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**VARIATION IN CONCEPTIONS OF  
UNIVERSITY WORK BASED  
LEARNING: AN EARLY YEARS  
PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE**

LUCY MPOFU-CURRIE

2015

# **VARIATION IN CONCEPTIONS OF UNIVERSITY WORK BASED LEARNING: AN EARLY YEARS PRACTITIONERS' PERSPECTIVE**

**LUCY MPOFU-CURRIE**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements of the University of  
Northumbria at Newcastle for the degree  
of Education Doctorate.

Research undertaken in the Faculty of  
Health and Life Sciences

April 2015

## **Declaration**

I declare that the work contained in this thesis has not been submitted for any other award and that it is all my own work. I also confirm that this work fully acknowledges opinions, ideas and contributions from the work of others.

Any ethical clearance for the research presented in this thesis has been approved. Approval has been sought and granted by the Faculty Ethics Committee / University Ethics Committee

**I declare that the Word Count of this Thesis is 45 968 words**

Name: Lucy Mpofu-Currie

Signature:

Date:

## **Abstract**

Current trends in global economies and rankings by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) have been bringing pressure to bear on Higher Education institutions to develop programmes to meet the global demands for a better qualified workforce. In the United Kingdom this has pointed at work based learning as one approach to up-skilling people that are already in work. This has raised concerns that academic rigour and standards could be compromised and scepticism about the workplace as a place for learning. Many universities are now designing and delivering work based learning programmes but there is still limited evidence of empirical research into work based learners' experiences on these programmes. The aim of this research was to contribute towards filling this perceived gap. A phenomenographic study was conducted to determine variation in the way university work based learning was conceptualised by a group of Early Years practitioners, a workforce that has been subject to various professional development initiatives by the government in an attempt to improve outcomes for children. With the emphasis on variation, the research approach facilitated the identification of the different ways in which work based learning is perceived by learners, giving insight into a deeper understanding of learning in this context. Six conceptions of work based learning were identified which were comparable to conceptions of learning identified in various traditional university contexts, suggesting that concerns about rigour and standards expressed by some critics of university work based learning could be challenged. The findings also confirmed a number of notional principles of work based learning and theory on adult learning. There was also an indication that further research could provide a better understanding of the workplace as a place for developing knowledge and that universities may not have monopoly over this. This research made a contribution to empirical evidence on how university work based learning is experienced by the learners, suggesting the possibility of work based learning playing a bigger role in providing a university education to people who would otherwise not be able to engage at this level. The Early Years practitioners have been identified as such a workforce. One of the recommendations made was that more research into work based learning could support the development of more innovative ways of delivering higher education programmes to meet the needs of the work market. The findings from this study will become part of the discourse about higher education work based learning and the increasing thinking about the workplace as a legitimate place for generating knowledge.

## **Acknowledgements**

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My sincere gratitude also goes to my friend and colleague Ms Kay Heslop who has navigated me through the complex channels of Early Years practice, immensely enhancing my professional development and the passion and knowledge pertinent to this research.

Finally, it would be amiss of me not to mention the two people without whose support it would have been impossible for me to undertake study at this level. My daughter Khanyie Shamakumba and my son Chobenie Damien Shamakumba were not only understanding about the times I had to study when I could have spent time with them, but also thoughtfully and religiously looked after my technological needs. Their support meant everything to me.

To all these people I say: 'Thank You!'

## ***Dedication...***

*To my Dad Samson Mnconywa Mpofu who invested in me, my Grandmother Dumezweni Ngwenya for her unwavering faith in me and my Mum Seniah Mguni whose eyes were opened.*

## Table of Contents

<b>Chapter 1</b> .....	4
Introduction and background .....	4
Aims of the research.....	4
The programme within which the study was conducted .....	12
<u>    Example of an APEL claim.....</u>	18
Work Based Learning .....	19
<b>Chapter 2</b> .....	23
Review of the Literature.....	23
Work based learning.....	25
Defining Learning .....	34
Research into work based learning.....	47
<b>Chapter 3</b> .....	57
Methodology.....	57
Choosing a research methodology .....	60
Phenomenography .....	61
Data Collection .....	67
Data analysis.....	79
<b>Chapter 4</b> .....	87
Results.....	87
<b>Chapter 5</b> .....	105
Discussion.....	105
Contribution to knowledge .....	113



<b>Chapter 6 .....</b>	<b>116</b>
Conclusion .....	<b>116</b>
References .....	119
Appendices .....	141

## **Appendices**

1. Consent form
2. Information sheet for participants
3. Email invitation
4. Interview Schedule
5. Project amendment request

# **Chapter 1**

## **Introduction and background**

This chapter sets the background to the study, outlining the aim and purpose of the research and the structure of the programme within which the research was conducted. It also examines the policy framework within which the concept of university work based learning developed, giving a brief overview of academic discourses and deliberations on work based learning as an alternative approach to teaching and learning in higher education. This is supported by a brief review of perspectives on the role of universities. My own interest in the subject of teaching and learning is discussed briefly with reference to the context of the programme. Implications of this for my role as insider researcher are considered. A general definition of work based learning is explored, with a distinction made between university work based learning and a 'learning organisation' perspective. A brief background to the Early Years sector as the participants' work context is provided and the chapter closes with a summary of the structure of the thesis.

