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UNIVERSITY OF WOLVERHAMPTON

How are changes to assessment in BTEC Early Years perceived as influencing the vocational nature of the curriculum?

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Abstract

Changes within vocational education have been consistent within England (Wolf, 2011, p4.) and are currently increasing within the education of 16-19 year olds (ONS in City & Guilds, 2001 p6.). Included in those changes was a recent reform to BTEC. Stemming from this reform was the introduction of assessment changes. More specifically, an increase in controlled assessments and exams, especially within the Early Years sector, which forms the focus of this research.

The introduction of such assessment methods offers a conflicting argument to the notion of creating Early Years practitioners with vocational and industry skills (Nutbrown, 2012). Within current education, students on Early Years vocational courses have voiced concerns that examined assessments do not provide them with the skillset they need for employment.

In order to explore the true influence of assessment methods on student outcomes, a range of methods were used to ensure validity, and strengthen findings. Firstly, pre-existing data in the form of modular reviews provided student's perceptions on how different assessment methods have prepared them for practice and supported their learning. These findings are explored alongside others from the five semi structured interviews gathered from members within one institution. This was used to compare how well assessment methods within the institution were supporting learners compared to the literary findings gathered within the literature review.

Each of the data collection methods presented findings which support the need for Nutbrown's (2012) concept of assessment methods to be industry related. Although, findings also indicated that the institution analysed in this research is considering ways to support the vocational and industry skills of their Early Years workers. However, clear evidence suggests that controlled assessment methods have not provided students with as good an outcome for both grades and skills as industry related assessment methods.

Therefore, it is important to make recommendations for change. Following the recognition that the key assessments being used, in line with the BTEC reform, are not providing learners with the best industry related experience they could achieve. Several recommendations are made in line with the key research questions and address both institutions- including teachers and management - and policy writers.

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For my children: You can do anything you put your mind to.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

Consistent changes are arising across education in England (Wolf, 2011, p44. & ONS in City & Guilds, 2001, p6.) with a current increase of vocational education being offered to young people aged 16-19. As part of the current educational reform, the Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulation (Ofqual), has triggered changes to all FE education including that of the Business and Technology Education Centre (BTEC) in making changes to their vocational programmes.

Incorporated within this change is BTEC's introduction of course pathways; technical-based (DFE, 2016) education aimed at progression routes into employment or the applied based (Pearson, 2016) courses which are aimed at progressing students into further education. According to BTEC this re-structure is as a direct influence (BTEC, 2015, p5.) from both employers and Higher Education (HE) feedback on vocational students and courses. However, the Institute for Learning (IFL) (2012, p15.) criticised that only a small sample of HE institutes and employers are required to provide feedback and therefore this is not a true representation of industry needs. Both Fryer (1997) and Leitch (2006) also recommended that higher levels of employer involvement were needed within vocational learning to provide a sound skill base for learners to be 'work ready' for industry.

Recent amendments to vocational reforms, including BTEC, have meant new specifications and more importantly new methods of assessments for such courses. This professional enquiry shall focus on one of these courses; Early Years level 3. This choice is founded from personal experiences and interests.

The context of this research enquiry is based around current personal experiences teaching within Further Education (FE) while also drawing from industry knowledge within Early Years. Analysing experiences of working with young children and their families, it has become more common to see 'qualified level 3' professionals who have limited skills, professional attitudes and who lack confidence carrying out basic industry related tasks and assessments.

Since 2014, there have been many changes to the qualification structures. However, similar 'hands on' content and assessment methods have been, from personal experience, consistent within the workforce and training. Consequently, this does not account for the increase in reduced competency within qualified staff. Therefore, taking a fresh look into the current changes and qualification structures qualifying the next generation of Early Years workers is an area of personal and professional interest which explores how we go about equipping practitioners with knowledge and skills.

The current Early Years level 3 course (BTEC, CPLD (2015) is now, in agreement by law, in conformity with the Early Years Educator (NCFTL, 2013) whom grant the qualified level 3 licence to practice upon completion of the course. The licence to practice this course equips learners with both the qualification but also practical skills to work as a level 3 practitioner within industry.

Students completing this course can and often do progress onto universities across the country into a wide range of courses to include paediatric nursing, midwifery, teaching, play therapy and many more. It is therefore important that the qualification also allows for academic growth in preparation for the transition to level 4 and beyond (Wolf, 2011).

It is therefore critical that a truly 'vocational' focus is achieved to prepare students for work. But, there must also be a solid academic element to prepare for future study to be achieved through this course.

Across recent years within FE, BTEC courses, specifically Early Years: Children's Play, Learning and Development (CPLD) has seen some significant changes around the course structures, assessments and outcomes for learners (BTEC, 2014, 2016). One of these more recent changes has been the introduction of examination units. However, BTEC remain focused that this is a technical-based qualification "recognised by employers" (DFE, 2016) in order to develop industry related skills.

The introduction of exams is therefore, the reason this enquiry shall explore if the new specification and changes to BTEC CPLD allows for Early Years to truly fit into the 'vocational' nature of the subject and if the methods of assessment used to measure students' success are appropriate for the 'technical-based' label BTEC are using on this course.

In order to explore the true vocational nature of assessment methods used in Early Years (CPLD) within one institution, this research shall aim to explore the following three questions:

1. How does the Early Years curriculum fit into a vocational ideology?
2. What influences the methods of assessment chosen for Early Years learners?
3. How do the methods of assessments chosen ensure students are ready to work in the Early Years industry?

In exploring these three questions, each chapter shall hold them as a continuous thread whilst exploring different elements of the research. Firstly critiquing a range of literature around current policies and wider influences on vocational education, then - utilising this research critique - a methodology shall explore how the primary data collection shall be gathered from one educational institution. The final chapters explore the primary findings and draw from these to make recommendations for teaching practice, institutional practice, and further research.

Chapter 2: Critique of literature

Whilst exploring the three questions outlined above, this chapter investigates topical literature, policy, and legislations relevant to each thread.

Firstly, a definition of vocational ideology shall be collated using current theory in order to provide a base framework for the research to work from. Once defined, recent changes around vocational education shall be explored. A brief history of vocational education is provided to set the current scene for which this research is based in order to see where the Early Years CPLD course fits in with the vocational ideology.

Secondly, in keeping with the thread of "assessment influences" in Early Years, a definition of assessment shall be formulated using a range of concepts before exploring how two key influences; Teachers influence, and, that of policy and funding's impact on how literature indicates assessments are influenced.

Finally, in order to investigate some of the assessments used within vocational education, in accordance with Nutbrown's (2012) guidance, a critique of current literature examines how well assessment methods are preparing Early Years students for industry.

How does the Early Years curriculum fit into a vocational ideology?

The following review aims to explore how 'Early Years' fits within the 'vocational' studies of FE. After exploring what is meant by a 'vocational course', this review shall explore current literature surrounding Early Years ideologies in order to assess how the Early Years CPLD (2016) fits as a 'vocational' course.

One key focus of this review will consider the different influences on assessment methods used within the CPLD (2016) course. This allows us to compare them against the vocational ideologies set out in current theory such as Wolf (2011) and Nutbrown (2012).

Vocational Ideology

Defining 'Vocational' Ideology

Vocational sectors, as argued by Norrington (2012, p.7) require "The routine expertise to deal with everyday problems, the resourcefulness to solve trickier problems and the wider skills for growth to innovate for future solutions". These are vocational outcomes which are valued by employers but are lacking within the UK (Norrington, 2012, p.7). In agreement, a more recent review of vocational education, recently referred to as 'technical education', was that of the Sainsbury Review (2016). This outlines that technical education, a skills based need of the country, dates back over 100 years and Sainsbury (2016) explains that although attempted by many, vocational reforms have failed to equip 16-24 year olds within England, leaving 400,000 unemployed and unskilled.

Panchamia (2012, p.2) indicates one reasoning to the "poorly defined and understood Further Education (FE) sector in England" is relating to the "somewhat chaotic policy making over the last two decades". Within his report, Panchamia explores the history and most prominent six changes to FE within this time. One of which being the development, and then closure, of the Sector Skills Council (SSC) in 2010. Wilcox (2011) indicates the role of the SSC was to influence all training in the UK, to work alongside employers to up skill the workforce from school leavers up to level 7 Masters Degree programmes. The SSC contained a wide range of councils in all areas of industry with the aim to bridge the gap between education and industry skills. This includes the Early Years Provision (Nursery world, 2004). Panchamia (2012, p.6) suggests the closure of the SSC, another step in chaotic policy change, was due to the SSC not meeting targets set by the Government. It could be assumed that this closure in 2010 will not have supported the forward improvements needed within the vocational 'skills based' sector.

Wolf (2011) later agrees that vocational education in England has not been stable. Wolf continued to explore that vocational qualifications were non-employer friendly and complicated to perceive. However, with this in mind, according to the examining body 'Pearson' (2016), current vocational qualifications, are still being targeted to develop "skills, knowledge and understanding in a sector" as they are supported and founded with the support of professional trade bodies and employers.

Sainsbury (2016, p.8) continues to identify clear problems within the existing system through it's over complexity and failure to meet sector skills needs. These conflicting views of current vocational courses lead to question the validity and outcomes of students being ready for vocational industry through education.

This collective concept of a problematic history within FE and Vocational education is a common trend. This has triggered recent changes to vocational education in England through the Government Office of Qualifications and Examinations Regulations (Ofqual) body (Gov.uk, 2016). However, despite its apparent problems common strands of the ideology, regarding what vocational education should be, are within general agreement. These common standards emphasise a 'vocational' need for skill based learning to prepare for industry.

Changes to vocational courses and the role of assessment within shall be discussed further in this paper. However, the term 'vocational ideology' for the use of this paper shall be formulated from the Department for Education (DFE) (2014, p.3). The vocational ideology of education is a way of working which currently needs amending that; "gives students the specialist knowledge they need for a specific job" in the case of this report that is within the industry of Early Years (NCTFL, 2014).

Recent changes to 'vocational' courses in England.

In 2011 the Government launched an independent review into current education for 14-19 year olds in England (Wolf, 2011). This review proved to be the basis for a lot of changes within FE and vocational education in England. Wolf (2011) recognised vocational qualifications, specifically level 3, as very positive within vocational education (Wolf, 2011, p.143). Yet, numerous recommendations within her report were made to better the vocational learning of students. For the scope of this discussion, 2 key recommendations shall be drawn upon.

The first point of recommendation was, despite courses having a focus on a range of vocational subjects and courses it is imperative they "should recognise and provide opportunities for Higher Education (HE) progression" (Wolf, 2011, p.43) in order to allow students the freedom within their career. This is elaborated upon to suggest that on average more than one quarter of students who continued into HE in 2009/2010 were in fact level 3 vocational students (p.152). This alone is a contradictory concept that vocational education should not only be 'industry focused' (DFE) (2014, p.3) but should also aim to provide them with skills for HE.

The second impact that Wolf (2011) indicated was that the range of vocational qualifications delivered needs to be expanded (p.145). A point later criticised by Nutbrown (2012, p.6) who indicated fewer pathways should be offered to students because too many complexly different courses are available which is misleading and confusing for employers.

Wolf (2011) provided an indicative list of the most popular vocational qualifications in 2009/2010 (p.145) of which Early Years is not a part. However, in contradiction to this, Wolf proceeds to argue that between 2000 and 2009 "educational assistants" (p.147), a role of which a high percentage of childcare learners progress onto, is a fast growing occupation with a 91% increase and rise of 230,621 jobs.

This research is no doubt without its flaws and it is apparent that this limited provision, according to Wolf (2011), needs to change. However, current statistics show that only 1 out of the 18 Birmingham FE colleges (See appendix 1) deliver the extended diploma in CPLD. This is a course which provides both access into industry, and UCAS points to access HE and would indicate that Wolf's (2011) review has not made a successful impact on vocational Early Years delivery within Birmingham. Although this is only one area, it provides a representation local to the students who originally sparked the need for this enquiry.

Many comments were made from the DFE in response to Wolf's report, including a key statement made, expressing that "Vocational education is a vital underpinning for our economy" and " young people skills in areas of immediate relevance to employers and business is a central part of Government's plans" (Rogers, 2011, p.2). Although Rogers (2011) also indicates that a contrasting DFE response suggests that all students aged

14-16 should be taught core academic subjects with a background of vocational studies. He also posits that specialising in vocational skills limits progression and further employment.

Following the Wolf (2011) report, Nutbrown (2012) launched a review into specifically Early Years vocational courses in England. A number of her points reflected that of the Wolf (2011) report with suggestions such as; "some current qualifications lack rigour and depth, and quality is not consistent"(p.5).

One further concern which the Nutbrown Review (2012) highlights, is that the current Early Years qualifications systems are not "systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding" (p.5) they require for industry working with children and babies. Unlike the Wolf (2011) report which focuses on the wider concepts for vocational studies, Nutbrown reviewed vocational early years to be 'industry ready' rather than identifying a need for learners to also be ready for HE progression which, as previously discussed, ties in with the DFE'S (2014, p.3) concept of vocational education being knowledge for a job role.

