than a definitive list of skills. Only one employer mentioned leadership and the ability to multi-task as being important, possibly because these skills were not of immediate importance to young people entering the workplace; it is unlikely that a 16 year old will be expected to be a team leader immediately. Wolf (2002) suggested debates around skills were largely political constructs and that although important for employers, they were not the prime considerations for an education system.

Although the teachers at the independent school and the comprehensive school both said they would not use the term employability skills, both worked to embed skills throughout the entire curriculum. The models used by the teachers covered most of the skills and attributes described by the employers. Skills such as: teamwork, communication skills, problem solving etc., are embedded throughout the curriculum but the teachers described them as transferable skills in the independent school and enterprise skills in the comprehensive school. The teacher at the independent school recognised that it was unlikely that young people would go into a job for life and so would need the skills to help them navigate a range of employment situations. This suggested a greater understanding of the competitive nature of highly skilled employment. Brown and Hesketh (2004) pointed out that employability was a major concern of the middle classes:

The demand for high skilled, high waged jobs has been exaggerated. But it is something that governments want to believe because it distracts attention from thorny political issues around equality, opportunity, and redistribution. If it is assumed that there are plenty of good jobs for people with the appropriate credentials then the issue of who gets the best jobs loses its political sting. But if good jobs are in limited supply, how the competition for a livelihood is organized assumes paramount importance. This issue is not lost on the middle classes, given they depend on academic achievement to maintain, if not advance, the occupational and social status of family members. (p. 7)

This school's priority was preparing its young people to secure a place at top universities which would then lead on to highly skilled or highly paid employment.

Table 3 shows the skills that the teachers thought should be embedded into the curriculum at the three schools. It would appear that there was common understanding around the skills required by businesses and the skills teachers were keen to embed in the curriculum. This implied that if businesses and schools had a common understanding, both sectors should be aware of the skills required by young people. Both sectors should be equipped then to teach or share these skills. The difficulty comes when looking at requirements that are more difficult to define.

Skill	Independent	Academy	Comprehensive
Business awareness			✓
Communication	✓	✓	✓
Creativity and communication		✓	
Decision making and problem solving		✓	✓
Economic awareness			✓
Financial literacy		✓	✓
Initiative		✓	
Leadership			✓
Make judgements on issues with an economic and ethical dimension		✓	
Motivation			✓
Multi task			
Negotiating and influencing		✓	
Organisational skills		✓	
Positive attitude		✓	
Presentation	✓		
Responsibility	✓		
Risk management		✓	
Teamwork		✓	✓
Time management	✓		
Technology	✓		

Table 3: The skills considered to be important by schools.
Shaded area shows the skills that schools consider important.

4.2 Employability skills or personal capital?

The employers had identified similar skills to those in Table 3. However, entwined in the answers about employability skills from employers were a number of less-easily defined attributes or personality traits that the employers felt to be important. The phrases included:

Ability to apply themselves	Enthusiasm	Mindset	Punctuality
Aptitude	Experience	Motivation	Prepared to go the extra mile
Common sense	Good humour	Open to learning	A smile
Confidence	Interests outside of work Good work/life balance	Passion to succeed	Softer skills and knowledge needed in the working environment
Curiosity	Hunger	Personal hygiene	Willingness to turn up everyday
Desire	Ability to live life at work	Personality	Would I employ this person?
Drive	Knowing how to dress	Positivity	

Table 4: Abstract attributes or qualities offered as definitions of employability skills

The phrases were interesting and could be classified as relating mainly to: communication, motivation, presentation, teamwork and time management. However looking at these skills in detail, it could easily be argued that these are not just employability skills but what Brown and Hesketh (2004) refer to as "personal capital", expecting employees to give of themselves to be able to secure employment:

> The value employers attach to both hard and soft currencies depends on how they are packaged as a *narrative* of employability. This involves being able to present one's experiences, character, and accomplishments in ways that conform to the competence profiles scrutinized by employers. Elite employability is no longer a by-product of elite class membership. The self has to be packaged as a life story full of productive promise. (p. 36)

In times of high unemployment, employers appeared to be asking for similar narratives for relatively low skilled and entry-level posts.

4.3 Broad agreement on the definition and teaching of skills?

On the surface it would seem that the teachers and employers agreed on what the term 'employability skills' broadly encompassed and it would also seem that employability skills were being taught in schools. However, three of the four teachers I talked to had some involvement in teaching work-related learning, careers or business studies and they were keen to talk to me about the subject. I talked to one deputy head teacher whose subject was English. She was tasked with embedding transferable skills into the whole of the school curriculum so all of the teachers had an interest in developing transferable skills.

The two business studies teachers had extensive experience of working with or in business and both doubted whether all of their colleagues would have the same appreciation of what employers were looking for. The teacher from the sponsored academy made the following observation:

> Teachers would say that employers want good team workers, good communicators and they talk about problem solving although if you ask them to unpick what they mean by problem solving, they would probably struggle in the context of their subject… I think teachers tend to think, 'What do I want a young person to look like' so they'll look at the attitudes as well as that makes them more employable…
>
> So part of the work that we've done here is saying: what you [teachers] want a young person to look like; that is what an employer needs them to be.

The teacher at the comprehensive school was very clear about teaching enterprise

skills but her comments reflected concerns about the nature of the education system,

assessment and how she would measure progress in skills:

> It is very hard to measure progress in teamwork for example, and in schools, especially with OFSTED criteria, we have to be able to measure progress. Now how do you measure somebody's progress of working in a team? If you want me to teach economics, then it is easy to measure the progress of a student in that subject. We deliver teamwork and communication in Year 8. But it is hard to do and you don't know if you are just reinforcing the skills they already have or encouraging new skills. So if a child is good at working in a team, maybe he or she has always been good at working in a team.

> A lot of it is about drawing attention to the skills for the students so that they can be aware that they are using the skills and they do have them. Confidence is different. I think you can definitely take confidence away from people, but I also think you can give it.

There appeared to a difference between teachers understanding employability skills

and being able to show progression in these skills. The independent school did not

teach employability skills but focused on transferable skills within the National

Curriculum, extra-curricula activities and examination subjects:

> Through their time here, in nearly all of their subjects, students will be encouraged to work in a wide variety of ways. This will include regular group work with a wide range of seating plans and regular movement so that students don't always work in the same pairs or groups. They will be encouraged to take a lead, and also to listen sensitively and help develop others' points. There will be structured activities - debates, discussions, projects (group or individual) - and also individual investigative work.

This teacher said that a combination of teaching the National Curriculum well

and providing imaginative extra activities adequately catered for the teaching

of skills alongside academic subjects.

4.4 Summary

When asked to define employability skills both businesses and schools talked about similar skills, attributes and behaviours and within this rather vague context, there was broad agreement on what the term employability skills meant. The definitions largely focused on supply side interpretations of employability skills, the skills young people needed to demonstrate in order to secure a job. All three schools were working to give young people the skills for life that would enable them to function in the world after school, but all were approaching the teaching of skills differently, possibly reflecting the very different backgrounds, confidence, ambitions and expectations of the young people in the three schools.

The next chapter explores different models used to teach or develop employability skills in young people and looks at the importance or otherwise of a vocational context for this type of teaching. It also explores young people's awareness of if and how they gain these skills.

Chapter 5: Appropriate models to teach employability skills

The last chapter suggested that teachers and employers understood employability skills to be specific skills and attributes required by young people entering the employment market. There was some acknowledgement that employability skills combined complex and often high level skills or "personal capital", which both teachers and employers considered to be important for young people to gain employment. Employability skills were defined in terms of a supply-side issue, that is, the responsibility to gain employability skills lay with potential employees not employers. The three participating schools used different models to teach employability skills and each school referred to them differently. In this chapter I explore:

- The context in which the schools operate

- What success means for each of the schools

- The choice of the three different models

- The efficacy of the models in teaching employability skills

- Working with business to develop employability skills.

I assess the feedback from young people within the schools to see whether or not young people recognise that they have developed employability or transferable skills as a result of the methods used in the different schools.

5.1 Context of the schools

The schools were all within twenty miles of each other but the young people attending each school came from different socio-economic environments. The three schools

referred to the skills being taught as transferable, employability or business and enterprise and all adopted different models to teach these skills. There appeared to be a direct correlation between the selection policy of the school, the catchment area and its choice of model to teach these skills.

The three schools taking part in this research project attracted young people from contrasting communities. The independent school selected its pupils on academic ability. It was based in an historic town that was ranked in the lowest quintile when looking at areas of deprivation in the UK, so relatively affluent although there were pockets of deprivation. It recruited pupils from the local area but also from further afield in the UK and internationally. The sponsored academy served an area in the top 1% of the most deprived areas in the country. Most of the young people attending this school lived locally so were exposed to the effects of deprivation (UK Local Area Statistics, Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2010). In government figures on Super Output Areas, this community consistently appeared in the lowest ten per cent for: income, employment, health, education, living environment and crime. However, the school achieved a score of 997 for value added which is average for schools in the UK so despite the levels of deprivation the school is able to provide a good score for value added (Department for Education School Performance Tables, 2012).