One could assume that the two funded reviews, Wolf (2011) and Nutbrown (2012), have clearly had an impact on the current reform of vocational education as evidenced in the Ofqual review of qualifications.

An official blog post released in 2015 by Benson, on behalf of Ofqual, the government regulating body for qualifications, outlined the reason for current changes to vocational qualifications in England. This included the review previously provided by Wolf (2011). Benson (2015) discussed the role of Ofqual as being to engage with employers in industry to assess the skills and knowledge required in order to develop in the sector.

Benson (2015) explores the decision of Ofqual to make changes to vocational courses. One major change which was passed through Ofqual was the introduction of two pathways, a technical pathway and an applied pathway for vocational subjects.

Prior to Benson's (2015) blog release, Pearson (2014) announced the release of their New Qualifications Framework (NQF) which, subject depending, allowed for both 'Technical' qualifications aimed at equipping students for the world of work and the 'Applied' qualifications to prepare for further education.

The DFE (2014) indicate that the introduction of technical courses includes the ideology that students will;

> *"Be equipped with specialist knowledge and skills, enabling entry to an Apprenticeship or other employment, or progression to a related higher education course. In some cases, Tech Level qualifications provide a 'licence to practise' or exemption from professional exams" (DFE, 2014, p.2)*

It is clear that this new ideology encompasses Wolf's suggestions that even vocational courses allow for progression to HE, as well as aiming to provide 'license to practice' to equip learners with industry skills as Nutbrown (2012) called for.

The alternative, introduced by the DFE (2014) was that of the 'applied' courses which aims to;

> *"Allow 16 to 19 year old students to develop transferable knowledge and skills. They are for students who want to continue their education through applied learning. Applied general qualifications allow entry to a range of higher education courses." (DFE, 2014, p.3)*

It is fair to suggest that the applied courses are equipping young people with transferable skills. This is to prepare them for and specialise in subject related content at HE rather than providing a skill based learning programme.

The course which shall later be examined in this study, the National Extended Diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development (CPLD) (BTEC, 2015) is included within the route of 'technical courses' as it provides learners with licence to practice but also UCAS points for access into HE.

Yet, despite the Government funded Nutbrown (2012) review and Ofqual's (Benson, 2015) announcement of change to enable vocational courses to be tailored towards employability skills, courses such as the BTEC CPLD level 3 specification (BTEC, 2016) indicate that there are a range of assessment used which are not industry related (i.e. a high stake exam around child development which has 100% controlled assessment with no links to practical experiences in industry.).

This new NQF qualification therefore contradicts that of Pearson (2016), Ofqual (Benson, 2015) and Nutbrown's (2012) suggestions that courses should be skills based.

It would be fair to question if, despite two clear routes of Pearson being created ("Technical" based and "Applied") qualifications with licence to practice such as CPLD should also have to encompass skills for HE; or purely focus on 'industry ready skills'.

It is clear that Pearson is trying to cover both academic skills (HE skills) in its choice of core assessment methods within the vocational course of CPLD. But, also using placement - as Wolf (2012) suggested - to fit into a 'vocational' course. It is fair to therefore question whether this vocational truly fits into either category which Pearson has created.

Early Years and vocational ideology

Recognising the practical skills required for Early Years workers was a theme continuing from the Wolf report (2011). Wolf explored the benefits of practical skills for workers within society. The DFE (2013), responded to this report, arguing that it is paramount to ensure students enrolled on vocational courses should gain the practical skills to enhance progression in their chosen field. Nutbrown (2012) furthers this by focusing in on the skills Early Years workers need in industry and therefore what should be provided by vocational courses within the UK. Nutbrown (2012) explicitly states that for Early Years Workers, real world placement is an imperative part of skill based learning and that assessment methods such as those used in practice, e.g. live observations, completion of paperwork used in practice and small group practical work. These all enhance the practice of students working in industry.

As previously mentioned, the extended Diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development specification 2016 (DFE, 2015) qualifies its students with a license to practice in accordance with the Early Years Educator (EYE) (NCTL, 2013). There are 6 main aims which the EYE state students should be able to achieve which all involve actively engaging within industry.

Within the six areas identified, there are a total of 41 skills which students are required to demonstrate within an Early Years environment. This indicates that the core of this course is around these skills in order to develop their industry ready competencies. However, in contrast to this, the breakdown of this course (see appendix 2) poses that these 41 EYE (NCTL, 2013) skills are merely a single pass criteria in one core unit of which the rest is written reports. Therefore, indicating that even current Early Years qualifications such as the CPLD (2016) are not all embracing the true importance of industry based skills which Nutbrown (2012) explicitly outlines and in-turn is not truly enhancing a vocational ideology.

What influences the methods of assessment chosen for Early Years learners?

Influences on Assessment

Defining 'Assessment'

A wealth of literature across academic research defines assessment in it's own way. Black and William (2001) argued that assessment refers to all activities carried out by teachers and students to provide information which can be used to modify teaching and learning activities. Likewise, Ofsted (2014) discuss assessment as a tool for teachers to use in progressing the learning of students and amending teachers best practice. For the purpose of this literature review, the term 'Assessment' shall embrace these definitions and will refer to different methods used to measure students learning.

Whilst the influences on assessment methods may be an endless list, the scope of this small scale research allows for two key influences on vocational assessment methods to be discussed. These are the teachers own influence on assessment and that stemming from policy and funding.

Teacher's influence:

Firstly, In accordance with BTEC (2015, p.190), two methods of assessment are used across their Technical CPLD course; internal assessments, and external controlled assessments. This however is contradicted in the new CPLD (2016) specification which introduced a third method labelled 'synoptic assessments'.

Internal assessments are created flexibly to;

> *"meet local needs, while others are set and marked by Pearson so that there is a core of skills and understanding that is common to all learners" (p5.).*

This quote indicates that the flexibility of assessment decisions on this course are at the discretion of the centre and teacher. But, this influence of the teacher to meet local needs could be perceived as very subjective. It would be fair to question if this supports what Nutbrown (2012, p.5) was trying to avoid when indicating that there is inconsistency with the skills and knowledge which Early Years students are gaining. The primary findings gathered later on in this research shall explore some of the reasons for teacher's choices of assessment. However, as BTEC (2014) indicates, sector knowledge of industry is a strong requirement in order to make 'vocational' related assessment choices. Although, it must be remembered that when delivering BTEC specifications there are guidelines and paperwork trail procedures which are outlined for teacher's assessment guidance.

Policy and funding:

In a recent report, the Education Funding Agency (EFA, 2016, p.21) outlined the expectation - in line with the Wolf (2011) report - that colleges are following "a balanced and broad programme of study" in order to achieve the requirements for course funding. The EFA (2016, p.23) continues to suggest that the programme of a vocational student should be a level higher than they have previously achieved. It should also make up the main bulk of their study alongside non qualification hours to include work experience and enrichment. However, in order to meet the requirements of both the EFA and vocational suggestions of the Wolf (2011) report, assessment decisions are impacted. The impact affects the amount of Guided Learning Hours (GLH) each course requires against the course demands, placement requirements and potential external influences such as student health needs or resources. Nutbrown (2012, p.22) criticises this and emphasises the importance of practitioners taking the time to study in order to become efficient at the skills learnt. Therefore, it could be argued that despite the vocational ideology, planning for assessments are greatly impacted by these restrictions. The primary research carried out in this project shall explore further the barriers to implementing vocational assessment which stem from policy and funding.

How do the methods of assessments chosen ensure students are ready to work in the Early Years industry?

Assessments: Preparing for Early Years industry

Types and methods of assessment used in 'vocational' course

Within her report, Nutbrown (2012, p.20) explores a range of skills and attributes which she believes are imperative for Early Years students to obtain. Nutbrown explores the process of learning these skills and recognises the importance of the pedagogical process they go through. One method highlighted in this review is the use of observations to assess children. Within the BTEC CPLD course, observations play a vital part in the assessment of students. But, observation is also required as a skill which students are to develop and carry out in order to build their own knowledge. The advancement of these skills is paramount when learning to observe the development and growth of children to improve their own practice (Nutbrown, 2012, p.21) and therefore requires the skill base and sector knowledge of the teacher delivering. This therefore appears to provide a vocational focus to assessment in Early Years.

In addition to this, BTEC's specification (2014, p.190) argues that the employees delivering their CPLD course need to have industry based experience and relevant up to date sector knowledge in order to deliver and assess the students. It is recommended that in doing this it will "provide the learners with a rich programme to prepare them for the employment sector" (BTEC, p.190).

In contrast to what seems a very vocationally focused specification from BTEC, where the majority of units are left to the 'industry related' decisions of the teacher, a closer look at the units indicates that three compulsory units are not. These three units are based around one 'controlled assessment' relating to children's development and growth, and two 'synoptic assessments'. The first of which consists of a written timed exam paper in the first year around supporting the theory of children's language and literacy skills. This is a prime area within the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS) (2014).

The second synoptic assessment is based around research and is a recent amendment from the 2014 specification. Students were required to put theory into practice and gain experience in carrying out primary research within an Early years setting to the current 2016 specification, where a written test is based on the theory of secondary research. This method of examination is not based around any practical experience, assessment with children, nor provides any opportunity to develop the practical skills which Nutbrown (2012) identifies. It also lacks the 'vocational' element which Wolf (2012) highlights of key importance. This update is clearly not one of purpose to improve practical skills, but perhaps 'aimed' to improve written examination knowledge of research in preparation for HE.

It is therefore fair to question that although there is some evidence of vocational scope to assessment methods, two 'prime areas' (EYFS, 2014) of children's development are not permitted to allow students to develop their own assessment methods. Without the use of observations, activity plans or alternative 'industry methods' it therefore suggests that the BTEC CPLD (2016) course is not wholly vocationally focused.

Chapter 3: Research design

In order to assess the effectiveness of national Early Years policies on courses - *such as the Children's Care Learning and Development (Edexcel, 2007) or, the more recent Children's Play, Learning and Development (BTEC, 2015)* - this research adopts a range of mixed approaches to determine if such courses follow current policy recommendations. Chapter three explores each approach whilst using the three research questions to frame a methodology and justification for this research to be completed.

Research approach

Stance taken on the ontological continuum

This research project aims to investigate how the Early Years level 3 CPLD programme fits into a 'vocational framework'.

Within educational research perspectives and opinions form policies and impact on the practices of many. Whilst the ontological continuum, as explored by Waring (2012), discusses the epistemological paradigms which can be taken towards research, as a working professional driven by vocational and practical values, the overall ontological stance taken for this research is more of an interpretivist view.

By adopting this interpretivist stance, the research shall offer a more personal insight into the viewpoints and opinions of the participants. This allows us to examine their perceptions and considerations around vocational education and the course of Early Years (CPLD, 2016) within it.

Whilst the main approach to this research is interpretive, allowing us to ascertain the viewpoints and experiences of participants, one element - *the numerical analysis of success rates and grades achieved through the last 3 years of specifications* - takes a more factual and statistical approach. This therefore, adopts a more positivist approach on the spectrum of ontology due to the factual and statistical nature of the findings analysis.

Adopting a mixed methods approach

By adopting a somewhat mixed stance to this research, it seems suitable to also adopt a mixed methods approach to data collection. A qualitative approach was applied to views and opinions, while a quantitative approach applied to grade analysis to fit in line with the two stances of research. According to Creswell (2003), different research approaches have changed over the last decade. Developing from an initial approach of research methods being purely qualitative or quantitative to the more recent introduction of 'mixed methods' approaches, the latter gaining equal prominence within the research field. Johnson (2014) expands upon the combination of both quantitative and qualitative paradigms to create a mixed method approach and defines them as being "those that involve collecting and analysing both forms of data in a single study" (Creswell, 2013, p15.). This mixed methods approach - examining both quantitative and qualitative data - sits well with the data collection methods proposed for this research.

The mixed methods approach of this research study aims to use both quantitative data from the analysis of numerical grades, qualitative analysis from semi structured interviews and analysis of pre-existing data from student's course reviews. The use of qualitative analysis aims to investigate the perceptions and understanding of five different professionals within the institution and explore reasoning rather than numerical statistical data. Statistical analysis does not allow for the depth of reasoning required to create a holistic picture around the impact of assessment methods in vocational courses such as Early Years. However, the use of quantitative data alongside this, aims to provide a different stance on how effective assessment methods are with respect to the grade outcomes. This deliberate choice of adopting a mixed method approach to data collection creates a "sense of rigour to the research" (Bryman, 2006) by having both the qualitative and quantitative data alongside findings from literature explored in chapter 2. Using a multi approach to research aims to triangulate the findings and as Bryman (2006) suggests, improving their validity.

The scale of research

This small scale research project shall be carried out by one researcher drawing from personal experience, delivering Early Years qualifications within one institution in Birmingham. The overarching aims of this project are to consider how the Early Years course delivered in one Sixth Form College within Birmingham City centre fits into a wider 'vocational' context in England. Although the primary research of this project is focused in one small representative area, the research will also be informed from a wider context around Early Years and vocational education. This includes national key policy changes such as the Nutbrown Review (2012) and significant government reforms.

Due to current changes as discussed previously in Chapter Two's literature review, fundamental policy changes, such as the Wolf Review (2011) and the Nutbrown Review (2012) have introduced modifications to vocational learning with the aim of standardising vocational learning, including the field of Early Years. In response to these pivotal developments in policy, the Ofqual (Benson, 2015) changes to course regulations have filtered down from a wider national context into the framework structure and course content delivered within the sixth form college case study.

Within a 4 year timeframe of delivering Early Years content at this institution, there have been 3 changes of specification delivered; Children's Care, Learning and Development (Edexcel, 2007) Children's Play, Learning and Development (BTEC, 2014) and the latest Children's Play, Learning and Development (BTEC, 2016). Across these three courses there has been an increase of examination and controlled methods of assessment for the learners.

This has been, from personal experience, an area of contention for students who label themselves 'vocational' learners. But, this is also in contrast with that of the Nutbrown (2012) review which indicates that assessment should be linked to industry and prepares learners for the world of work. Therefore, it is argued that this increasing element of examination, including core units related to children's development is not a method used in industry. In contrast to the increase in exams, as previously explored through the Pearson literature and specifications, a high percentage of internal assessment methods are at the discretion of the assessor/teacher delivering the unit; whom in theory should have good industry experience and knowledge.

Embracing these considerations and findings triggers the second element for this research project. The second two research questions proposed are aiming to scrutinize the different assessment methods used internally and how they fit into the 'vocational ideology'. By examining methods across the last 3 years within the single institution this research focuses on, alongside questioning interviewees around preferred assessment methods for creating a vocational element to the course. This research aims to explore how much of an impact the wider vocational policy changes have filtered down to impact the learners' vocational experience and qualification.

Methodology stance taken

There are many different methods to research which are frequently used within Educational Research (Cohen et al, 2007). Cohen et al. (2007, P47.) identify the term methods as being "a range of approaches used in educational research to gather data which are to be used as a basis for inference and interpretation, for explanation and prediction". By adopting the concept that any specific methods should be chosen for a purpose, a mixed methods approach shall be taken towards this research (Crewswell, 2003). Each method shall now be explored and their purpose for this research explained.

Semi- structured interviews

The first of the methods used was semi structured interviews. Gilbert (2004, p88.) explores face to face interviews by explaining how interviews need to be structured to a format which allows the interviewee to predetermine the overarching questions of the interview. Embracing this concept has triggered the justification for providing the interviewee with a list of questions prior to interview. In doing so, this allows the participant time to have a clear answer which portrays their true response to each question as they will have time to consider it rather than answering under pressure. Harris and Brown (2010, p2.) would support this as they argue that "poor or incomplete memory of events, external influences, and lack of time to fully recall information" may lead to incomplete or inaccurate responses. Therefore, all interview participants shall be provided with a full overview of the research project and list of questions prior to interview.

Within the design of the interview questions, an open approach has been adopted to create open ended questions (Gilbert, 2004) thus, providing the interviewee scope to expand on questions and not limit their responses. Gilbert (2004, p.92-95) discusses the importance of not limiting the responses of participants as it can reduce the range of data and therefore create leading questions and inaccurate responses. An example of both the questions and information sheet provided to participants can be found in appendices 3 and 4**.** The open questions are designed to synthesise the data collected, allowing us to explore the different influences on assessment decisions for vocational learning within the institution involved. It is expected that within the subjects covered through the interviews, that some data shall also be evidenced around how the different assessment methods chosen provide learners to be industry ready.

Edward's and Holland (2003, p.15) discuss the importance of adopting the method of interviews with the view that interviews are a method of gathering data which can then be confirmed. They state "interviews can be checked for credibility, for example by comparing what he or she says with the researcher's own observations, or official records, or the accounts of other people who were involved in the situation" (p.16) Therefore, following each interview, a thematic analysis shall be applied to the gathered findings and a full transcript be recorded. This shall be available to each of the participants post interview to confirm their responses in order to improve the validity of the data.

Upon thematically analysing the semi structured interview findings- in order to ensure anonymity - each of the five participants shall be identified using a code such as P1, P2, P3, P4 & P5. This shall also be the case when referred to during the findings.

Secondary data analysis of institutional data on assessment methods used

Interviews, as previously discussed, will have provided a qualitative element to this research project through the use of perceptions and thoughts of the interviewees. However, due to sitting within the mixed methods approach on the continuum, an element of quantitative data shall also be gathered to provide a numeric and qualitative element of research for comparison and to strengthen the validity of the data.

The institutional data consists of two elements which shall be explored to see which assessment methods are being used within the one institution and how relative these are to a 'vocational focus'.

Firstly, institutional data used within Early Years shall be collated and analysed to explore how assessment methods have changed between three specifications; Children's Care, Learning and Development (CCLD, 2013), Children's Play, Learning and Development (CPLD, 2014) and Children's Play, Learning and Development (CPLD, 2016). This data shall be represented in the findings as quantitative data, specifically focusing on the amount of different assessment methods used and the percentage of high grades each has generated. Analysing which assessment methods have been used in each of the three courses CCLD (2013), CPLD (2014) and CPLD (2016) and the percentages of high grades i.e. a Distinction or above, shall provide an insight into any possible correlations between assessment methods and high grades. Findings shall be referred to using the specification title and year.

Yet, the analysis of assessments and grades alone would not provide an insight into how vocational each assessment method was. Therefore, a second strand of institutional data shall be analysed in the form of modular reviews. These reviews are populated by learners on the three courses above to represent which module methods/assessment methods they preferred and thought best prepared them for industry practice within a vocational context. The benefit of doing so allows us to use a different lens to analyse how well each assessment method fits within the 'vocational context of Early Years'. This also allows considerations from the student's perspective as well as strengthening the data and providing additional analytical depth. The information gathered from these modular reviews shall then be compared against the viewpoints of the interview participants. By forming a comparison, it will provide an insight into analysing if the actual assessment and grade data matches how the participants view 'vocational assessment' and to see if it is being carried out within the setting.

Modular reviews shall be explored as three separate entities; the specification and cohort CCLD (2013), CPLD (2014) and CPLD (2016). Whilst findings from each analysis cannot be attributed back to individual learners, each entity shall be referred to in the findings with the titles indicated above.

Research sample

Whilst keeping in mind this project is small scale, there are three strands to consider.

Firstly, this small scale research project incorporated different appropriate professionals' views within a single educational context as part of the semi structured interview process.

Five initial participants were chosen for the semi structured interviews due to their range of roles within the educational context. Each participant holds a position within the educational institution where they have had a wealth of experience working with vocational courses or are currently planning and delivering such courses.

Gilbert (2004, p102.) indicates that in approaching and selecting specific participants it provides a notion of being highly valued and develops intrinsic motivation to engage deeper with the research process and therefore aims to breakdown any potential barriers such as time.

However, prior to the interviews taking place one participant withdrew their participation. Whilst recognising their entitlement to do this, the research was in early enough stages to replace the participant so drop outs would not impact the range of results gathered.

Secondly, when analysing institutional data of both student grades and the assessment methods across different cohorts, the size of the research scale and an element of 'realism' was considered as to the time process it would take to analyse the data produced (Cohen et al, 2007, p80.). Therefore, three recent Early Years cohorts of grades and assessment methods have been selected to keep the data size manageable.

A second consideration of the sample size for the analysis of assessment methods and grades, is the ability to access grades from students on previous Early Years courses within the college. Considering data from over 5 years ago, for example, could potentially be too far removed from current practice. There would have been a very different team of professionals delivering course content which brings into question the validity of the data. Therefore, in order to contain the sample size to a realistic amount, three of the most recent cohorts of level 3 students shall be examined with regards the assessment methods used, grades achieved, and the modular reviews.

The final consideration for sample size is regarding the analysis of institutional data in the form of modular reviews. In order to maintain validity, the same three cohorts of students whose grades and assessment methods were used shall be analysed. Yet, due to potential time barriers, a thematic analysis with key emerging themes across the three cohorts' reviews shall be applied.

Although this research project is of a small scale and, unlike larger educational research projects, findings will not be generalised across education. These findings could be relative to additional institutions with similar educational contexts.

Research response rate

Whilst, as previously stated, this is a small scale research project on one Sixth Form College and the participation is small in comparison to larger scale research projects. When considering the response rate there are three elements which are most likely to impact the findings in this small scale project.

Firstly, a high dropout rate of participants is more likely to impact findings.

Due to this being a small scale research project, the chosen participants have been selected because of their role within the institution and relation to vocational education and assessment. When asking participants for their consent to be involved within the research, one participant refused. Whilst this is their right to refuse and they have not been involved in the research, this is potentially a key player within the college's vocational context. Being in the early stages of the research, this participant was able to be replaced, however later on in the research process this may not have been as feasible and therefore have had a greater impact on findings.

Secondly, participants whom have agreed to be involved within the research may choose to not participate or answer some of the topics or questions discussed. Whilst this is within their right to do so, it could also minimise the range of data and results gathered.

Thirdly, participants choosing to withdrawing their views and responses from the research is likely to have significant impacts upon the range of findings also.

It is, however, important to keep this research within its context of a small scale project and consider that being such a small sample makes it difficult to generalise the findings to other colleges even within the same area of Birmingham.

Making the research valid

Triangulation, according to Cohen et al (2007, p141.) is the implementation of two or more methods of data collection used to pinpoint a single dataset or objective. The need to use multiple data collection approaches to validate the potential outcomes of a study (Campbell and Fiske 1959 in Cohen et al 2007) justifies the multiple methods used as part of this research project.

In order for the research results to be strong and robust, there is a need for validity to run consistently throughout the different methods adopted. Neuendorf (2002, p114.) explores validity to being the "extent to which a measuring procedure represents the intended, and only the intended concept". Gilbert (2004, p.279.) furthers this topic of the importance of validity in research by suggesting that in order for methods to be valid, the sampling collection should be scrutinised. In order to relate these concepts back to the research project here and create a triangulation of datasets to improve validity; four different methods shall be used.

The first of these methods is literature analysis. By analysing current policy and changes - within both the Education sector and the Early Years field - a perspective of comparison can be used to see how the findings fit into the current framework and system. With the analysis of literature around Early Years and education, the findings shall inform and shape the themes and questions when gathering further data.

The second method which this research project shall use to create validation is the use of questioning within semi structured interviews. By using questionnaires as a method of research from five different people with different roles within the institution, the aim is to reduce the bias of one area in the college. But, also provide a more holistic picture of vocational education within the institution. When creating the base questions for the interviews, a piloting scheme (Gilbert, 2004, p102.) allowed a "critical eye" to be cast over the content and question order allowing the optimisation of the data collection. The "critical eye" piloting scheme aims to be an opportunity for a member of staff whom is familiar with the context of vocational education, but who is not directly involved with the research. This, in turn, enables the support to develop and improve data collection. Once interviews have taken place, thematic analysis shall be used to identify

key themes from findings. This will be used to create a wealth of information for comparison against the assessment grades and methods from the institutional data.

The third analysis, which shall provide a different perspective on this research, shall be an analysis taken from institutional data of assessment methods used in Early Years over the last three cohorts. The analysis will look at all of the different assessment methods used across the three previous specifications CCLD (2007), CPLD (2014), and CPLD (2016) and the grades each assessment method generated. By analysing this quantitative element of data, it provides a different perspective that explores how current assessment methods are taught and if they provide learners with a vocational experience that literature promotes; therefore enriching the data credibility.

The final analysis shall be of student modular reviews from the institutional data of the same students from the same three cohorts previously mentioned. By providing a fourth angle, this allows an insight into how the students feel the different assessment methods used on the course prepare them for the vocational industry of Early Years. This will add a final element to the research to see if the views of the students match what the literature depicts of vocational education and of that of the interviewees views on the course.

By bringing these four different viewpoints together, it is predicted that a more holistic picture will be created and therefore offers a more robust set of research findings.

Research ethics

When considering ethics within social research, Hammersley & Traianou (2012) explain that it "means the study of what researchers ought and ought not to do, and how this should be decided". This notion is later expanded upon through legal frameworks, such as the British Educational Research Association (BERA, 2011) guidelines, in order to avoid causing harm to participants within research (Hammersley & Traianou, 2012).

By adopting the approach of avoiding harm to participants, Cohen et al (2007, p.51.) suggests that there are a number of "considerations which researchers should address in planning research". Applying these considerations to this research project, there are four specific areas which shall be examined in order to protect the participants.