The comprehensive school was based in a small market town and served rural, urban and professional communities. This town was ranked slightly lower than the city of the independent school in terms of multiple-deprivation. Its value added score was slightly higher than the sponsored academy at 1006 (Department for Education School

Performance Tables, 2012). Young people attending this school lived in the immediate area but also travelled from villages within five to ten miles of the school. The independent school was the only one of the three schools that had a policy of selecting young people on academic ability so this may have had some bearing on the level of academic success.

There was a contrast in the catchment areas for the schools. The sponsored academy was in one of the most deprived areas of the country and the young people attending this school largely lived in this community. The young people attending the independent school and the comprehensive school came from a much wider catchment area. Although some young people did live in the immediate area of the two schools many travelled or, in the case of the independent school, boarded. It is safe to say that the catchment areas for the comprehensive and the independent schools were more affluent than that of the sponsored academy (UK Local Area Statistics, Indices of Multiple Deprivation 2010).

This may have indicated a hierarchy of need for the young people in the three schools in terms of the skills they required when leaving school aged 17 or 18. It is quite probable that the young people at the sponsored academy had a more urgent need to understand the importance of employability skills if they were to escape poverty. Ainley and Allen (2010) made the following observations:

> … snobbery, racism and sexism permeate an educational hierarchy that completely mirrors the class structure of society topped by its leading fee-paying private schools and ancient universities… Certainly, all teachers know that, as Martell wrote in 1976, 'As you move down the socio-economic class scale, kids read and write less well' (p. 6)

The young people at the sponsored academy lived in an area of deprivation where parents were often out of work or absent, for a variety of reasons. The teacher at this school used the example of one young person to illustrate the types of issues facing these young people and suggested that they had more immediate priorities that conflicted with being model pupils at school:

> This community is very different. I've known children be late. I used to have a student who was late by 20 minutes everyday because he was doing a milk round and then a paper round. So he was up at 4 am doing the milk and then his paper round because his father was in prison. His mum was looking after his sister who had cerebral palsy and they needed the extra income to support them. And then you've got a teacher saying, he's not coming to any of my lessons because he's 20 minutes late. Well, hang on a minute… this kid has been up since 4 and he comes to school everyday of the week because mum says it's really important he's at school. It's about how you get that balance.

This teacher was suggesting that these young people had some understanding of economic issues and the importance of work because they were required to help with family budgets, but the economic needs of the family conflicted with the young person's need to be at school. Many had Saturday jobs or helped out as carers.

5.2 What 'success' means for each of the schools

When asked what success looked like for the school, staff at the independent school said the school's aim was for every child to be "comfortable in their own skin and not to try to be something they are not". In terms of destinations for its young people, 98 to 99% went on to university, which implied that the school considered academic success to be important for almost all of its pupils. It was not surprising that this was the case as the young people at this school were selected on academic ability and all of the young people I interviewed were studying GCSEs in at least 11 subjects.

Teachers said young people who did not choose to go on to university, set up businesses or worked for their parents in business. This was described as parents offering young people a form of apprenticeship in enterprise or in running the family business.

At the sponsored academy, success was considered in similar terms to the independent school in that it was very focused on what was best for each young person. The teacher at this school explained that success meant: "finding the best path for each individual young person". However, she went on to explain that the "best path" may mean encouraging young people to stay on into sixth form but equally it may mean exploring apprenticeships, further education college or foundation learning. This was not the case in the independent school.

At the sponsored academy, staff were very concerned about the futures of the young people. The teacher talked in terms of making sure the young people had sufficient qualifications and skills to "survive" after leaving school; in the independent school, teachers and young people talked about having the skills to "succeed". The sponsored academy had a problem with attendance but the young people who actually attended the school tended to thrive. Fifty per cent of young people staying on into sixth form achieved three A' level passes and many young people went on to study at Russell Group universities. The school had also developed relationships with local universities to help young people pursue higher education in a way that would keep costs to a minimum by allowing them to live at home and work in part-time, appropriate employment whilst studying. Despite the difficulties faced by these young people,

which were typical of those described by Brown and Hesketh, (2004) "lack of money for books, often cramped housing conditions, and poor local job prospects, placing them at a distinct disadvantage", this school appeared to be putting in place strategies to support young people beyond school either through business connections or access to higher education, acting almost as guardian beyond the school life of the young person.

Although the schools were quite different, two of the three had similar ambitions for its young people, saying the interests of the young person were paramount. The teacher interviewed at the comprehensive school said, in her view, the numbers of young people going on to university was the school's mark of success but that this might change in light of the increase in university fees and the amount of debt young people might incur in pursuing this route. This is echoed by Ainley and Allen (2010):

> The escalating cost of a university education combined with worsening
> employment opportunities and increased accommodation costs as part of
> the overall housing crisis. This has resulted in… new forms of dependency
> by young people on their parents. (p. 7)

Financial background may have some bearing on the qualifications on offer to the young people but this may equally be a reflection of the selection policy of the independent school. The state schools took young people of all abilities and interests and so offered a broader range of qualifications than the independent school. This does necessarily mean that young people were studying qualifications that were of little value or gave a false sense of achievement as suggested by Wolf (2011), but the secondary school teacher did talk about vocational qualifications being offered to

young people who were in danger of disengaging in an attempt to keep them interested in education, which feeds in to Atkin's (2009) argument.

5.3 The choice of the three different models

When asked about how the schools teach employability skills, each school approached the topic differently. All had different views on the significance and models used.

5.3.1 Teaching transferable skills at the independent school

The deputy head teacher at the independent school was responsible for the curriculum in the school and tried to embed transferable skills throughout the curriculum. She preferred to use the term 'transferable skills' rather than 'employability skills' even though she believed most young people would have had 14 jobs by the time they were 30, reflecting the views of Ainley and Allen (2010) and Brown and Hesketh (2004) that young people would be entering a very different working environment from that experienced by their parents. She also considered General Studies to be an important subject because she believed this subject gave young people a broader knowledge/view of the world. The deputy head teacher suggested young people were able to gain and practise skills as a result of imaginative teaching of the National Curriculum and extra-curricula activity. This included regular group work, changing seating plans in class to ensure young people mixed within their peer group. Young people were encouraged to take a lead, and also to listen sensitively and help develop others' points. In addition there were structured activities: debates, discussions, projects (group or individual) and individual,

investigative work. She explained that the National Curriculum advocated skills teaching as part of a child's development.

She viewed transferable skills as: leadership, literacy, numeracy, knowledge about the world, report writing, social skills and communication. She stressed that employability skills were not just about how to write a CV but how to conduct an interview, a telephone interview, the importance of body language, speaking and listening skills.

Young people at the independent school had lessons timetabled on Saturday morning that meant they were unable to obtain work experience through Saturday jobs, unlike their state school counterparts. The school provided opportunities for young people to gain transferable skills through the curriculum but also through volunteering with local charities and participation in a number of projects such as putting on drama productions around the school. The school considered this type of activity to be excellent for teamwork, leadership, project management and confidence, all of which have been described by employers as employability skills.

The teachers were very clear that the school did not devote much time to work-related learning. Parents provided work experience opportunities and were keen to help with employability skills by carrying out mock interviews or using connections to get work placements in the holidays for their own children and for the children of other parents they knew through the school. The teachers said the school was lucky because parents would only offer this type of support to children from the independent school and not to children from other schools in the area. Brown and Hesketh (2004) discussed the

"veneer of employability" suggesting that it could be used to hide a range of agendas and strategies to protect the interests of young people from middle class families.

As mentioned earlier, if there were lots of good jobs available, increasing access to higher education and improving employability skills for all would not be an issue, however if good jobs were in short supply but more people were accessing higher education then the competition for these jobs became a real issue:

> The reality is that increasing congestion in the market place for knowledge workers has led to growing middle-class anxieties about how their offspring are going to meet the rising threshold of employability that now has to be achieved to stand any realistic chance of finding interesting and rewarding employment. The result is a bare-knuckle struggle for access to elite schools, colleges, universities and jobs. (p. 7)

It would appear that parents of young people at the independent school were only prepared to offer support to other young people at the school, so protecting and promoting the interests of their offspring. When asked how many young people from the independent school could be described as work ready by the end of Key Stage 4 she suggested "very few", but in many ways, being work ready was not a priority as the majority of these young people would go onto higher education and would be supported by the school's network if they required work experience.

5.3.2 Young people's awareness of transferable skills in the independent school

Interviews with young people confirmed the narrative of the teachers. In the independent school, I interviewed two groups of four or five young people: the first group were considered to be academic and the second were considered to be less so, although all of the young people were studying GCSEs in 11 subjects. I interviewed the young people in the music block and all were studying music at GCSE. Throughout the

interviews I was accompanied by a chaperone, who was not a teacher, and the young people talked quite freely.

The first group of young people said they would go on to study A' levels because they intended to go to university. They were all studying 11 or 12 subjects at GCSEs. All were studying Latin and music. One student wanted to be a midwife but later talked about being a doctor, another definitely wanted to be a paediatrician, the other two weren't sure of career choice.

In the second group, all boys, two were planning to go on to study A' levels. One boy said he wasn't academically clever so would probably go to a further education college to study music, another boy said he loved music and wanted to go to further education college to study music. Although this group of boys seemed a little less confident than the first group, all were studying 11 subjects at GCSEs. All took part in the discussion.

The young people in both groups appeared to be motivated and talked about what they needed to be successful in life. All but two said they would go to university. One said that employers would not take on people without a degree, underlining the perception discussed by Ainley & Allen (2010); Brown & Hesketh (2004) and Wolf (2011) that a degree was now a minimum requirement for employment. One girl said she hadn't really thought about what she wanted to do but she would go on to university because it felt too soon to leave the comfort and protection of school and education behind. All said that they would consider university, as this would give them the best chance to succeed in life. They were all interested in a gap year.

The young people had experience of volunteering but they had limited work experience. One young person worked for his friend's parents and another two worked in their parents business for pocket money. One girl said she was given jobs to do in her parents' company that no-one else was prepared to do and that these jobs were boring. Even so, these young people had direct access to businesses and business people.

The young people all cited skills gained through sport, group activities or music as employability skills. The young people could see the relevance of most of the employability skills we discussed apart from financial awareness. One boy suggested that only managers or business owners needed to have financial awareness because "if you don't have money you don't need to know how to manage it." This indicated that although the young people had some knowledge of the employability skills, their understanding might be limited.

These young people appeared to be very bright and confident and, perhaps not surprisingly considering their age, appeared to have a very limited world-view. However, it appeared these young people were aware that they were gaining life skills and employability skills through both curriculum and extra-curricular learning at the school.

5.3.3 Careers education

The music teacher at this school was also tasked with providing the careers service. He bought in the services of the Independent Schools Careers Organisation (ISCO) to

provide specialist advice to young people. Through ISCO, the school offered young

people the opportunity to take the Morrisby test, which provided an insight into which

career best matched their talents. There was a follow up session with Year 11 on A

level choices. Parents could subscribe to ISCO after school but most found that the

university careers service helped students to find careers. ISCO had regional advisers

who supported the school by carrying out mock interviews, and providing an

introduction to Higher Education. ISCO provided support via email, its helpdesk or

phone to young people navigating the higher education system, with advice on how to

choose a higher education course, how to write a personal statement, what to look for

in a university and when to apply. This contrasted with the Coalition Government's

decision to devolve careers education from a central service into individual schools

(Education Act 2011) with the result that most schools did not offer a careers service

at all. (Richardson, 2012)

5.3.4 Embedding employability skills at the sponsored academy

The teacher at the sponsored academy was the head of the local education business

partnership but had been employed by the school specifically to make the link

between the curriculum and its relevance to future employment opportunities. The

model progressed from Year 7 to Year 13 and beyond. Young people were taught in

such a way that they could see how subjects related to the world of work. Every

subject was given a business context: for example, an ICT lesson might be followed by

a project set by a local business that involved designing a website. The project

provided the context so young people could see the relevance of learning that

particular subject beyond school. The teacher explained:

> If they are working in maths you would expect them to be looking at
> problem solving which they have done but now they are looking at a project
> which is with AGFA which wont be about maths, it will be about project
> management, because it is the same skill set. It is about using a
> mathematical skill set in a different way. It is putting it in a different
> context.

The model was also used to tackle misconceptions teachers might have about

employability skills, for example: the difference between group work and teamwork.

The teacher explained that when teachers began to unravel what teamwork might

look like in the context of a subject, it could be quite complicated. Each year, each

subject teacher worked with a local business on a project focusing on the Big 13 skills

(Appendix 5) to be taught in this model.

The model provided a drip feed of skills to young people, embedded in the curriculum

throughout their career at school. In addition there were enrichment days: whole days

devoted to business games, working with employers or mock interviews. Each year

group was given a particular skill to focus on so that, by Years 10 and 11, young people

were much more aware of their skills and strengths. As a result of this work, the school

aimed to give young people a clearer understanding of their options and preferences

when they left school. The teacher believed this was a radical approach and that not

many schools offered this model. She suggested it was essential to make the direct link

between learning at school and future career possibilities for these young people.

5.3.5 Young people's awareness of employability skills at the sponsored academy

In this school, I interviewed five girls and although they were very respectful and

polite, it was occasionally difficult to get responses from them. A contributing factor

may have been the presence of the teacher in the room, sitting directly behind me and in full view of the girls. I felt the interview had gone quite badly but the teacher said it had actually gone well because the young people were usually not at all confident speaking to strangers.

The five girls interviewed in this school all had very different ambitions. Two, possibly three, will go onto university and two will take a Level 2 qualification in childcare. Of the three hoping to go on to university, one had ambitions to be an illustrator, the second was unsure of the career she wanted to pursue and the third wanted to be an accountant. These young people were studying a variety of qualifications including GCSEs and Diplomas.

The girls were aware of employability skills and all cited examples of school-based activity when asked to illustrate their own employability skills. They listed speaking in assemblies, school performances or activities in Personal Social and Health Education as examples of presentation skills. They did not however make specific reference to core curriculum subjects such as maths, English etc where business models had been embedded. They remembered one-off business games and events as these seemed to have made an impact on them.

They were able to demonstrate an understanding of employability skills. Motivation, they suggested, was illustrated by turning up on time and getting good grades. Financial awareness was considered to be very important and the young people related experience in this field with enterprise games and activity days. They had

played a game called 'Cashpoints' which mirrors life, where young people have to find a job, earn a salary, and then make decisions about buying or renting a house, buying a car, food, holidays, paying bills, etc. When talking about leadership, they suggested it was not important for everyone to be a leader but it was important for people to communicate well and play their part as a member of a team.

The young people were about to embark on work experience. They had all had to find their own work experience placements and had used their own contacts. The work experience placements were in: shops, a hairdresser's salon, the school's maths department, an office and a nursery. Some were in fields that interested the girls but others had simply been chosen because they were easy to arrange through contacts known to them. This showed similarities between the young people at the independent school in that the young people at the sponsored academy also used their social networks to gain work experience. However, the opportunities on offer to these young people were low paying, low skilled jobs.

5.3.6 Embedding employability skills at the comprehensive school

At the comprehensive school, the teacher interviewed was tasked with making young people aware of business and enterprise skills. Unlike the employers interviewed who described some skills as character traits or being inherent in young people, this teacher believed that the school put a lot of work into developing these skills in young people and in making young people aware that they have these skills.

In Year 7, young people began to work on their "Enterprise Passport", a little booklet which covered seven different skills:

- Teamwork

- Communication

- Problem solving

- Decision-making

- Risk taking

- Financial capability/economic awareness

- Leadership

The young people in Year 7 were given tasks to complete to help them to use a particular skill. They then reflected on when they had used that skill in the past. When they had completed the task and the reflection, they received a stamp in their passport. The aim of the scheme was to help young people to understand a skill that they would need later in life. The teachers also worked on positive reinforcement, telling the young people, for example: "You were a great leader when you were working in that group". According to the teacher, young people remembered specific praise and developed the attitude, "Yes, I can do that".

She went onto say another key issue for schools was that teachers have to measure achievement and progression in young people. She was not sure how she would measure progress in soft skills, for example how to benchmark teamwork and how to measure an improvement. Wryly, she suggested schools should perhaps ask the employers how they measured and improved soft skills in their employees.

5.3.7 Young people's awareness of business and enterprise skills at the comprehensive school

In the comprehensive school, I interviewed a group of two boys and two girls, in a partitioned section of the main hall while a business game was taking place in the other half of the room. The young people I talked to were all quite confident and three of the four had very clear ideas of what they wanted to do when they left school. One wanted to go to drama school, "to be on the stage" but had been encouraged by her parents to have a plan B. The second girl wanted to study Politics, Philosophy and Economics as an undergraduate, continue to study for a Masters in Business Administration and then pursue a career in business with a large public company. One boy wanted to go to further education college to study motor sport engineering. All were studying at least eight subjects at GCSE.

When asked about how they learned about businesses and work the young people said that they remembered enterprise days and having people from businesses coming to talk to them. They had just completed work experience and so this was uppermost in their minds and they were able to talk about their experiences in detail. All were different: one of the boys went to an engineering company which was a close match to his ambition of being a motor sport engineer; one of the girls who wanted to go into corporate business went to a large insurance company where she was given a thorough introduction to the company at all levels; one boy worked as a waiter in an Italian restaurant and felt he had been left to figure things out:

> I had to work out what to do. I wasn't really told. It was in an Italian
> restaurant so people were just shouting at each other. I was a waiter.