Firstly, informed consent of the participant is a key consideration which has been defined by Diener & Crandall (1978 cited in Cohen et al 2007, p.52.) as;

> *"the procedures in which individuals choose whether to participate in an investigation after being informed of facts that would be likely to influence their decisions."*

Within the initial stages of this research project, each participant chosen for the semi structured interviews is to be provided with a full information sheet outlining the stages and aims of the research project (see appendix 4). Each participant shall be given a week to read and prepare any notes or thoughts they have around the questions before the interview. Signed consent (see appendix 5 for a blank copy) shall be taken prior to the interview and also after the interview has been completed. Each participant shall be informed that they have the right to withdraw their consent at any point within the research process (BERA, 2011. & Cohen, 2007, p.55.) and will be provided the opportunity to see a full written transcript of their interview ensuring their views have been represented with accuracy. All interviews shall be audio recorded and all will be analysed through the use of a transcription. Each interview shall be transcribed by highlighting the topics, themes and key points from conversations. However, participants shall be given the opportunity to request a full word for word transcript if they should request to see it.

Autonomy and confidentiality are considerations the BERA (2011) guidelines lay out for research and are applied to this research project.

Autonomy

The second element which shall be considered for this research project is that of keeping the research data rich and autonomous in order to reduce bias and interference with findings. Hammersley & Traianou (2012) define autonomy within social research as "To respect his or her right to hold certain views, to make certain choices, and to take certain actions based on personal values and beliefs". In order to adopt the importance of autonomy within this research each participant shall have the right to review a transcript of the interview to ensure that their views are being represented fairly.

Hammersley & Traianou (2012) explore privacy as a way to protect an individual from intrusive demands or the sharing of information where consent is not given. Whereas Nachamais (1992 cited in Cohen, 2007, p.64.) suggests that in order to maintain anonymity, and therefore respect the privacy of participants that research findings and data used should in no way reveal the participant's identity. Therefore, this research study shall use no names or job titles within its findings that can identify participants.

Diener & Crandall (1978, p63.) identify numerous different ways of which to keep the participant's identity private and anonymous. Two of these approaches have been adopted for this research project. Firstly we have the dissemination of information. One way the findings of this research shall be disseminated is through the release within institution involved in the research project. Each participant shall be informed prior to signing their consent that in the dissemination of findings, no names shall be used and because of the small scope of the project being based within one institution, the findings shall not mention job titles of the participants either with the aim to ensure privacy.

Confidentiality

The second method - adopted from Diener and Crandall (1978, p63.) - is that of storage with the aim to protect the individual participants. All paper based documents, in line with the BERA (2011) guidelines, shall be stored in a locked draw with access limited to only the researcher. All interview digital recordings shall be taken on a voice recorder before being transcribed for analysis. No recordings shall be taken on mobile phones and the voice recorder used shall also be stored in a locked draw when not in use. No files shall be shared electronically or be stored on computers accessed by other users.

By using this range of methods in order to abide by the BERA (2011) ethical guidelines; this research aims to protect all participants in order to create a fair and reliable set of data.

Research limitations

When considering the research design of this product, it is important to consider the possible limitations and weaknesses of the design and how this could affect any research participants (Cohen et al, 2007, p48.). Upon review there are three significant limitations within the design which need to be considered.

The first significant limitation upon the research project is time. The duration to complete both the primary research and carry out the effective data analysis on findings shall be one limitation that will be taken into consideration. Creating full transcripts for each semi structure interview participant shall be a lengthy process. However, Davidson (2009, p37.) suggests that all transcripts are selective in what and how they are transcribed. Whilst this is considered, the reason for full transcripts and not selective ones, is to provide a full enhanced view of each participant's views. But, it is also to serve the purpose of validation by allowing participants to read back and confirm their contribution to the research. In order to negate the time constraints, detailed and well planned timings and action plans shall allow for dedicating pockets of time for such analysis.

Secondly, generalisation to additional research will also be a limitation upon the project. Due to the small scale and scope this research has, findings could not be widely representative to all education providers. Yet, findings around assessment methods within Early Years could be more widely relevant; especially within colleges and the FE sector of similar sizes.

Lastly, a primary focus of the research is to explore the different grades achieved by learners across the three different specifications CCLD (2007), CPLD (2014), and CPLD (2016). One weakness of this research is that it only has the scope to take each set of grades at face value. However, it does not take into consideration alternative factors such as new students learning curves, the difference in industry knowledge between first year and second year students, or the impact of the teachers own industry experiences have on their assessment choices. Whilst the inconsideration of these factors could be argued to influence the final grades of each modular assessment, this has been identified and shall be considered within the findings. But, in order to gauge the overall effectiveness of how the assessment methods used fit in with a vocational ideology; such barriers have been consciously set aside.

Chapter 4: Presentation and analysis of findings

The focus of this research has investigated how a wide context of Early Years policy has impacted course changes for Early Years students within England, such as Children's Play, Learning and Development (2016) and Children's Care, Learning and Development (2007), focusing specifically on how these changes have impacted assessments for learning in preparation for students to be industry ready upon qualification.

Through carrying out data analysis from pre-existing data, semi structured interviews and numerical analysis of grades, a wide range of findings have presented themselves. Therefore, this next chapter shall explore such findings whilst relating the analysis to each of the three key research questions;

- How does the Early Years curriculum fit into a vocational ideology?
- What influences the method of assessment chosen for Early Years learners?
- How do the methods of assessment chosen ensure students are ready to work in the Early Years industry?

Within each research question, findings have been segmented further and the reoccurring themes analysed. Whilst there are a range of key findings discussed in this chapter, a short summery completes this section by highlighting some of the additional findings which do not fit in with the scope of this research project. Across the discussion of findings, individual participants shall be coded as P1, P2, P3, P4 or P5 and findings to emerge from specifications Children's Play, Learning and Development (2014) (2016) and Children's Care Learning and Development (2007) Shall be coded with the number of total student modular reviews first, the year of the specification and the relative awarding body last. E.G 23/2014/CPLD.

How does the Early Years curriculum fit into a vocational ideology?

'Vocational ideology' as explored within the literature review, for the purpose of this paper, is proposed to "give students the specialist knowledge they need for a specific job" (DFE, 2014.P3 & NCTFL, 2014). In order to examine how well the department of Early Years within the educational institution in question fits within this ideology it quickly became apparent that initial emphasis was to question if all of the interview participants viewed vocational ideology in the same way this report does. Across all five interviewees, common key phrases such as "it is about students doing it", "Simulating or creating real life skills", "Learning the skills required for real life in industry" became apparent as common trends which strengthen and create an air of agreement with the proposed definition used within this paper.

The phrases put forward across all five participants mentioned above supports not only the definition used within this paper but also that of Norrington (2012, p7) and the Wolf report's (2011) arguments of how vocational education should be. Yet deeper analysis of participants' views all strongly supported Sainsbury's (2016) argument that there are clear problems within the vocational sector and that this ideology is not being met. Although, therefore, each participant is in agreement with the literature of an ideology for vocational education it raised questions as to why this is the case and is this true to all subject areas including Early Years.

Findings across all three areas of research, semi structured interviews, modular reviews and grade data have offered contribution to this section of the research and generate three areas for discussion about how Early Years fits in with vocational ideology.

Technical pathways of education.

Whist the DFE (2014) and therefore, in turn Pearson (2014), introduced two pathways for learners within FE, these are explored within the literature review. Due to Early Years having a licence to practice attached to the completion of the level 3 programme as well as a high content of learnt specification, it is a worthy subject to explore if the teachers involved in this research feel it should be placed within the technical pathway allocated and if this meets the vocational nature and ideology associated with the course.

One participant (P4) claimed that the mere nature of the 'technical route' for vocational education was skewed and contradictory. The DFE (2014) identify technical courses to either;

> *"equip with specialist knowledge and skills, […] or progress to related higher education courses […] In some cases provide 'licence to practice' or exemption from professional exams."*

It was questioned by this interviewee (P4) that even within this one definition there are 3 very different routes for vocational education and therefore how can it be viable for one course to meet all 3 routes as the Early Years course is required too. Whilst this aim for technical based courses fits into Wolf (2011) suggestion that vocational courses should allow for progression to HE as well as industry, a key theme which emerged from 32 student modular reviews 23/2014/CPLD, 9/2016/CPLD was that the Early Years course CPLD 2014 specification and 2016 specification was trying to be too much and do everything. When examined further it became clear that there were three main arguments for this thinking;

1. The 'vocational course' contained exams which were not relevant or required within practice.

This was a point of contention mentioned through both 4 (24/2014&2016/CPLD) modular reviews of learners across both 2014 and 2016 specifications and through three out of five interviews. Whist one interviewee (p.3) explained that they felt;

> *"within some vocational industries there could be a need for exams so I do think there is a place for the within subject specific content" (p.3)*

Another interviewee argued that;

> *"Within the Early Years sector and even within HE Early Years courses, assessment of learning is very rare to be examination based"(p.4)*

This was further supported by 6 students modular reviews (6/2014/CPLD) exclaiming that;

> *"we are vocational learners […] We did a vocational course because I struggled to pass my A levels and wanted to do something hands on."*

Whilst there is clearly some discrepancies here, the DFE (2014) Indicates that in some cases there are exemption for professional exams.

Therefore, it would be worthy of exploration, on the basis of exams alone, if Early Years should fit within the technical route as the choice to include professional exams as an assessment method is one not relevant with the industry of Early Years and therefore a more industry method of assessment should replace examination units. This would also support Nutbrown's (2012) theory that assessment should be relative to industry practice.

2. The specification content coverage doesn't link to industry skill assessments.

One interview participant (P1) discussed in depth that the new specifications (2014 onwards) had been dramatically amended in their transformation both in a positive way due to a well needed update but also clarification within the assessments. However, two additional interviewees (P4, P2) expanded upon this, whilst agreeing that the updates were paramount within vocational industries, the amount of content in which should be covered had dramatically increased. One participant (P4) explained that;

> *"Within the Early Years units there were often 4-5 pages of content which should be assessed an whilst it is all relevant to be taught a lot of it is unfair to request assessment on […] an example would be if teaching about 12 safeguarding laws or policy, students should have an understanding of them all but shouldn't be required to explain and assess them all in detail. This is not what would have to be done in practice"*

A second participant (P2) whilst considering BTEC from a different subject expertise furthered this finding in explaining that;

> *"There are inconsistencies within the amount of spec and understanding of how much should be assessed. This is a cross college understanding as examination units you would expect to deliver all but an exam does not cover 100% of the specification content, therefore why would non examination units be expected to in their method of assessment"*

Whilst both of these points are valid, it would seem that this is an inconsistency within assessment to be explored by either management or to be consolidated by the BTEC

development team. However, this is a valid point to raise as Ofqual (Benson,2015) specifically suggest that courses should be skilled base and if 100% of specification should be covered then it raises questions as to how this is achievable whilst maintaining a skill based assessment method related to Early Years industry.

3. True skill based assessment only forms a small percentage of assessment and grading.

Whilst a clear theme emerged across both one participant (p4) interview and 100% of student's modular reviews from the 2014 and 2016 specification, a high number of industry assessment methods are being used and additional skills are being taught outside of the specification content it was identified through 3 modular reviews (CPLD,2014) that;

> *"It is like having the course we have to be taught and the work and then what the teachers help us learn and provide us with the skills to do which are not part of the course"*
>
> *"It seems the only assessment which we do to develop skills which are part of the course only form one pass criteria which is our portfolio, the rest is a level like assessment".*

This key element is discussed in greater depth in later in findings. However, a key difference highlighted by one participant (P4) is that;

> *"There is, however, a key change for the better between the 2014 and 2016 specification in that at least 1 learning aim in the 2016 specification has a command verb to 'demonstrate' included which means there is some development in the consistency of a 'doing' mentality arising within the specifications however this is still a drop in the ocean of what it should be"*

It could be argued that in order to meet the Wolf review (2011) requirements of allowing progression to HE as well as industry within the technical route that high content which is often written based is developing analytical skills as well as having some elements of industry such as the 'demonstrate' for skills.

To summarise how well Early Years as a course fits within the technical route, It would be fair to question how well this has happened as there appears to be some elements of the provision of knowledge and skills and an element of HE preparation and licence to practice. So, whilst there is the evidence the course meets a little bit of everything outlined in the DFE (2014) prescription of a technical course, there are strong reasons to argue that in meeting all of the different parts, Early Years CPLD (2016) course is not fitting into the vocational ideology to the extent it should be.

Current opportunities in institutions Early Years department

Whilst four out of five interviewees contributed valuable insights into how vocational education can be improved or should be run, one participant (p4) when the question of how does Early Years fit into vocational ideology, discussed that actually the department is stuck within a situation where delivering the range of skills students should be taught are not a key part of the specification and assessment process. Whilst Nutbrown (2012) indicates some clear guidance as to what skills students should be learning for industry and therefore is supported by the EYE (NCTL, 2013) criteria, one participant (p5) argued this is not the same across wider subjects and raised the question as to who dictates these sets of skills students need to learn and why do they not feed through into the specifications. Although this would agree with Panchamia's (2012) argument that the closure of the sector skills council has impacted the reliability of vocational education, without having additional research including contact with Pearson the scope of this project dos not allow for such exploration, however, this could be something worthy of additional research.