One girl had gained retail experience where she felt she had not been given enough responsibility, or trust. All felt the work experiences were useful and meant that they had been given the opportunity to use their skills in a real context. They all suggested two weeks rather than a week and half would have given them a more meaningful experience but appreciated that the school's priority had to be academic work and exam success. When asked in detail about skills that might be considered to be employability skills the young people said that they had opportunities to practise these skills throughout lessons, sport and drama at school.

The young people in both of the state schools talked about the practicalities of fitting in work experience when they were also sitting exams. In both schools the young people stated that exams and coursework should take precedence over work experience. In the independent school this was clearly the case, as it did not offer work experience to young people in Year 10 or 11.

It appeared that the young people were aware that they were learning employability skills in different ways. They were aware that they could learn these skills through sport, public speaking, drama, and normal lessons. Business and enterprise events had made an impression. There was less evidence to suggest that the young people remembered lessons where links had been made with businesses to provide a context for their learning.

5.4 Schools working with businesses

Only the sponsored academy regularly invited employers to work with young people on employability or enterprise skills. The sponsored academy's programme relied heavily on working with employers on activity structured in partnership with the Education Business Partnership (EBP), teachers and employers. The comprehensive school used its local EBP occasionally for work experience health and safety checks and to attend the occasional enterprise event away from school. The independent school did not work with the EBP as it said their services were too expensive. It appeared that the school with the most vulnerable young people worked most closely with businesses, however it could be argued that young people in the other schools had more exposure to businesses but largely through family connections or social networks.

Although none of the employers I interviewed had a direct link with any of the schools participating in this research project, all displayed a commitment to supporting young people in schools. Three of the larger companies had specific education departments or officers with a remit to support their employees in working with schools. One company simply offered work experience and apprenticeships. The three smaller companies all had a commitment from senior management to work with schools. Their aim was to support young people in gaining employability skills through a range of activity including: work experience, internships, community-based projects, business and enterprise games and recruitment skills.

5.5 Summary

The three different schools taught skills in different ways. The independent school focused on transferable skills, embedded throughout the curriculum. The young people here were given the opportunity to test their skills by volunteering and a programme of extra-curricular activity. This school focused on supporting young people to gain the skills to succeed, so the independent school used academic study and extra-curricular activities as the context to teach skills.

The sponsored academy embedded employability skills throughout the curriculum and made links with businesses to illustrate the importance of curriculum learning to the world of work. They were using the context of business to teach the relevance of academic learning. In this school staff supported young people to succeed but there was also a strong focus on ensuring that all had, at the very least, the skills to survive. Young people in all three schools recognised that they could learn employability skills through a variety of means including: enterprise activity, academic study, sport, drama, volunteering, work experience, music and drama. They did not make specific reference to the contextual learning being provided in National Curriculum subjects.

The comprehensive school focused on broadening young people's awareness of the economic world through business and enterprise activity. This school offered business-related activity as one-off enrichment days but embedded skills that could be described as employability skills throughout the curriculum. The teacher at this school was concerned about measuring progress in soft skills and suggested that businesses could support the school in this. It appeared that the young people at this school were

aware that they were being given the opportunity to develop skills that would help them to gain employment but work experience had made a strong impression on them and was affecting their decisions regarding their future careers.

In the next chapter, I explore how businesses engage with schools and if this engagement is designed to support young people in gaining employability skills. This chapter and the previous chapter have shown that a lot of attention was focused on the supply side of employability skills, ensuring young people have the skills they need to survive and/or succeed. In the next chapter I explore the demand side of the issue.

- How are businesses helping young people to gain and sustain employment

- The relevance of qualifications to employment

- Recruitment practices.

I examine what companies offered to schools in detail and how relevant this activity was in terms of the issues actually facing young people hoping to enter the employment market.

Chapter 6: Employers' engagement with schools

In Chapter 5, I explored the different methods used by schools to teach employability skills and how successful these methods appeared to be in terms of young people developing the employability skills. I also briefly touched on employers' willingness to support schools in teaching employability skills. In this chapter I look at businesses' involvement with education in greater detail to see if there is a common understanding of the issues facing young people. As Brown and Hesketh (2004) pointed out: "the acid test of employability is employment". This chapter looks at what businesses are offering in terms of employment opportunities for young people and the selection processes they use with a view to exploring the demand side of employability.

6.1 Business support for young people in schools

The CBI advocated in its 2011 Action for Jobs report (p. 12) that businesses and schools should work together to give teachers a better understanding of work through exchange schemes. They went on to say a business person in each area should be responsible for organizing and encouraging business/school links. They also suggested making access to work experience a right for all 14 to 16 year olds, the narrative behind these measures being that businesses should support the teaching of skills to support young people to gain employability skills. When talking to the employers, all said they had some involvement with schools. All of the companies offered work experience in some form, from the traditional two-week model for young people in Year 10 to internships. Three companies, the largest, (the construction management

company, the food company and the bank), had specific departments to support their employees in working with schools. The three smaller (the engineering design company, the design agency and the office management company) all had a commitment from senior management to work with schools through a range of activities including: enterprise days, business-related talks, internships and community based projects.

6.1.1 Specific business engagement with schools

Most of the companies engaged with schools in a variety of ways for different reasons. The main ways in which they engaged with schools was through:

- Apprenticeships

- Education Business Partnership activity

- Enterprise activities

- Internships

- Mentoring

- Mock Interviews

- Work experience

- Work-related learning

- Young Enterprise.

Several employers volunteered to work on schemes such as Young Enterprise in their own time. Although the employers said they wanted to support young people in learning about the world of work, all said engaging with schools was good for their business. The benefits ranged from finding suitable employees to providing training for

existing staff of all ages. Just as schools considered enterprise activities to be effective in developing employability skills in young people, employers also viewed them as a training tool for their employees. The director of the office management company said that this type of activity helped staff to become "more rounded people in general". These activities were seen as an effective way for employees to develop their soft skills, so there were benefits on both sides.

Several employers grouped activity with schools under the heading corporate social responsibility. The construction management company talked about pressure on the organisation to work with people in society who were struggling to find work. Included in this group were both young people and the long-term unemployed. The pressure described came from the desire to win contracts with local authorities. The company was more likely to win local authority tenders if it provided evidence of working with local people to improve their communities. The company made a deliberate effort to find out about social issues in the area where contracts were available. One example of this was where the company had renovated an old school building in a deprived inner-city area. The building had been turned into an enterprise centre for businesses and start-ups. The company was working with a local school to create a community garden.

This company also worked with local schools, helping young people to write CVs or practise interview skills. The company provided placements in its regional offices and it also offered work experience projects, which were different from the traditional model

of work experience. The company, through its education officer, invited cohorts of students to work on projects based on real commissions for two-week periods.

> We built a Youth Centre. We split the students into teams and we gave them a brief that we had when we started on the project and said this is the brief for the building.

The young people were then tasked with creating design ideas for the building. The education officer provided the young people with budget costs for different materials etc, so they could provide a realistic, costed response to the brief. The construction management company acted as the client and young people presented their ideas on a variety of project-related topics to the company panel. At the end of the presentations one team was awarded the 'contract'.

The construction management company had a variety of reasons for working with schools. The main driver appeared to be winning new business. The company had to demonstrate corporate social responsibility in order to win local government contracts. Undoubtedly, a side effect of this was an involvement with schools that helped young people to gain an insight into the world of work and learn about employability skills. However when talking to the education officer about the skills young people lacked when coming to work for the business she talked about communication skills, teamwork, common sense and the appropriate use of social media, all of which had to be addressed in the work setting.

The director of the engineering design company's motivation was providing support to young people who lacked role models at home. Although he worked in relatively

affluent area, he cited lack of parental support and positive role models as an issue for

young people:

> Half the problem is the support structure is not there for them. I think the
> parents in a lot of cases are no help. They see their parents sat at home
> doing nothing and think if they can sit home and do nothing, why can't I?
> And the government doesn't help by giving them money.

The human resources manager at the manufacturing company and the director at the

bank also touched on this theme. They suggested businesses could provide role

models to young people. The interviewees talked about poor role models blighting

young people's chances, again blaming the supply side of the employability issue

rather than lack of employment opportunities. As we have seen the report on the UK

Parliament website offered a different view of youth unemployment, suggesting that

young people's employment prospects were hardest hit in difficult economic times.

(Potton, 2012)

The manager in the food company said the company had an image problem that

affected its ability to recruit quality staff. Food manufacturing, she suggested, was not

attractive to young people. This was a large multi-national business with a lot of

factories in different geographical locations spread across the UK. It worked with

schools in different ways. The company worked closely with the local further education

college on its apprenticeship scheme. The company also attended open evenings,

careers fairs and it offered its apprentices to give talks in schools about what it was like

to be an apprentice and why they had chosen the apprenticeship route.

The company was planning to expand its work with schools to offer, for example, a "See inside manufacturing" event where the company would invite schools to have a factory tour. The company was about to launch an academy bringing all of its education activity "under one umbrella". Through the academy it was planning to run workshops, highlighting some of the employability skills required by the business to give young people an insight into the business. The company hoped that this type of activity would help in terms of providing an understanding of the skills required and how young people could develop and enhance those skills whilst studying. The company worked with the local education business partnership. They also provided Science, Technology, Engineering and Maths (STEM) ambassadors.

The director of the design agency was the driving force behind this business's commitment to working with schools and universities:

> I have personally benefited from work experience at many different ages. This motivates me and the company to offer it. It's amazing how it can change your life through actual experience. On this basis alone it should be compulsory. Starting work experience in an engaged company at 16 is perfect! But it is a two-way experience and too many organisations just sit a student down and isolate them or get them to do menial jobs. This is not a meaningful experience! (and cost is nothing to do with it).

The company supported young people who wished to enter the design industry in a number of ways:

> Through the Young Enterprise programme. We also work locally with the EBP in schools for 16+ work experience and we do a number of talks [in schools]. The last year we mentored a 17 year old from a local college.

> We have visited the local FE College on a number of occasions to speak to design students at BTEC and degree level.

> We are also mentoring graduates from a local university.

The director/owner offered internships that could lead to employment with the company. For him, this was an excellent way to recruit talented staff and at the same time it provided young people with work experience. He volunteered his own time to working with schools on Young Enterprise, mentoring and other enterprise related events.

The office management company described their commitment to working with schools as:

> putting something into the community. It is getting kids involved in enterprise. At the end of the day we want them to grow up into entrepreneurs, interested in running businesses and then they will come and fill our office space. That is probably a long-term view. There is a PR opportunity as well.

This company offered engagement with young people as an altruistic gesture designed to help young people with work experience but also to gain public relations benefits for the company to highlight the offices on offer to the business community. Another aim was to encourage entrepreneurship in young people with the aim of creating entrepreneurs of the future who would then rent the offices. This last goal was so long term that it was unlikely to be a true goal. It was much more likely that working with schools generated PR opportunities around enterprise. The director volunteered on the Young Enterprise scheme and also encouraged other members of the team to volunteer for school-based activities. The company offered work experience and internships to schools locally and internationally.

The bank had an education officer to coordinate its education activity. It also worked with the local EBP. The company had an active community engagement programme,

working with the long-term unemployed. This type of activity could be seen as corporate social responsibility, illustrating values that the company espoused: a local bank working to support the local community.

Most of the businesses had an interest in working with schools and colleges and worked with schools to support young people in learning about the world of work. Equally all had good business reasons for their involvement with schools. Their aims were to:

- Raise awareness of business and how it operates
- Secure work
- Enhance their brand through corporate social responsibility activities
- Recruit staff and to provide training opportunities for their own staff.

Most believed they were putting something back into the community and three said they were providing the model of a strong work ethic for young people who perhaps lacked this guidance at home. Seemingly everyone benefited from this type of activity but it is fair to say that most of this activity focuses on a perceived lack of or need for skills in young people rather than creating actually job opportunities for young people.

6.1.2 Businesses offering limited support to schools

The manufacturing company engaged with schools in a limited way. It only offered work experience placements, often to family members of employees but this company had an apprenticeship scheme so worked directly with young people from the age of 16, supporting them to become skilled workers. This company recruited five young

people into four mechanical engineering apprenticeships and one electrical

engineering apprenticeship typically each year. On successful completion of the

apprenticeship schemes these young people were recognized as skilled workers in the

company's grading and pay scheme. The electrical apprentices spent their first year at

college and the mechanical apprentices spent two days a week at college and the rest

of their time in the work place. The company used a specialist agency to recruit young

people onto its apprenticeship scheme. To be considered for the scheme, young

people had to have at least five good GCSEs including maths and English, which the

human resources manager described as "the usual criteria". The company also looked

for an aptitude for the work which could be displayed through hobbies, for example,

one apprentice was very interested in car and motorbike engines. The human

resources manager said:

> We look for engineering aptitude, we look for personality to some
> extent, enthusiasm, which is hard to quantify, but how someone
> comes across when you meet them. If they seem switched on,
> enthusiastic etc.

Young people were recruited from the age of 16 to 20. When asked about recruiting

young people at the age of 16 rather than 18, the human resources manager said:

> Would it make any difference to us if we brought them in at 18 rather
> than 16? Not really. Although some of our old school managers would
> probably say you could mould and shape someone at 16 to be what
> you want them to be more easily than you can someone who is
> 18/19. Sounds like indoctrination, doesn't it?

Similar to the other companies, the human resources manager did cite a number of

issues with young people when first recruited but talked about these issues in terms of

an adjustment to be made:

Yes there are quite a lot of adjustments particularly with us being an engineering site. They start work at 7.30 am and during Monday to Thursday they don't finish until 4.30 pm. They have an early finish on Friday so adjusting to those hours from what they've been used to at school is a challenge: the discipline that's required, that you are relatively closely supervised, that you must do what you are told to do. I'm laughing but it's true. At school you've got a level of compliance to get through but that is different from what is required at work. You don't have, certainly early in your career, the freedom of choice on how to spend your time and what you do, which is to some degree what you have at school.

This company had very little involvement with schools other than offering limited work experience and showed no desire to increase its involvement. However it offered employment to young people, providing clear career progression. It worked with a specialist agency to recruit young people and recognised that young people entering the workplace required support and it provided this support. This approach appeared to correlate with the advice offered by CIPD (Rudiger, 2013) that employers had to adapt their recruitment and working practices to help young people enter the workplace, rather than having unrealistic expectations of young people fresh out of school.

6.2 Recruitment of young people

In an attempt to find out if a lack of employability skills in young people affected the recruitment of young people, I asked the employers about their recruitment practices including:

- the age profile of staff

- acceptable levels of qualification

- desirable skills.

Of the seven companies interviewed, only two ruled out the recruitment of young people at 16.

Name of company	Ages at which they recruit staff
Construction management company	18, Graduates
Manufacturing company	16,18, Graduates
Design engineering company	16,18, Graduates
Food company	16,18, Graduates
Design agency	16,18, Graduates
Office management company	18, Graduates
Bank	16,18, Graduates

Table 5: Ages at which young people are recruited

Although five of the seven companies were prepared to recruit young people at age 16 all said opportunities for young people at this age were rare. The manufacturing company recruited only five apprentices each year. It had a total staff of 240 so recruitment of young people represented 2% of its workforce annually. The food company had recruited 50 apprentices and was planning to double this number in the next year but this represented less than 1% of its UK workforce. The company was prepared to pay the entirety of, or a contribution towards, university fees for some management apprentices. The office management company director said she looked for people with experience so was unlikely to employ young people.

The director at the bank said he was unlikely to recruit young people in large numbers, even though he described young people as being integral to its business. The company recruited a large number of staff in administration roles so was largely not looking for highly skilled individuals. When asked if the bank was recruiting young people in significant numbers, the director replied:

> Absolutely not. Simply because of restructuring and technology and in terms of productivity, we are actually more likely to lose numbers rather than gain numbers. Whilst there is a natural churn, that natural churn is

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quite low, certainly well below 5% of the working population and that's simply because people, particularly in the last few years, have been less willing to leave work and try to get other jobs because of the uncertainty in the economic climate and their lack of confidence in being able to find other jobs…We are not recruiting in any significant numbers whatsoever.

Only the design agency showed enthusiasm for recruiting young people. This small business relied on talented young designers so it was important for the director to ensure his recruitment practices attracted young people.

I assess individuals on their merits. I definitely have to meet them. We look closely at their work, CV and their past, but meeting them and looking through their work is very important. Young people do not necessarily have to have been through a traditional path to be considered for placements or a job.

This director stressed the importance of young people gaining an insight into the business as a whole:

Our job requires a reasonable skill level but nothing can replace the 'on the job' experience and understanding you gain from doing real 'live' work for clients and being exposed to the running of a business. I employ young people to do the work of a graphic designer but I do not hide the challenges the business goes through and I most definitely share the successes! There is a real ongoing issue that the design industry will require young people to have between one and two years' experience before actually being viable for a full time position. Bit of a *Catch 22* situation! You have to hit the ground running, get out there and do what you can.

The director of the design company acknowledged the difficulties young people had in gaining employment and experience, and worked with them in the early stages of their careers to help them develop the skills required to be successful.

Table 6 shows the levels of recruitment in the participating companies.

Company	Age profile of staff	Minimum qualifications required
Construction management company	One quarter of staff are aged under 25	Three A levels or equivalent
Manufacturing company	One large group of under 25s and one large group of over 40s and little in between	5 good GCSEs including English and maths. May consider equivalent qualifications but stated a preference for and prejudice towards GCSEs
Engineering design company	No real age categories in a company of 12 employees	No minimum depends on the individual
Food company	Ageing workforce but the company is working hard to attract young people through apprenticeships and offering to pay for degrees.	No minimum. Will consider different academic routes. There are lots of low skill jobs and only a small proportion of jobs at graduate level
Design agency	Largely young graduates	Graduate or excellent portfolio
Office management company	Largely middle aged women	No qualifications necessary. More important to have good communication skills and experience of working in a customer facing environment
Bank	Employees range from 16 to 65 with no particular splits	5 GCSEs from A to E including English and maths.