Furthering from this point, one participant (P1) explained that "the skills developed within the Early Years specification is more of a bolt on for their portfolio unit than the core assessment across the course". However, whilst this is a key constraint, one further interviewee (p4) further articulated:

> *"There are lots of different skills which the department are currently offering and running alongside the teaching content in order to provide the industry skills to accompany students work experience in placement. However, these shouldn't be a bolt-on we schedule in, they should be mandatory and integrated within the GLH and spec"*

Some of these opportunities are now briefly interpreted from what both one interviewee (P4) and the 2015/2016 cohorts modular reviews explained.

Live Practice

> *"Outside of lesson time but still within contact time with learners we invite a local nursery to attend once a week bringing pre-school children with them. This provides live assessment opportunities to assess students in a range of skills and provide 1:1 support and development where required which they do not get in placement as much. (P4)"*

It was addressed, however, by a different participant (P3) that although this is a good opportunity for learners it comes with its own barriers of time, timetabling and staff limitations with regard to not being able to have all learners working at the same time. Some of these barriers are discussed further on in the findings within this report.

Additional experiences outside the classroom

Whilst a lot of the EYE (NCTL, 2013) skills can be carried out within the classroom environment, unit specification of the CPLD (2016) specification indicates there is a section within the portfolio where students are required to experience outdoor settings and planning with children. In order to develop these skills, it was identified through interview with one participant (P2);

> *"That the department is working in partnership with a nursery to accompany them on forest school visits as well as college arrange trips to local woodland areas to widen the horizon of learners who often have never experienced similar environments."*

Funding has been identified by 18 student's modular reviews (18/2014/CPLD) as an issue when staff try and arrange such trips as the forest school training events and time has also been a key factor when staff attempt to plan visits to the local library with children to develop literacy planning. One student (1/2014/CPLD) explained that;

> *"The staff seem to have limitations when they try and do these things for us which are more helpful than learning the spec stuff".*

The barriers of time and funding are explored through the GLH of the course later on in the findings section.

Industry skills within the classroom

As part of identifying what vocational experiences the course CPLD provides for learners, one student (CPLD/2016) identified that;

> "The course gives us the experiences and skills to go into nursery work or classroom based teaching TA posts"

This is reinforced through the CPLD (BTEC,2016 p7) specification which explains that "Students completing their BTEC Nationals in Children's Play, Learning and Development will be aiming to go on to employment".

Findings from 3 interview participants (P3, P2, P5) explained that classroom simulations are valuable to learning skills for vocational skills and within Early Years these skills range from practical skills such as creating displays with children's work to organising and presenting their ideas.
However, one criticism of this again comes back to the issue that these skills are only one pass criteria for one unit within the whole 2 year course. (CPLD, 2016)

To summarise some of the experiences which two thirds of learners have identified through modular reviews (2014/CPLD & 2016/CPLD) and interviewees (P3, P2, P5) have discussed, there are key elements which work with learners to develop skills required for the workplace as Nutbrown (2012) suggested. However, it appears these come with limitations and the notion of being stuck between "the spec and real life skills" (p4), minimal integration of the two seem to be apparent. It would be fair to suggest that despite the lack of integration which would need to be transformed from a wider context, there are many elements taking place which are working to provide Early Years learners in this institution a vocational education and therefore could argue that Early Years fits very well within the vocational ideology, however there are many limitations which prevent this from its full effectiveness.

What influences the methods of assessment chosen for Early Years learners?

When exploring an ideology for assessment methods in Early Years, as this paper previously discusses, there are numerous key legislative policies which have been enforced to date (Nutbrown, 2012; Wolf report, 2011 And the Sainsbury review, 2016) These key policies have raised specific questions and concepts about vocational education but when used to analyse how assessment and learning should be measured often create conflict and a critique of each other.

This section of findings explores how assessment methods used within one institutions Early Years department are influenced. Findings here mainly draw from the semi-structured interviews conducted and the modular reviews carried out from pre-existing data. These findings have been critiqued using thematic analysis.

When analysing the different influence themes identified within findings for Early Years assessments it became apparent that these were commonly referred to as barriers by the majority of participants and within this, two separate trends impacted on the assessment process; internal institutional barriers and External wider contextual barriers. Both shall be explored in turn.

Internal barriers

Teachers' industry expertise

Three interview participants highlighted that staffing is a current barrier within the educational institution to developing true vocational assessments. Within this, two further points were identified as staff lacking in vocational skills to impact assessment and a lack of confidence from staff to assess true vocational experiences.

As BTEC (2005.P6) express, there are no restraints on assessment methods for their courses apart from the externally marked exam and synoptic assessment. However this conflict with the one main, imperative point to come from the Nutbrown (2012) review being that of the importance for Early Years teachers to have a wealth of industry experience to enable their choice of assessment for learners. On one hand, this is conflicting as BTEC allow for absolute flexibility within their internally assessed units, however as discussed in the literature review of this research, the 'local needs' of the sector is very subjective in relation to the experience and industry knowledge of the teacher. Therefore this would support Nutbrown's (2012) argument that there are inconsistencies within the sector of practitioners' knowledge. However, on the other hand, both sides clearly emphasise that there is a high importance for industry knowledge in order to deliver true vocational courses. One comment made within interview was that;

> *"The difference between teaching an academic A level course to a vocational is that its what's not the content but the tricks of the trade, best methods of doing that job or teaching learners to read between the lines…. You only get that through sound industry experience" (P2)*

Whilst this participants view supports that of Nutbrown (2012) and BTEC (2015), it was further identified that as part of the institutions progression forward more staff are being employed with industry backgrounds, especially recently within the Health and Early Years department in order to provide learners with the vocational skills required outside of the course specifications. Whilst this is a conscious step forward for the institution, across the interviews a common thread which was evident was the view point that even with vocational skills, there is a concern that teachers lack the confidence to assess vocational skills within a vocational context.

Findings across interviews from all participants discussed the need for essential support in making conscious changes to vocational assessments, part of this is being to build the confidence of teachers to move away from completely written assessments and incorporate a range of practical and industry assessments. However, all three modular reviews; CCLD (2007, CPLD,2014 and CPLD 2016) indicate that this is a confidence lack in both staff and students as when given the choice between written or industry related, not practical, a common theme across students (CPLD,2014 and 2016) claimed that;

> *"Written assignments are easier because we know we can pass it easier"*
>
> *"Either practical in placement assessments which are the best or written assignments are the best, not because I like writing them but I know how to do it"*

Comments such as those above have created the indication that although learners do not prefer written assignments as they lack vocational content, when given the choice for assessment written assignments are 'easier' with regards to their confidence in achieving the content. It could be argued that this lack of confidence from learners is interrelated to teachers lacking confidence in the assessment process also.

One method which was discussed by two interviewees (P4, P1) was the consideration of introducing and qualifying staff as qualified assessors, with the aim to build confidence in their ability to assess and therefore use industry skills to build confidence in student's ability also. One interviewee (p5) explained that:

> *"Teachers may well have the confidence in their subject but if they are not confident in how to assess it, learners are not likely to be confident in their ability to achieve in that context or method"*

According to participant 1, qualifying teachers as assessors is something which this institution aims to do with both members of the Early Years team. One further benefit of providing this training within Early years could be the link to the EYE(NCTL,2014) and being able to strengthen how each of the 41 skills are taught and assessed, perhaps even integrating them further within units instead of only focusing on them as part of one pass criteria within one unit.

Although this is a finding which was targeted at a specific institution and department, it could be rolled out across all vocational courses and be a more generic resolution if such concerns are subject wide.

External barriers

A second barrier which has been identified across both the institutional modular reviews as well as the interviews consists of external factors and influences on vocational assessment methods. The two key themes which emerged throughout were that of specification limitations to assessment methods and funding.

Specification limitations

Firstly, one interviewee (P1) discusses his experiences working within the constraints of the BTEC specifications and how these impacts on the assessment methods used.

> *"When teaching to a BTEC specification although there are units which naturally lend themselves to specific assessment methods such as unit 9 where learners are required to use different observation methods as their assessment, the majority of units are open to teachers choice. The problem with this is that within the specification there is so much content which is needing to be evident within the assessment that it often doesn't fit into a natural vocational assessment" (P1)*

This view point was supported by 12 modular reviews (12/2016/CPLD) that have a general consensus in agreement with this student who claims that;

> *"Some of the units have way to much spec content and a lot of it even though it is good background stuff; it's not relevant to a good assessment which helps us actually learn stuff".*

Whilst the course specification (see example in appendix) is an apparent barrier within this institution and course area, further analysis of interviews also indicated that there is some confusion around how much of a unit content should be covered from the taught specification within an assessment. Whilst one participant (P4) indicated that the specification is far too long to meet within an assessment, another participant argued (P3) that it was only the most relevant content from the specification which needs to be covered. It would be fair to suggest that this is one area which should be explored further in order to identify the severity of this barrier in order to overcome it.

Funding and Resources

A second external barrier to be identified through thematic analysis of both the interviews and modular reviews was that of funding being a key barrier to assessment. Funding was explored across all of the face to face interviews and mentioned in approximately 40% of modular reviews CPLD (2014) where it was highlighted as a common issue within assessment method and classroom learning. The following comments were taken from a cross range of interviews;

> *"Resources to transform the classroom into a real 'industry' experience for learners to be assessed in is in most areas are minimal due to the cost of doing so" (P2)*

> *"Unlike FE, we are limited with funding and resources, ideally setting up projects just as a live nursery to support assessment and live experiences would be ideal or buying projects for students to fix up with construction or engineering courses" (P1)*

> *"In order to come away from written assignments and assessments, resources such as flip cams for group discussions, resources for more practical assessment methods and being reliant on technology and competent wifi is often a problem with the number of students in the department. These form barriers which ultimately create limitations for teachers. (P5)*

Likewise, this was repeated as common themes across 2 specific modular reviews as it was expressed that;

> *"It's frustrating when teachers want to take us places which would help us with our assignments and there are problems with the minibus or there is no money in the budget" (CPLD, 2014)*

> *"We have used a range of assessments with our teachers, but the ones where we are in practice and the children are in college are restricted because of time and our teachers being stretched across different groups". (CPLD, 2016)*

As evidenced through the sample of quotes above, funding and time are common themes which impact assessment methods within the institution. These two themes link together in one discussed element as students are funded on their course in relation to Guided Learning Hours and are allocated percentages of times to study each week. However, within these GLH, it has been identified by one member of staff that;

> *"GLH is tight and is completely needed to get through the unit content not really to be flexible enough to be engaged in additional activities such as having children visit the institution in order to construct real life assessments". (P4)*

As discussed previously within the review of literature, the EFA (2016p21) and Wolf report (2011) both identify that funding of courses is allocated around many requirements, however the GLH of courses being a key one. It would be fair to agree that Nutbrown's (2012 p22) critique of this concept in emphasising the importance of Early Years practitioners taking time to study skills and develop is strongly supporting the findings of both the modular reviews and the staff interview quoted above. When restricting time for practitioner's development in the form of GLH, there have been clear findings that this is having an impact on the Early Years departments' ability to increase the range of assessment methods being used. Whilst there is evidence through the different assessment methods used that across the last three years assessment methods have begun to develop to being more vocational and industry based, GLH and time provided for students development within the course still remains a barrier to implementing further "live or practical based assessments for both the teachers and students".

How do the methods of assessments chosen ensure students are ready to work in the Early Years industry?

Nutbrown (2011) indicates, as discussed within the literature review of this research, that there should be strong elements within an Early Years course in order to equip learners with the skills and real life experiences of working within industry.

This section of findings examines how well the current courses and opportunities provided for learners within the focused institution is actually preparing them for industry. Both research grades across three cohorts and modular reviews from such learners are the main focus of data drawn from within this discussion.

One area of research which has highlighted key themes across this project was the examination of different assessment methods used on the same course across 3 different specifications CCLD (2007), CPLD (2014) and CPLD (2016). Exploring the different assessment methods used across the change in specifications aimed to investigate how well the course of Early Years is preparing the learners for industry. Literature such as the Wolf (2011) report and Nutbrown (2012) review creates ideologies that assessments should be industry related, provide opportunities for learning 'on the job' and provide learners with experiences for up to date industry knowledge from staff.

Therefore, all assessment methods across the last three changes in specifications on the Early Years courses have been examined and categorised to see how well the deliverance of the assessments fit within the vocational ideology Nutbrown (2012) and Wolf (2011) established.

For the purpose of this discussion of findings, the wide range of different assessment methods used have been segmented into four different categories depending upon the type of method used.

Assessment directly based in practice

Firstly, CCLD (2007) data suggests that any assessment directly based in practice (see figure 1 below) have a direct correlation on the percentage of high grades achieved by learners.