Table 6: Age profile of staff and typical level of qualification required

Much of the literature (Ainley & Allen, 2010; Brown & Hesketh, 2004; Wolf, 2002) referred to misconceptions around the knowledge-based economy which suggested that young people would need to be highly qualified to enter the jobs market as it would be unlikely that there would be any low skilled jobs on offer. The employment profile of the companies participating in this study suggested they required a range of

skills and qualifications, not just people with higher education qualifications. Most

were prepared to take on young people aged 16 and two employers (the

manufacturing company and the engineering design company) said they preferred to

take on young people aged 16 as they were easier to train than graduates or young

people with A' levels. Of the two companies who would not take on staff at 16, the

construction management company worked with site managers, quantity surveyors,

architects etc so they were looking for highly qualified staff. They did take on young

people with A' levels and supported them through higher education (both financially

and through training). The office management company mainly employed middle-aged

women with good customer service skills and a lot of experience of dealing with the

public. The director said that although in theory she would not be against employing

young people at 16, in practice the youngest people they employed were graduates.

Three of the seven companies said qualifications were not important. Three stated a

preference for five GCSEs and one stipulated three A' levels. Despite this, some of the

employers said that the standards of education in this country had to be raised if the

economy was to improve. The director of the bank said that a lot of young people with

degrees approached the bank looking for clerical work. When I questioned this he said

that the reason they were actively seeking clerical work was because they were unable

to find employment at graduate level. He went on to say that a degree was becoming

the baseline qualification.

> It is becoming more the norm. What is it they say about India, 60% of the
> population has an MBA or something. So I think it's not only about the
> ability to get a degree, it is the quality of that degree, the subject, where
> that degree is from. I think it has become more important. There are two
> things that will happen. Degrees will become more of the norm, but people

will aspire to have a degree of a certain type from a certain location more and more to differentiate themselves from other people with degrees. And vocational qualifications will become more important. So apprenticeships, work place training and so on.

Do you think young people actually need degrees to do the work in your organization?
No they don't, it's just a way of differentiating themselves.

This comment illustrated Tomlinson's (2009 view that "employers played an active role

in reinforcing patterns of labour market inequality amongst different graduates."

It also echoed Brown and Hesketh's (2004) view that more young people pursuing

degrees did not mean a dumbing down of society, rather it reflected how

> "organizations have extended and widened their barriers to entry, in ways that go way beyond the requirements of many jobs." (p. 195)

They made an important observation.

> Employability cannot, therefore, be defined solely in terms of individual skills or characteristics. This is because it exists in two dimensions, the relative and the absolute. Virtually all policy statements of employability fail to grasp this duality of employability. (p. 24)

They were referring to the supply and demand side of employability. Some of the

employers interviewed touched on themes such widening participation to higher

education devaluing qualifications, lack of skills, lack of role models but all of these

comments ignored a fundamental point: many young people were employable, they

had skills and qualifications beyond those required for jobs, but the demand simply

wasn't there. All of the companies had different but rigorous recruitment procedures:

some used psychometric testing, others used extended interviews but all took time to

ensure that the people they recruited had: the right attitude, good communication

skills, knew how to behave in a business setting and had an aptitude and enthusiasm

for the business.

The companies were willing to engage with schools to support young people in gaining employability skills but the competition for employment meant that the companies could and were demanding ever-higher qualifications and skills from young people, even for entry-level employment. This suggested that far from young people not having the qualifications and skills to gain employment, employers were taking advantage of the tough economic climate to set entry requirements for jobs at levels that were far higher than the jobs actually merited. It would seem, as Brown and Hesketh (2004) implied, that the skills needed to get a job were far greater than those required to do the actual work.

6.3 Is business' support for schools addressing the real issues?

The young people I talked to at the comprehensive school were very aware of the economy and the lack of jobs available to the general population, not just for young people. They were aware that competition for work would be stiff, and that they had to work hard at school to give themselves the best opportunities. Several of the employers interviewed acknowledged that schools were making efforts to instil employability skills and a degree of business awareness into young people. The director of the design engineering company said:

> Schools are fantastic now. These kids do loads of stuff, enterprising things. But it is how to take that, apply that and spin it over.

There were several comments praising schools but there was an acknowledgement from both the schools and the employers that although employability skills were being taught something happened between the schools and employment:

> I think a lot of it is probably language and they way they are taught in schools about what's important. I don't think they are actually lacking them in totality, I think it's maybe lost in translation somewhere.
> *Human resources manager: the food company*

This may well be the case, but it seems more likely that although businesses are willing to support young people in many ways to gain skills, very few are offering employment opportunities with appropriate recruitment procedures for young people.

The opportunities that were available were highly sought after and so involved rigorous selection procedures. The CIPD (Rudiger, 2013) suggested that employers should look at their recruitment procedures, the language they use and their expectations of young people to ensure that young people were given the best chance of securing employment. It seemed that although businesses were very keen to help the young people gain skills that would be useful to them in the future, few had made the connection with their recruitment policies and how friendly their policies might be to young people actively seeking to work with them. Ainley and Allen (2010) suggested that if youth unemployment was not addressed, the Government's way of dealing with the issue would be to create only two socially acceptable groups of young people: students or apprentices, neither in full time employment.

6.4 Summary

Businesses and schools did work together on business and enterprise with the aim of giving young people employability skills or at the very least an insight into business. This type of activity had the added bonus of meeting business agendas concerned with: public relations, corporate social responsibility, winning contracts, delivering on

their brand values or staff training. These companies had few real employment opportunities for young people but were able to be highly selective when looking for employees, demanding evidence of much higher levels of skills and qualification than perhaps the posts merited. It is possible that rather than a lack of skills in young people being responsible for their unemployment it is more likely due to the unrealistic expectations of businesses. If businesses fail to address their recruitment practices, they may find that all of this well-intentioned work with schools may be a waste of time. The next chapter looks at the key points from the study and conclusions.

Chapter 7: Discussion, conclusions and recommendations for further study

In this chapter I draw out the main arguments and discussion points from the research project and attempt to draw conclusions to answer my initial research questions:

- What do teachers, employers and young people understand by the term employability skills?

- How do young people in secondary schools gain employability skills?

- Is there a mismatch in understanding between schools and employers?

When I embarked upon this research project I naively thought it would be relatively simple to identify employability skills and then look for the best model to teach these skills to young people. The findings indicated a much more complex picture. In this chapter I explore the findings by looking at:

- The definitions of the term employability skills

- The experience and understanding of schools and businesses

- Practice in schools and businesses

- The agenda around employability

- Conclusions and recommendations for further study.

7.1 Defining employability skills

There had been several attempts by politicians and business organisations to define employability skills by producing lists. These lists included skills such as teamwork and communication skills combined with more nebulous terms such as Baker's familiarity with systems (Wolf, 2002) or a positive attitude, self-management and business and

customer awareness (CBI, 2012). Commentators such as Ainley and Allen (2010), Brown and Hesketh (2004) and Tomlinson (2008) suggested that the work place had changed and so the term 'employability skills' related to the practice of cultivating and using skills and capabilities likely to secure, maintain and find new employment. Their views reflected a working environment that was more flexible, based on short-term contracts. Even though they debated the idea of a knowledge-based economy's demand for ever more highly qualified people, they acknowledged that entering the work place was becoming more and more competitive and that young people would be subjected to tough recruitment processes far more frequently than their parents or grandparents.

7.2 The experience and understanding of schools and businesses

Interestingly, although teachers and businesses had an awareness of the issues affecting young people entering employment, only the teachers and employers that worked together on education/business link activity said they would use the term 'employability skills'. This group of teachers and employers defined employability skills as a combination of hard and soft skills but their definitions largely reinforced the supply-side narrative of employability skills: young people needed to acquire skills that would allow them to take responsibility for their future employment. They did not discuss the demand side of the employment issue, which suggested that there simply were not enough suitable jobs available and that young people were facing competition for these posts from people of all ages.

7.3 Practice in schools and businesses

Teachers often talked about employability skills in terms of confidence. Employers said they knew what they were looking for but couldn't quite define what would make one young person employable and another not employable. This indicated that employability skills combined a range of qualities, skills and attributes that were not easy to define and that the issue of employability was perhaps more complex and subjective than the rhetoric from government and business organisations would suggest.

7.3.1 Practice in schools

When asked about employability skills, the teacher at the independent school focused on three key areas: how to dress, how to behave appropriately and the importance of punctuality. This approach suggested that for these young people it was simply a matter of how they presented themselves. The young people at this school had been selected on academic ability. Most would leave school with good academic qualifications; most would go on to university. This school taught skills in the context of academic study or extra-curricular activity. It did not focus on education/business activity but acknowledged that the parental network could be called upon to help young people to gain experience in their chosen career if necessary. The teacher said this network was not available to other young people in the area.

The sponsored academy taught academic subjects by providing examples from the world of work to illustrate the relevance of academic study to future employment opportunities. This school modelled employment opportunities and engaged

employers who were not connected to the school to support young people. These young people lived in a deprived area but if they attended school they tended to achieve academic success, but the school acknowledged that it had a problem with attendance. The comprehensive school embedded skills throughout the school life of the young people and offered additional business and enterprise activities. The three different approaches suggested that the schools recognised that young people from poorer backgrounds needed more help to navigate and enter the world of work.

The differences in approach in the three schools were remarkable, but equally remarkable were the similarities in the understanding of the skills required by the young people in all three schools. The sponsored academy made deliberate attempts to illustrate the significance of academic study as a means of accessing opportunities in the world of work and to provide a context that the young people could understand. Social networks in the area of the sponsored academy largely led to low paid work so the school attempted to create more effective networks. Emphasising the importance of achievement at school and linking this to employment opportunities appeared to be less of an issue for young people at the comprehensive school and the independent school where their family backgrounds and social networks provided a more obvious correlation between academic achievement and economic success. This suggested that young people in the sponsored academy faced greater barriers to employment and so required more direct intervention and help. However, all of the young people interviewed had a similar understanding of what was required, in theory, to gain employment.

So in answer to the questions what teachers, employers and young people understand by the term employability skills, it would appear that teachers and employers had a broadly similar understanding of employability skills. These skills were focused on the supply side of the employment market, putting the onus on young people to gain certain skills, knowledge, attitudes and qualifications in order to make themselves employable. Teachers tailored their approach to teaching skills to the perceived need of the young people.

7.3.2 Practice of businesses

Businesses were happy to support schools through business and enterprise activity, work experience, apprenticeships, internships and many other education business initiatives designed to help young people gain employability skills. These types of activity had benefits for both young people and businesses but would not necessarily pass the acid test of employability, which, according to Brown and Hesketh (2004), resulted in employment. The businesses interviewed for this study admitted that they did not recruit young people in large numbers, but those who did recruit young people offered support through apprenticeships, sponsoring higher education programmes and providing opportunities for self development.

7.4 The agenda around employability skills

Politicians and business groups have blamed lack of employment skills in young people for poor economic performance, describing employability skills as a supply-side issue. However, in this study, the demand side of employment appeared to be the real issue facing young people, particularly those from poorer backgrounds. In a difficult

economic climate, fewer jobs meant greater competition for jobs. Employers were able to set their own assessment criteria to ensure they selected the best candidate for the job. These employment practices, although understandable, often, unwittingly perhaps, excluded young people from the employment market. Many young people were going on to higher education in the belief that higher education would give them a better chance of securing employment only to find out that a degree, for some companies, was replacing A' levels or GCSEs as the minimum qualification for entry.

Even though some businesses said that young people needed to stay on in education to gain good quality qualifications from first class universities, they also talked about having to manage expectation when taking on graduates who had been forced, by lack of real graduate opportunities, into taking menial roles. The requirements for recruitment often far exceeded the requirements for the job on offer. This indicated that in many cases young people did not lack skills but were actually over qualified. The issue was not a lack of skills but rather that companies had to manage the expectation of young people who were overqualified for the low skilled jobs on offer.

Wolf and others talked about the perceived lowering of the value of academic qualifications, as more young people were able to access higher education. Brown and Hesketh (2004) were exploring recruitment into graduate level posts but offered a different perspective:

> As a much larger proportion of young adults gained university qualifications, it has exploded one of the great myths of the industrial age, that there is a limited pool of talent capable of advanced academic study or capable of a career in management. This suggests that what separates the winners and losers in the competition for tough entry jobs are differences

in social and cultural experiences and in the way they manage their employability. (p. 125)

This indicated that 'employability skills' covered much more than a set of basic skills. They embraced: background, social class and cultural experiences. This again appeared to have been acknowledged through the different approaches of the schools.

In the last year or so there appeared to have been a shift in understanding of employability skills. Even organisations like CBI and CIPD were moving away from defining employability skills as a set of business-related skills such as communication, leadership, motivation, etc., to a more holistic approach to preparing young people for the world of work. In some of their reports, these organisations appeared to acknowledge what teachers taking part in this research project have known for some time, that skills cannot be taught as a separate topic or in a vacuum: they have to be woven into the curriculum as a set of life skills that complement academic learning. The CIPD highlighted that businesses had a responsibility to look at the demand side of the employability issue by making recruitment practices more young-person friendly.

Despite the three schools participating in this study taking three very different approaches to teaching employability skills, all tried to weave skills and/or an element of business awareness into the broader curriculum. The level of understanding expressed by the young people in each of the three schools was remarkably similar although their eventual routes to employment may be very different.

7.5 Summary

There was a lot of activity and debate around employability skills: what they were, if young people lacked them and what was being done to support young people to gain them. There appeared to be a willingness to teach and support the teaching of employability skills from both schools and businesses. Schools were already attempting to embed employability, or perhaps more accurately, life skills into the curriculum. Any gap in understanding appeared to relate to actual opportunities for young people to gain real paid employment with businesses, not a lack of understanding on the part of schools or young people.

The main finding of the study was that there was a lot of activity in schools aimed at teaching employability skills. Both schools and businesses supported this activity and young people clearly understood the need to develop these skills. However, nationally large numbers of young people were either unemployed, going on to higher education or training, or embarking on apprenticeship schemes. This suggested that it was not a lack of skills that was leading to high youth unemployment, rather it was the lack of demand for young people in the work place that was the real issue. The CIPD recommended that businesses should look closely at their recruitment practices to ensure they were young-people friendly. This, they argued, would help young people into the workplace.

So the real question is what do we want for young people? Would we like them to remain in education or training until the age of 24 as suggested as the logical outcome of current policy by Ainley and Allen or would we prefer to support them into

meaningful and fulfilling careers? To do this young people would need support in

gaining a combination of skills, education and competencies to navigate the world of

work, but they would also require a commitment from employers to take a risk on

employing young people and supporting them in the early stages of their careers.

7.6 Recommendations for further study

This research project examined the question of employability skills with a small group

of interested parties. It unearthed a number of complex issues. The study focused on

small groups of people in schools that were chosen for their differences in terms of

location, catchment and ethos. Selecting such a small group of schools may have

created false impressions so there is potential to explore how skills are taught in more

schools in different groupings. Over the time period of this study the Coalition

Government (2010) introduced a variety of schools including Academies, Free Schools,

Studio Schools and University Technical Colleges so there is scope to explore

approaches to teaching skills in a broader range of educational settings.

There is also potential to examine employability skills as a means of social engineering

by looking at the destinations of young people from different schools and different

socio-economic backgrounds. It would be interesting to explore employability skills as

a means to provide access to employment and equally as a means of excluding young

people from certain types of employment. There is further scope to measure the

impact of teaching methods on young people to see if different approaches actually

result in a change in behaviour or mindset, if this is indeed required. This study

focused largely on the supply side of employability skills so there is potential to explore

the demand side of the issue in much more detail by looking at recruitment and

training practices and policies with employers.

Appendix 1

Skills grid for use with young people

Name of school	What does this skill mean to you? What does it mean in terms of behaviour?	Do you have this skill? If yes, how did you develop it?	Is it important to have this skill in the world of work? If yes, why?
Teamwork			
Communication			
Motivation			
Financial awareness			
Problem solving			
Leadership			
Decision-making			
Risk taking			
Economic awareness			
Business understanding			

Appendix 2

Semi-structured interview questions for teachers

Do you use the term employability skills and if so what do you mean by it?

How do you teach skills in school?

What do you think businesses are looking for in terms of employability skills?

What percentage of young people go on to higher education, further education and employment?

What does the school consider success to be in terms of destinations for young people? (Are these mapped?)

What percentage of young people would you say were work ready at the end of KS4?

What are your views on the increasing numbers of young people going on to Higher Education?

What are your views on changes in policy (raising participation, encouraging young people to stay on into higher education, increase in university fees, debate on work related-learning and work experience etc)?

What are the implications of these changes for teachers? In terms of mapping destinations? Does this mean a change in policy regarding qualifications offered?

What does the school do to help young people understand about the world of work, what opportunities are available to them and what is expected of them?

How important is work-related learning?

How important is work experience?

Are employability skills important to all young people?

Appendix 3

Semi-structured interview questions for employers

Employability skills
Would you ever use the term employability skills?

What does the business/member of staff consider employability skills to be?

How do you identify employability skills in young people?

Would you say the young people you recruit/work with have employability skills?

How would you evidence this?

Can you describe the skills young people need to work for your business?

Which skills do you expect young people to have when being recruited?

For which skills are you prepared to provide training?

Recruitment
What is the age profile of your staff?

Do you recruit young people in significant numbers? (At what level?)