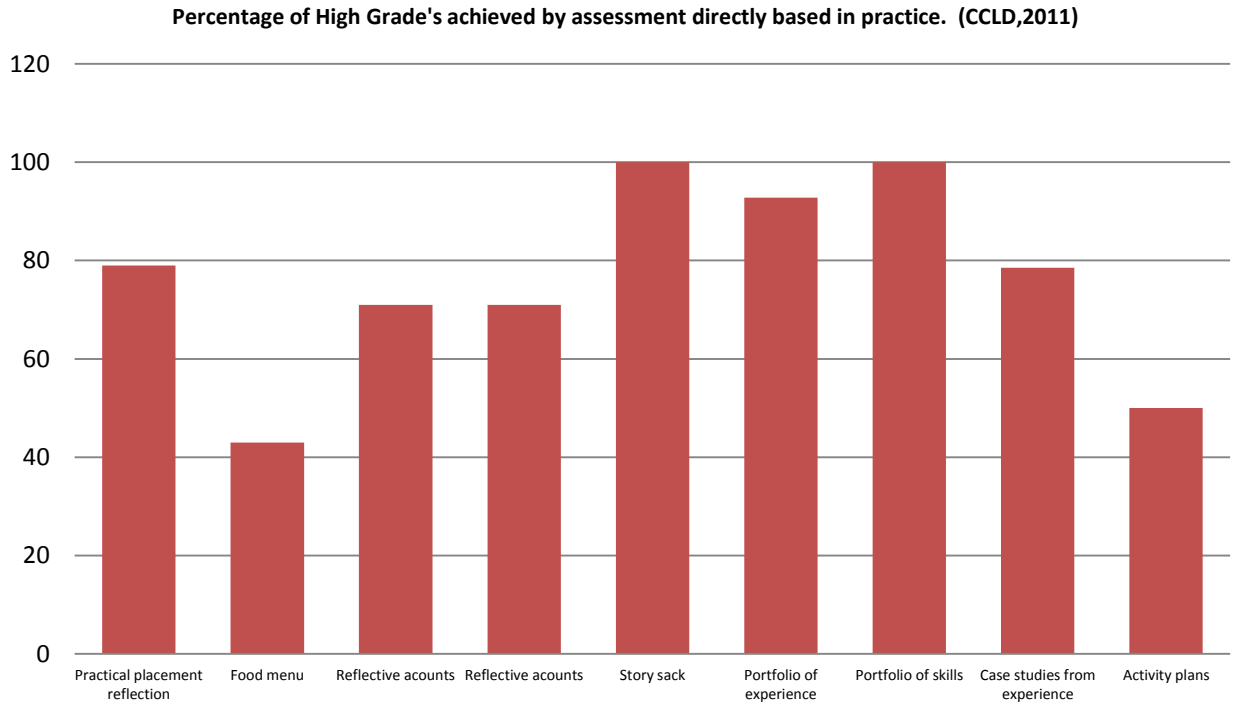

Figure 1.

Whilst, from an educational perspective, high grades are often deemed important with relation to league tables and funding it begs the question 'do high grades truly equal competency'?, a question to be explored not in the scope of this research project but worthy of additional exploration.

However, within the scope of this research, the analysis of these assessment methods compared both the practice based assessments and non-practice related assessments with the EYE (2013) core skills that are imperative for an Early Years worker to develop to explore how effective they are at preparing learners with workforce skills.

In doing this, a clear correlation has shown that the practical based assessments used are closely linked with requirements such as EYE core skills. One example of these links comes from the 2016 specification, a unit based around observation methods clearly demonstrated that the assessments learners were carrying out are focused directly on skills used within practice but also skills such as 3.2 'Carry out and record observational

assessment accurately' directed from the EYE (2013). Student modular feedback also shows significant support of the more practice based assessments preparing them for industry. One review explained that:

> *"Learning to observe children through this unit and carrying out my own observations is an important skill I need so I can complete my own key records after I qualify. Writing about this or using the textbook wouldn't have helped me as much" (CPLD, 2016)*

Whilst this is just one example, findings clearly show this is repeated across numerous units on both the CPLD 2014 specification and 2016 specification but not as highly on the previous CCLD (2007) specification. Examining this difference highlights two possible reasons for this.

Firstly, since the CCLD (2007) specification was launched back in 2013, Government regulations, laws and policies could have changed alongside best practice working with children and therefore the assessment methods taught by the teaching staff at the time could be different. However, the key policies impacting change such as the Nutbrown (2012) review, EYE (2013) and the Wolf report have not recently being amended since 2013 and therefore, although practice in industry is ever developing, no key policy change has been enforced which would trigger a content change or impact on assessment methods being less practical based.

The second possible reason and what could be argued a more valid one; there has been a staff change between this specification (CCLD, 2007) and the CPLD (2014). This change in staff has introduced a primary school teacher with a wealth of Early Years' experience and a level 6 Early Years practitioner with a wealth of experience working with children in social services, education and private care. It could be argued that the introduction of this experience and industry expertise has provided up to date and relevant opportunities for more live and therefore industry ready assessments. Although judgements cannot be made on the industry experiences of previous staff members, 19 student modular reviews indicate that from the CCLD (2007) specification their experience in industry (placement) was very separate to that of their work in the classroom. A different view has been expressed in a modular review from the 2016 specification through explaining that;

> *"What we do in college is to help and assist what we are doing in placement. The evidence we get in placement always links back to the classroom and we are often encouraged in college to reflect and share our experiences to support our college work when linking to theory" (2016 specification modular review)*

Additional data found which supports this finding is from 3 out of 4 interviews held with staff mentioned that having industry experience is an imperative part of delivering and planning for vocational courses. One participant (p2) explained that with industry experience comes "the confidence to assess as you would in industry instead of trying to recreate actions through words". Whilst another explained that as a college, "there has been a focus on increasing the industry experience of teachers they employ".

This range of evidence supports Nutbrown's (2012) explicit argument that learners should be taught from a background of industry expertise. It is fair to argue that these findings support Nutbrown's (2012) suggestions as both the number of 'industry based assessments' increased but so did the grades and the links to the EYE (2013) criteria as staff members changed. This therefore suggests that the assessment methods based around 'direct practice' are preparing learners well to work within the Early Years industry.

Assessment related to practice

Secondly, findings suggest that any assessment related to practice but not carried out in practice such as the skills needed to work effectively and safety within industry i.e. developing displays, speaking skills, food hygiene training etc… also contribute to a relatively high percentage of grades for learners.

Modular reviews across each of the three cohorts, but more specifically within the 2014 and 2016 cohorts indicated that those assessments which support the skills needed "to be a practitioner rather that to work as a practitioner" allow students to build up their skill set and confidence to support them further in the workplace. Two interviewees (P1, 2) also made reference to 'softer skills' within their interview which

> *"Are the skills teachers need to develop outside of what is written in the specification in order to make them employable young people". (P1)*

However, when probed further, limited understanding as to what these 'softer skills' should be and who should set them was conveyed. This is something that Sainsbury (2016) additionally argued that a high number of young people leave education unskilled for industry which could be a direct impact on the closure of the Sector Skills Council back in 2010 (Panchamia, 2012). One specific interviewee argued that this could be the case as regulations for OFQUAL to accredit courses since the closure of the SSC has changed and is not as rigorous (Gov.uk, 2016).

Furthermore, this key concern around employment or softer skills not being a coherent set agrees with the concerns of Nutbrown (2012) who would argue that in not knowing which skill set should be taught to learners is "not systematically equipping practitioners with the knowledge, skills and understanding" (P5). However, although, as was mentioned in 4 interviews, the industry of Early Years is different to other areas of industry such as a mechanics due to the level 3 course providing learners with a license to practice. Due to this license to practice, set skills are prescribed within specifications as set out by both the national curriculum and EYE (NCTL, 2014). However, it is the additional skill set for employability, not specifically linked to a job role which findings have indicated is missing.

One reason suggested through interviews from both a teacher of Early Years and a Quality Manager was that the reason for this gap in skills being prescribed from educators could be related to the understanding that all courses should allow both vocational and progression to HE (Wolf,2011) where it could be argued these softer vocational skills are not required. This could suggest that vocational courses which are being delivered have an ulterior focus emphasising too much on HE and not industry. However, one specific participant (P3) explained that in order to incorporate the industry and sector knowledge skills outside of the specification, industry experts are required to develop assessment methods true to practice, and that is how the institution is attempting to move forward to develop such skills.

Findings gathered through modular reviews (CCLD, 2013, CPLD 2014, CPLD 2016), students perspectives, and that of one interviewee (P3) differed significantly. Modular grades from across all three cohorts examined, indicate that grades achieved through assessments based around the 'employability and softer skills' are relatively consistent and on average sit at between 60-70% high grades. This has been supported through

modular reviews (CPLD,2014 & CPLD, 2016) where learners 59 learners across all three cohorts have suggested that these assessment methods have aided their confidence to increase, understanding of self to be promoted and range of skill set to be increased. However, in contrary to this, one compelling view point (P2) was that a high percentage of our learners progress onto university and therefore although there are benefits to developing such skills for personal development of learners, it should be academic skills through assessment methods which promote study skills and development for HE progression.

Arguably, with such conflict between preparing learners for HE and industry from both literature and through this research that there is still on a smaller scale institution some conflict within the education sector. Although there are differences in opinions, there is substantial evidence from student grades and modular reviews that the assessment methods used which relate to practice and support employment are having an effective impact on learners in preparing them for practice. One learner expressed in their module review that "My placement report said that the manager has seen how much I have grown in confidence and reliability over the year". (CPLD, 2014 modular review) Additional research would benefit this exploration by incorporating industry experts in the planning process of vocational courses to identify the additional areas learners could develop to support them within industry. One interviewee (P5) suggested that although this happens to some extent within the college that this is something to be enhanced within the institution.

Assessment used to reflect on theory

Thirdly, a further category of assessment used within the Early Years department is to reflect on theory from practice. This, according with both specifications from CPLD 2014 and 2016 is encouraged within some of the unit contents. However, analysis of grades across all three specifications indicated that this category of assessment forms only 3.1% of all assessments used. In comparison with all the assessment methods used this is the lowest, yet, grade analysis indicates that those assessments used carry a relatively high grade with them.

When analysing module reviews for such assessment units there was a mixture of responses from learners who, although expressed they could see the benefit in reflecting on their practice;

> "At first I thought reflective practice was really pointless but when we started learning about the different reflective theory and how to apply it in practice it started making sense as to how we can use it make us better in placement" (CPLD, 2014 Modular review)

There was also a general expression from a wealth of modular reviews that;

> "I do think this unit is important, learning how to reflect on us and what we do but don't think it should be a whole unit, doing this alongside practical stuff would be good. We do this as part of unit 9 when we reflect and evaluate our activity plans so same thing really and that is much better it should be in all we do not separate" (CPLD, 2016 modular review)

In accordance with Norrington, (2012 p.12) vocational sectors should provide students with "The expertise to deal with everyday problems, the resourcefulness to solve trickier problems and the wider skills for growth to innovate for future solutions" Whilst the statistics from findings indicate this is not an assessment method used frequently, it would be fair to argue that the student view points and grades achieved agree with Norrington's (2012) view that this is a key skill for learners to develop in order to progress their ability to solve problems.

Furthermore, within each interview, interviewees were exploring the potential barriers of using methods of assessment within vocational courses. One participant (P5) highlighted assessment to reflect and build on skills to be a paramount skills required for students to learn, however, also identified that there are numerous barriers to implementing such assessment. A range of barriers were mentioned across each interview. However, a key one relevant to this method of assessment was the lack of time available to teachers in order to teach students the skills of how to reflect effectively in order to develop and learn from their practice. It was suggested for one participant (P2) that this could be a reason for the lack of single assessment units related to reflection. Whereas, just as the student through their modular review indicated, reflection is and should be taught across all assessments; yet this is not clear to an external view of the assessment methods.

Whilst the specifications mention reflection only in one unit for the CPLD 2014 and 2016 and not definitively in the CCLD (2007) specification, it would be fair to argue that one way to improve the coverage of reflective practice for Early Years students and to overcome the barrier of time would be to use reflection within teaching and learning to enhance the students ability of reflection on practice. In teachers developing their learners through teaching and learning from their own choice as BTEC indicates they should, further inconsistencies are being developed between comparative students on the same course across the west midlands as Nutbrown (2012) indicated was happening.

Whilst there does not appear to be a simple solution to resolving inconsistencies on a wider scale, this research findings suggest that using reflection assessment does improve the grades of learners as well as improving their vocational practice, however in order to overcome potential barriers of time, one finding for teachers to adopt could be to enhance this within teaching and learning and AFL rather than a single method of AOL.

Assessment in the form of written theory

The final category which the assessment analysis indicated within this institution is that of written work. This category contains a collection across all three cohorts of written assignments, reports and externally marked work including an exam paper. At a first glance, the grade analysis for this category of assessment displays a wide range in grades. Below is an example taken from the two courses CCLD (2007) and CPLD (2014) which clearly indicates that there is limited continuity in the percentage of high grades achieved across the two courses and between each assessment.