What do you look for in young people? (skills/attributes/qualifications)

We hear a lot about how important it is for young people to be highly skilled because only by increasing the country's level of skill will we be able to compete internationally. Do the jobs that you recruit young people into generally require highly-skilled, highly-qualified young people?

Which 14+ qualifications does organisation expect young people to have?

Which 14+ qualifications is the interviewee aware of?

What is the skills distribution within the organisation? (Are most of your staff highly-skilled, highly-qualified?

Youth employment
What are your views on raising the participation age for young people in school?

What are your views on the increasing numbers of young people going on to Higher Education?

Would you employ young people aged 16/17? If 'yes', in what type of jobs?

Is youth unemployment a concern for your sector/organisation? If yes, are you putting any measures in place to help young people into employment?

Engagement with schools
Does your organisation engage with schools? If 'yes', how?

Do you have a community engagement programme that involves working with schools and young people?

Do you offer work experience or support work-related learning in schools through education business links?

What are your views on work experience?

Appendix 4

**Semi-structured interview questions for young people
(to be used in conjunction with the skills grid).**

What are your plans when you have completed Year 11?

Which subjects/qualifications are you currently studying? Which subjects/qualifications (if any) do you plan to study in Years 12 and 13?

What are your thoughts about the value of a university education?

At school, have you taken part in any events with employers?

Have you taken part in work experience arranged by school?

What are your experiences/views of these events?

Do you have any experience of the world of work?

Will this have any impact on your plans for the future?

What are your views on youth unemployment?

Using the skills grid
What do they understand this skill to be, where/how might they develop this skill?
Do they think they already possess this skill, if so why?
Do they think this skill is important for employment?

Teamwork
Communication
Motivation
Financial awareness
Problem solving
Risk taking
Decision-making
Leadership
Economic awareness
Business understanding
Leadership.

Can you describe the skills/attitudes are that would make you employable/attractive to an employer?

Appendix 5

The Big 13 – Enterprise Skills

The Big 13 – Teamwork

The degree to which a group of people can work together effectively can be a decisive factor in whether they can achieve their goals. Poor teamwork can lead to disagreements, negativity and inaction. How often does a cry go out from a frustrated team member: "I could have done this in a third of the time myself, and with none of the disagreements!" But 'team working' is one of the biggest shifts in business management today – working with others is now almost inescapable.

Much of good team work comes down to how well people get on with each other and their ability to apply basic social skills to get the best out of others and their situation. These skills include flexibility, sensitivity, compromise, persuasion, respecting and participating. With these skills a group can commit to a common purpose and attain their goals, they can act as effective mentors and nurture the best in one another.

The Big 13 – Risk Management

What is risk? The possibility of losing? The possibility of failing? A situation where the outcome is uncertain? Contemplating any of these seemingly negative outcomes could put a person off taking action if success is not a given. However learning to cope with and manage risk is imperative for anyone who wants to progress in life. Managing risk is the process of identifying different threats and possibilities involved in a project or event, and seeing how they can be mitigated, controlled or simply accepted.

Life is full of uncertainty and failure, and an inability to cope with these risks can lead to fear and inaction. But learning to manage risk develops the confidence to take informed decisions which can turn risks into opportunities.

The Big 13 – Negotiating & Influencing

The skill to effectively influence others is one that everyone needs.
People spend a lot of time and effort trying to persuade each other to do what they want, whether in personal or professional situations. But negotiation, influencing and persuading are skills that can only be developed given the circumstances and opportunities to do so. Effective negotiation requires a high level of communication, the ability to build rapport and persuade rationally, and the confidence to deal with 'difficult' situations that could be a block to success.

Negotiating and influencing also encompasses the ability to listen and compromise. It includes the ability to be turned down, knocked back, but to still participate. An effective way of offering an opportunity to develop these skills in primary schools is by providing a structure for influencing to take place, and structure which provides an opportunity for children to plan future negotiations and develop the skills they will need in later life.

The Big 13 – Effective Communication

Effective communication is an essential skill for life.
From understanding the importance of first impressions to having the confidence to speak in meetings, from sending appropriate emails to making a connection with someone over the phone – a high level of communication is necessary in so many aspects of life.
Children benefit from activities which develop communication and give them the tools and language to express themselves. Students need new vocabulary to be able to describe their learning and experiences, as well as activities which challenge them out of their communication 'comfort zones.'

The Big 13 – Creativity & Innovation

Creativity and Innovation can be seen in a number of ways – the generation of ideas and concepts, making things or even taking a new approach to teaching and learning.
It is about being imaginative – thinking 'outside the box' – looking for solutions, solving problems, inventing new ideas. And then imagining that something 'extra' which will be the spark for innovation or improvement. Teachers have a key role to play here, providing creative learning opportunities which fire the imagination of children and create that spark.

The Big 13 – Positive Attitude

When Henry Ford said: "If you think you can, or you think you can't, you're probably right,' he succinctly summed up the influence of attitude can have on outcome.
Negativity says 'I can't…' It anticipates difficulties and creates images of failure and embarrassment that hold people back. Positivity says 'I can…' It manifests itself in self belief, constructive thinking, finding solutions and optimism.

Many successful people credit their energy, motivation, creativity and success to maintaining a positive attitude. Some say it is the single most important factor, the factor that stopped them giving up and gave them the power to keep going until they achieved their goal.

The Big 13 – Initiative

Initiative can be seen as the willingness to take the first step, or make the first move. If no-one was willing to take the initiative nothing would progress. How many people talk wistfully of big ideas they've had, but never acted upon? Sometimes the gap between idea and reality is the hardest one to bridge because it requires tangible action.
Taking the initiative includes elements of risk, positive attitude and good judgement. Importantly though, it includes the willingness to 'go for it' – which is essential in a fast paced competitive world where every job, business idea and opportunity will have many people chasing it.

The Big 13 – Organisation & Planning

There are many occasions where existing school activities could be turned over to children to provide opportunities for them to develop invaluable management skills.
Planning and organisation are key factors in the success of projects and activities. This includes being able to manage time and workload, being able to rank priorities and ration

scarce resources against competing claims and the ability to take a project from an idea through to final product despite any obstacles that may arise. Children learn these skills best by 'doing', overcoming problems as they go, evaluating their experiences, identifying weakness and planning for improvement in the future.

The Big 13 – Decision Making, Problem Solving & Identifying Opportunities

Good decision-making is an essential skill for life. Make intelligent and timely decisions and you're on the road to success, but a string of poor and ill-considered decisions can leave you struggling to get back on track.

Decision-making and problem solving are closely linked. For both it is necessary to work out the likely consequences for any course of action, identify and weigh-up pros and cons, evaluate evidence, consider alternatives and choose and implement the best course of action. Identifying opportunities becomes part of this process – it may be that a brilliant opportunity is spotted when a 'problem' is being solved. To be able to develop and implement these skills independently through an enterprise activity will build a child's confidence in their own abilities and judgement.

The Big 13 – Leadership

Good leaders have the ability to motivate and influence, they get things done – by their own hard work and their ability to engage others. Leadership is a quality that seems to include many of the other enterprise capabilities. Good leadership requires communication, a positive attitude, initiative, creativity and the ability and confidence to negotiate and influence.

In adult life good leadership can be the difference between failure and success, satisfaction and frustration and profit and loss. Providing leadership opportunities for pupils is essential – so they have a taste of what it is like to take responsibility, make decisions, manage peers and problems and deliver a final product or activity successfully.

The Big 13 – Make judgements on issues with an economic and ethical dimension

No person, enterprise or corporation operates in a vacuum and every action can have a consequence, positive or negative. Issues which affect people's lives, the environment and society should be considered with integrity and thought.

Where previously profit ruled, the rise of Corporate Social Responsibility highlights how increasingly business is being asked to consider the 'triple bottom line' of People, Planet, Profit. Organisations like Fair Trade, 1% for the Planet, and Oxfam have done a great deal to increase awareness of issues around sustainability, the environment and the exploitation of Third World Workers. Now, not taking responsibility for the impact a business has in these areas can irreparably damage a company's reputation and diminish a brand's popularity.

The Big 13 – Financial Literacy

How do you manage a budget? How much do things cost? How much do you need to live? What is profit and loss? Developing a real awareness of how the world of money works is vital for a young person. While ever an endless source of materials, resources and funds seem to abound from home and school to meet their requirements then they are not developing the knowledge and awareness of the 'real world' that will give them purpose and motivation for studying and working.

Learning about how to manage money in a practical way can be fun – but the lessons are very real: nothing comes for free, you can work hard and improve what you had, and sometimes things go wrong and you have to start again.

The Big 13 – Product or service design, development and production process

All the goods and services that are available for consumers to buy have been through some kind of design, development and production process. Simulating this process can be highly illuminating and addresses the development of many other enterprise capabilities. For a production process to run smoothly and successfully a team has to work well and communicate. For a product to be successful it has to be creative, for a service to survive it has to be well planned. An activity which addresses elements of production process is a coherent way of bringing together these enterprise skills and identifying, in a very real way, their importance.

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