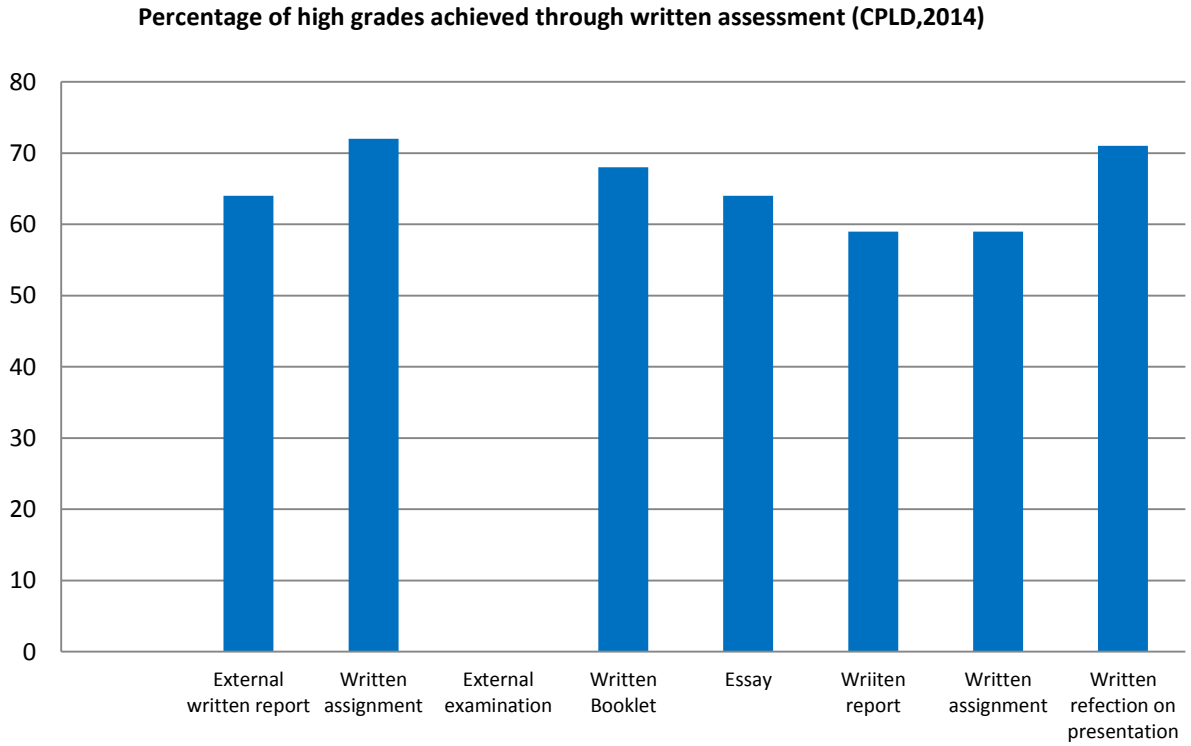

Figure 2.

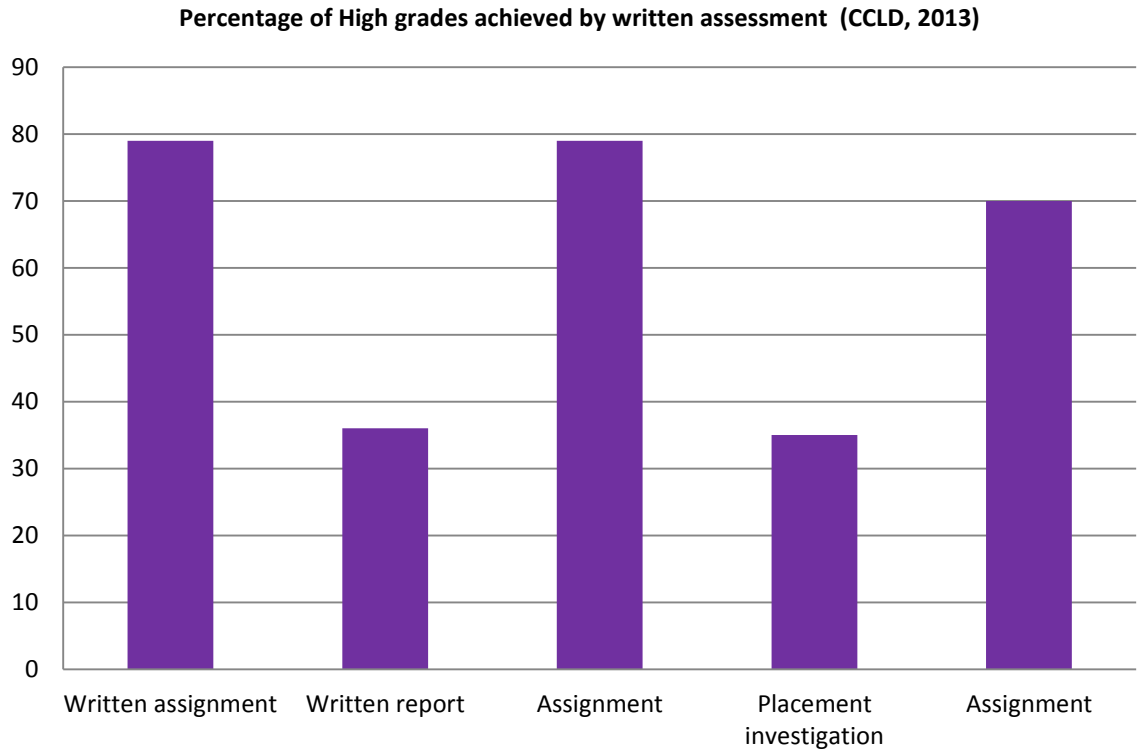

Figure 3.

The second of these graphs, CCLD, (2007) has varied percentages of high grades; however two are well within the top 30% compared to the first graph which all sits between 50 and 70%. One participant who has experienced the change in specification strongly argues that the change in content and academic expectations between courses answers this difference as;

> *"Learners are expected to achieve and provide much more academic based evidence for the CPLD specs, some of which is a ridiculous amount of content and within word counts. These are vocational learners." (P4)*

The only exception to this is the external examined unit which achieved 0% high grades and when analysing data alongside the comparable modular guide's students clearly indicated that they rated the exam very lowly in how they felt it prepared them for industry and practice.

Likewise, a common theme running through all interviews was that the only reason for the introduction of exams was in fear of the changes from OFQUAL (Gov.uk,2016) and current reviews such as the Sainsbury (2016) review which highlights the need for more rigorous assessment and the need to provide learners with the skills to access HE (Wolf, 2011). When questioned, a consensual theme running through the interview findings was that written assessment has its place within vocational education, as critical, analytical and written skills are entwined within most industries, especially that of care or education. However, one participant indicates that;

> *"Although written skills are important for vocational industries, a number of our learners do progress onto HE into vocational degrees or equivalent courses and therefore a mixture of academic and voc skills are needed even for HE progression" (P3)*

However, a further participant argued that:

> *"Even though specifications are now designed to support access to HE, even within HE vocational courses related to Early Years, the majority do not have exams, they have a higher level of written assessment but also contain a high percentage of practical assessments, reflective practice and portfolio based assessments" (P4)*

Based on this concept, it would be fair to question if Early Years has been contained into the bracket of technical courses (2015) But not considered independently as Nutbrown (2012) argued it should be as this section of assessment methods does not sit within the vocational context to equip learners for industry.

The concept of a more balanced approach to exploring key topics such as children's development (Unit 1 examination unit, CPLD 2014) is comparable between the CCLD (2013) specification where it was exploration based and learners created a portfolio of findings to explore different stages and factors of development and achieved 78% high grades whereas the examined unit on the same unit in CPLD (2014 & 2016) achieved 0% high grades and triggered 3 learners to fail the course. This key difference is clearly down to the assessment method used as content is comparable and very similar.

It would be fair to question if this specific unit (Unit 1, CPLD 2014) had have consisted of a more balanced or multiple assessment method alongside a written assessment if the learners reviews would have been better, grades increased and learners have developed greater skills within industry.

It is clear by drawing all the institutional data together around the use of written assessment that although there is some evidence of higher grades across all three cohorts, the written assessment in itself is not providing the learners with the vocational and industry skills they need to develop for practice. However, whilst it has been recognised through both data analysis, interviews and modular reviews, there is a place for the development of written skills within vocational courses it would be fair to argue that using this method of assessment alone is not a suitable method for student assessment, a balance of assessment methods is more appropriate for Early Years vocational learners.

Summary of findings

The findings explored within the main three research questions for this paper have highlighted that although a generic agreement has been reached on what vocational education should be, key barriers have been identified within each of the research questions relating Early Years to vocational education.

Firstly, a notion stands to question if Early Years as a course should belong on a technical pathway for education considering the definition of what a technical pathway is due to exams and high content, low skills based specifications.

Secondly, an exploration into how well Early Years fits within a vocational ideology revealed that as a single department, additional skills and experiences outside the teaching of the specification is creating a vocational element but in doing so instigates a two sided battle between the GLH for teaching content and the time, funding and resources to equip students with the skills that should be assessed for industry practice. One further key finding within this is the need to have confidence in staff to deliver and assess true vocational courses suggesting that teachers should have strong industry background and could be supported further through the use of assessment qualifications or training. This in turn would allow for wider industry related assessment to be introduced. Evidence of this has been seen through the change in Early Years team across different specifications.

Finally, when analysing effective assessment methods used to ensure industry ready learners, a range of exploration within the key four categories; assessment directly in practice, assessment related practice, assessment used to reflect on theory and assessment in the form of written theory was divulged. Overall, findings suggest that whilst assessment based directly in practice and that closely related to practice out performs other types with the percentage of high grades achieved and skills based ready for practice, the best outcome for high grades and industry application was within modules where a mixed method of assessment is used to assess theory and its implication within practice. This generated both high grades and also received the best feedback from learners to "equip them ready for industry" (CPLD, 2014 modular review).

Other findings

Whilst findings were gathered, a degree of inconsistency emerged in relation to how the skills needed for the workforce are deemed relevant, and by whom. Similarly, there were issues raised in relation to funding and the impact of this on guided learning hours. However, whilst recognised that these are important, the scope of this research limits the depth which can be achieved with them. It is therefore that such findings could be explored in further detail in additional research projects.

Chapter 5: Conclusion and recommendations

The journey of this research began with personal experiences of the recent changes across vocational education. Specifically that of the Early Years sector and with a curiosity of how such changes impact on the learners within one specific institution.

Along with exploring key literature and policy changes within the wider context of England, three research questions framed the research methods used when collating primary research within the institution. Although these findings have been discussed in depth in the previous chapter this final chapter shall conclude each section of findings in relation to the research questions proposed throughout the project and shall conclude with recommendations for practice where appropriate.

How does the Early Years curriculum fit into a vocational ideology?

The notion of 'Vocational ideology' used for the purpose of this paper, as been proposed to "give students the specialist knowledge they need for a specific job" (DFE, 2014, P3 & NCTFL, 2014).

A clear consensus has been achieved through the findings of both interviews and modular reviews within the research around what the true aim of vocational education should be; entertaining the view that it's all about 'doing it'. Whilst there is a clear connection between such view points and that of policy such as the Wolf (2011) review which is clearly a strong unity to develop effective vocational teaching, there are also , and more worryingly, valid concerns over the current practicality and effectiveness of vocational education within the wider context of England but also within the institution.

When examined further, there have been three strands identified for this concern which although have previously been discussed within both the findings and results section of the dissertation shall now be mentioned with relevance to recommendations for improving practice in order to ensure that Early Years does for within the vocational ideology presented.

Firstly, questioning if Early Years as a course granting licence to practice, should truly be allocated a 'technical' pathway of education due to it seeming to have adopted an 'everything to everyone' stance. There were a further three reasons as to why an array

of concern about how truly vocational Early Years education is within the institution. These include the use of controlled examinations which do not prepare 'vocational learners' for industry assessment practice, whilst it is addressed in the BTEC 2016 Specification that internal assessments are choice of assessor concerns were raised by participants that the specification of both the 14 and 16 CPLD do not let itself to industry practice assessment methods due to both the amount of content to be assessed and finally that the truly vocational assessment areas are minimal within the overall qualification.

Whilst evidence from participants interviews and modular reviews suggest that the aims of 'technical courses' has been met through the Early Years course, neither elements appear to have been met in the depth expected of a course providing licence to practice.

Secondly, it became very apparent that the vocational ideology around 'just doing it' required a whole package of experiences and opportunities which Early Years staff were working to create in addition to the specification assessment in order to 'teach those industry skills' not included in the course specification. Whilst these packages of skills faced barriers and still have a way to go in providing for all learners on the course, there was confusion and conflicting views around where the list of skills students need for industry should be coming from. Such confusion and conflict was expressed through participant interviews, as explored within the findings chapter, and suggested the cause could have been due to closure of the sector skills council whom in the past generated specific skill listings relevant to both industry and qualifications. With this closure a definitive skills set for practice has since been missing, in turn impacting on specifications with limited consistency.

Whilst it is recognised this is a small scale research project and studies only the impact of policy changes to a small minority of students within England and cannot therefore be generalised across all Early Years students and institutions, elements of these findings can be applied to similar institutions and course subjects. It is fair to conclude that although there are some elements evident within the course specification and some strong elements of good practice within the department, in order to improve the vocational elements to the course CPLD, a number of recommendations for improvement should be made.

Recommendations for Institutional Practice

- Industry links continue to improve as Nutbrown (2012) highlights the importance of such links. Amend timetabling to allow forward planning for the introduction of new opportunities for all learners. In planning for additional opportunities, potential barriers can be foreseeing and reduced.
- Explore funding options to allow for additional resources and opportunities for learners. Whilst considering internal funding is limited to budgets, accessing external funding could provide new opportunities for learners to experience and learn from.

Recommendations for Awarding Bodies

- To explore and be more prescriptive of the industry skills students are to achieve outside of the portfolio skills in order to be 'ready for practice'. In prescribing skills for industry, from industry experts and course writers, a wider range of experiences should be enhanced through greater expectations.
- To explore if courses, such as Early Years should be allocated a pathway of which there is evidence to suggest it doesn't specifically fit. Whilst findings in this research indicate that the course of CPLD (2015) has met some of the pathway requirements and Wolf (2011) argues learners should be both industry and HE ready, additional research would be worthy to explore why such a distinctive course with licence to practice needs to be on a pathway with so many additional expectations.

What influences the methods of assessment chosen for Early Years learners?

The findings discussed in chapter 4 around the influences, or barriers as they became known among participants, explored how the assessment methods within the one institution are impacted. Two trends, Internal and External influences became apparent through findings and both, in turn presented a range of barriers.

Internal factors impacting assessment methods consisted of staff and their industry expertise or lack of and the impact this had on their confidence to assess to an industry standard. Although it was recognised that employing staff across the vocational courses with industry expertise is something the college have in their focus and have started to implement, there was still concern over current staff members and their confidence in being able to assess industry skills with confidence. One finding explored was to implement further training to staff such as 'assessor awards' to build on the confidence to assess but also to provide more opportunities both in and out of the college environment to provide 'live' assessment opportunities. Whilst it is recognised there are a number of opportunities being provided within the Early Years department, within the wider context of the college's vocational sector, industry opportunities and knowledge of staff remain often limited.

The second theme explored is external factors which influence assessment choices within Early Years. There are two threads within this; Specification limitations and funding/resources. Firstly, specification limits opens two concerns, firstly that there is too much specification content to assess in a vocational nature, this how shown to be problematic when delivering such a course in line with the funded GLH of the course. The second concern aired within the discussion of findings has been that the specifications delivered over the last three years are very theoretical based and do not allow for a wide range of assessment methods to be used, despite advertising there is freedom of choice for assessment. These two concerns are potential areas of future research which could be explore further within relative institutions and through conducting contact with Pearson.

Funding/Resources are discussed with emphasis on how lack of resources can impact the assessment choices teachers feel they can provide for learners. A range of student opinions, through modular reviews, and teacher comments indicate that funding is limited in order to set up 'live' projects' to assess industry skills. It is also explored that funding related barriers such as internal WIFI issues reduce practical assessment opportunities such as live streams and projects. Whilst national funding is a wider barrier which this research does not have the scope to explore, further research into funding could take place. However, internal budgeting for resources and opportunities could be explored alongside fundraising and collating resources from other means are possible ways to overcome such influences on assessments and in turn provide a wider ray of opportunities for learners.

The key influences mentioned here could all be explored further through either institutional or external research.

Recommendations for Institutional practice

- Equip current staff with additional qualifications such as the assessor's award in order to develop their confidence to assess in practice. By increasing confidence and skills of teachers with industry knowledge, learners shall gain from a greater variety and experience of assessment allowing for industry skills to be measured at a deeper level.
- Continue to provide a wide range of opportunities to assess learners in practice. By adapting timetables for staff to assess in practice and removing barriers for students to gain additional experiences working with children, additional live assessment opportunities shall continue to arise.
- Continue to improve resources for learners such as Wi-Fi. The use of technology within the college for assessment, specifically when exploring IT with children needs to be a barrier removed to allow for reliable technology use for assessments.

Recommendations for further research

- Research and explore how funding for an early years level 3 course breaks down for the institution and why this is the case if the course provides a license to practice should this be different to generic courses?
- Additional research to explore and contact course writer's at Pearson regarding the confusion around how much spec content should be taught. Find out from other institutions teaching same course what their understanding of it is. Is it an institutional confusion or a wider one?

How do the methods of assessments chosen ensure students are ready to work in the Early Years industry?

Nutbrown (2012) suggests that the ideologies of assessments being purposeful and industry related, has shown to be one of contention across this research project. Although as previous chapters have explored, there is consensus about how assessments should be provided in order to be vocational, and the findings discussed around how the assessment methods used have ensured students are ready for industry create a somewhat complex picture.

Assessment methods used across the three specifications CCLD, CPLD (2014) and CPLD (2016) have fallen within four categories of assessment; Assessment directly based in practice, Assessment related to practice, Assessment used to reflect on theory and Assessment in the form of written theory. Whilst the findings clearly indicate that high grades are achieved across all four of these categories apart from the latter where written exams have been used for assessment, it has been highlighted that high grades do not necessarily equip learners with the industry skills they require to enter the workplace or be ready to embrace their 'licence to practice'. However, contrary to this concept, there were findings in more recent specifications of both higher grades and elements of more industry based assessments. One suggestion for this could be the change in staff dynamics and industry experience being key to implementing more industry assessments, however, this cannot be generalised as minimal understanding is evident of previous staff's industry background. Although this cannot be generalised, it does support, once more, the paramount industry skills vocational staff should be equipped with.

One further key finding which should be taken from this research is that although there are varying grades of high grade percentages across all methods, the best outcome for an assessed grade has indicated to be where a mixed method approach has been taken to a unit in order for not only theory to be taught and assessed but then strong links back to application of theory in practice. A unit broken into 2 or more assessment point of different methods have consistently across all three specifications generated the highest grades and also received the best feedback from learners about their appropriateness in supporting their practical skills. It is therefore, a valid question as to why units specified by Pearson such as unit 1 on both CPLD 4014 and CPLD 2016 contain 100% written theory examination, especially as this has the lowest grades of all units across three specifications. Whilst it is understood that their aim is to prepare for industry and HE skills in accordance with the Wolf (2011) report and in guidance with the technical route of education, findings indicate that currently the courses CPLD (2014) and CPLD (2010) are not effectively doing either. Therefore, additional research and contact with such course writers would be needed to explore this further.

Recommendations for teaching practice

Teachers are to adopt a mixed method approach to assessments, where they have the control to do so, where a minimum of 25% of assessment is closely industry skill related. In doing this, this research has shown knowledge levels increase and application to practice results in higher grades as well as higher industry competency levels.

Recommendations for Institutional practice

Continue to appoint vocational teachers with industry expertise and knowledge. The increase in vocational expertise of Early Years staff has shown alongside Nutbrown's (2012) review that this is a strong indicator for student success.

Recommendations for Further Research

Exploration into why units specified by Pearson contain unit assessment weighting 100%. Further research projects could explore this further. Whilst identifying that the DFE (2015) sets own regulations, Pearson have control within those regulations and flexibility to amend assessment choices and weighting.

Word count: 19,985

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Appendices

Appendix 1 – Statistics of Birmingham FE colleges that cover CPLD courses

College name	Postal Area	EYE Qualification offered	Progression
South and City College	**B5**	CACHE Diploma in Early Years Education and Care level 3	Industry and HE
Birmingham Met College	**B4**	CACHE Childcare and Education Diploma Diploma in Children's Play Leaning and Development (STOURBRIDGE CAMPUS ONLY)	Industry
The sixth form college Solihull	**B91**	CACHE Diploma in Early Years Education and Care level 3	Industry
Solihull College	**B91**	CACHE Childcare & Education (Early Years Educator) Diploma	Industry and HE
Bourneville College	**B31**	CACHE Diploma in Early Years Education and Care level 3	Industry and HE
Heart of Worcestershire (Redditch)	**B97**	Diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development	Industry
Stratford College	**CV37**	CACHE Diploma level 3 in Early Years Educator	Industry and HE
Joseph Chamberlain Sixth Form College	**B12**	Extended National Diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development	Industry and HE

Appendix 2 – PEP coverage for EYE skills.

Cited from: National College for Teaching and Leadership (2013) Early Years Educator (Level 3): Qualifications Criteria. Crown Copyright: London.

Section i: Summary of qualifications content and assessment criteria for level 3 Early Years Educator

A: Qualification content

All Level 3 Early Years Educator qualifications will require candidates to demonstrate an in-depth understanding of early years education and care, including that they can:

1. Support and promote children's early education and development
2. Plan and provide effective care, teaching and learning that enables children to progress and prepares them for school
3. Make accurate and productive use of assessment
4. Develop effective and informed practice
5. Safeguard and promote the health, safety and welfare of children
6. Work in partnership with the key person, colleagues, parents and/or carers or other professionals

Cited from: BTEC (2015.P5) Pearson BTEC Level 3 National Extended Diploma in Children's Play, Learning and Development (Early Years Educator) Specification. Pearson Education: London.

3C.P5 Develop a Practical Evidence Portfolio containing evidence of developing own practice, knowledge and skills when working with children.

Appendix 3 - Questions for interviewee

Question Topics

- Job Role of participant:

- Brief context of experience teaching vocational courses:

- Which vocational subjects and levels have you had experienced teaching?

- Which exam boards have you taught on for vocational courses?

1. **What is your understanding of the term 'vocational' in the context of education?**

2. **How much of 'vocational assessment' should be subject specific?**

3. **What barriers, if any, do you feel there are or that you have experienced when carrying out vocational assessment methods?**

4. **What key elements do you feel are paramount when planning a vocational course for students aged 16-19?**

5. **What is your view on AFL (Assessment For Learning) and AOL (Assessment Of Learning) in vocational courses?**

Appendix 4 - Information Sheet: How are changes to assessment in BTEC Early Years perceived as influencing the vocational nature of the curriculum?

What is the project about?

The focus of this project is as a response to the recent changes by BTEC (Business and Technology Education Counsel) in their assessment methods for the Early Years course: Children's Play, Learning and Development Level 3. This research project aims to explore perceptions of 'vocational' courses to see if there are assessment methods proposed which conflict with the 'vocational' nature of the course.

Why are you being invited to take part?

When considering 'vocational' courses there are many elements and important influences over the assessment choices made. You have been approached alongside others to be involved in the interview process from your experience in teaching and managing vocational courses.

What would taking part in the project involve?

Taking part would involve participating in a semi structured interview which shall be audio recorded. This interview shall last approximately 30 minutes.
Topic questions and points shall be provided prior to the interview if you wish them, in the aim of overcoming possible time restraints for interview allocations. Note taking is permitted around the topic points provided to you in preparation for the interview. However, a copy is required at the end of interview for clarification purposes.
Once the interview has been recorded, a thematic approach shall highlight the key themes identified from the interview. These key themes shall then be documented into a transcript. If you would like a copy of this transcript in order to clarify your contribution this will be available.

What will happen to the information you provide?

All of the information you provide will be completely confidential and would only be accessed by the researcher. None of the information you provide will be passed back to the college, or attributed to you directly. This will include digital voice recordings and any written notes made. At any point in the research you have the right to withdraw your involvement and consent previously given.

Project Dissemination Aims

1. Once the research project is completed and finalised a written report shall be released within the college. The findings will be shared for the purpose of best practice with peer teachers within the subject teams involved.
2. If there is wider interest in the project within the college then dissemination strategies can be re considered to meet any potential demand.
3. A summary of findings shall be presented to 2 specific contacts within BTEC who have shown an interest in the nature of this study.

Who is involved in the project team?

The project is being undertaken by an individual researcher, Kate Dudley who is completing a final dissertation module on the MA Professional Practice and Lifelong Education programme. The project is being supervised by Doctor Valerie Hall, on behalf of the University of Wolverhampton. Should you have any queries or concerns relating to the project, please contact Dr Hal on V.Hall@wlv.ac.uk. If you have any questions about the project, please contact: Kate Dudley on Kate.e.dudley@gmail.com

Appendix 5 – Blank consent form

Statement of Informed Consent

1. **You are required to agree to the following prior to interview:**

   - I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
   - I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time.
   - I understand that I do not have to answer any questions that I do not wish too and without offering any explanation.
   - I am willing to participate in this study.
   - I agree to the interview being audio taped
   - I understand that my personal details and those of my organisation/employer will remain anonymous and that confidentiality will be maintained at all times

Please tick your preference:

- I do not wish to see a transcription of the main points from my audio recording. ☐
- I do wish to see a transcription of the main points from my audio recording ☐

I can confirm that all of the above information has been provided before the research interview or observation has been conducted.

I agree to take part in this research project.

Name (please print): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____

2. This part should be completed after the interview has been completed

I am satisfied with the way the interview was conducted and am prepared to allow the information disclosed during the interview to be used by the researcher when reporting the findings of this research, subject to the guarantees of anonymity and confidentiality

I understand that any recordings, or written notes, made are only for the use of the researcher. Access to any recorded, or written, material is restricted and this is not included in full in the written record of the research. Quoted excerpts from the interviews, or written notes, may be used in the research project, or related documentation, but participants in the research will not be identified by name at any time.

Name (please print): _____ Date: _____

Signature: _____