## **Aims of the research**

The aim of the research was to determine what variation there was in what adult learners working in the Early Years sector perceived as learning arising from their engagement in a university work based learning programme that involves the workplace and the university simultaneously.

It was also to investigate what bearing the context of Early Years practice had on the learners' conceptions of learning on a programme that requires them to draw upon their own practice. Since the programme involves learning from university and the workplace at the same time, it was important to determine how the learners differentiated between the learning gained from each context and if learning from one influenced learning from the other.

## **Questions**

What is the variation in Early Years practitioners' conceptions of work based learning?

What impact does working in the Early Years sector have on the learners' conceptions of their own learning through work and study?

How do the practitioners articulate their experiences of learning from work and university concurrently?

## **Policy and changes in Higher Education**

In the past two decades trends in global economies and technological advancement have put pressure on universities to design and deliver programmes that support the development of a workforce that can hold its own in the ever -changing global economic milieu. The 1990s saw government policy turning its focus towards addressing the perceived need for a skilled workforce to compete in a global market (Saunders, 1995; Winter and Maisch, 1996; Evans, 2000). In the United Kingdom the Dearing report (1997) challenged education institutions to design and deliver courses in collaboration with employers in order to meet the needs of the work market and raise the country's higher education participation profile. The need for these reforms was reiterated in 1998 when the UK participation rate for higher education slipped from 7th to 15th place in the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) ranking. Calls for strategies to address this deficit intensified.

Consequently, in the White Paper, '*The Future of Higher Education*' (DfES, 2003) the government set out plans to address further decline and promote growth in the international forum through a radical reform of the sector also meant to drive forward the agenda for opportunity and social justice. In December 2004 Sir Sandy Leitch was tasked with the challenge of examining the possibilities and ideas for the UK to maximise growth, productivity and social justice in a rapidly changing global economy (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006). Universities had a somewhat controversial but crucial role in this agenda. This role is discussed in more detail in the next section.

The Leitch Review committee was asked to examine the United Kingdom's optimum skills mix in order to maximise economic growth and productivity by 2020 and to consider the different trajectories of skill levels the UK could pursue' (Leitch Review of Skills, 2006 p.143). The review indicated that although the skills profile of working-age people in the UK was steadily improving, the pace of progress was not enough to meet the necessary skills needs by 2020. Something had to be done to close the skills gap, increase productivity and employment as well as generate significant economic and social benefits within that timescale (LSDA, December, 2005). Following their interim analysis, '*Skills in the UK: the long-term challenge*', published in 2005, the Leitch Review team committed to addressing three key issues:

- the skills profile that the UK should aim to achieve by 2020 to drive growth, productivity and social justice over the longer term;
- the appropriate balance of responsibility between the government, employers and individuals for the action required to meet this level of change;
- the policy framework required to support these changes.

They came up with a number of recommendations, amongst which was the utilization of work based learning to increase the skills of those already in work. This would also potentially increase the number of adults already in work who were qualified to degree level. The idea presented several challenges to the Higher Education sector and further fuelled the debate on the role of universities in preparing their graduates for the work market. Views about the role of universities have varied in academic and political discussions. Some of these are discussed in the following section.

## **The role of universities**

Universities play a big role in how learning relates to economic and social justice issues universally. Although traditionally universities have been known as centres of learning (Castells, 2001; Hunt et al., 2006), the transferability of the knowledge and skills gained through formal education to the demands of the workplace have been questioned (Eraut, 2004; Hager, 2004). Considering that the Enterprise in Higher Education Initiative (HEI) places personal transferrable skills like problem solving, communication and working effectively with others high on the list of attributes valued by employers (Tate, 1993), one would argue that it would be in the interest of universities to place these attributes high on their agenda when they prepare their students for the work market. Universities and the generation of knowledge have always been associated.

Castells (2001) did identify 'generation of knowledge' as one of the four major roles of universities. However, he ranked this as one of the minor roles, highlighting certain tensions between the local and universal roles of universities. Although he acknowledged the historical role of universities as places where ideological struggles were expressed, he also described them as mechanisms of selection and socialisation of dominant elites. With the introduction of higher fees in 2012 in the United Kingdom, it would seem the universities' capacity for this selective quality has been reinforced, contrary to the government's perceived role for universities to empower the less privileged of society and enable people to

better themselves (Higher Ambitions, 2010). The 'social justice' agenda of the Leitch review was concerned with this issue.

The fourth role Castells identified was that of the training of a skilled labour force, referred to as the professional university (Castells, 2001), a view shared by the Leitch review team. Brennan et al. (2004) also examined the economic, political, social and cultural roles of universities, arriving at the conclusion that although economic goals were driving higher education reforms, universities were mainly responding to external pressures rather than initiating the changes.

University learning has also been associated with conceptual engagement and critical thinking. Ashby (1973, p.147) believed that in university learning 'there must be opportunities for the intellect to be stretched to its capacity, the critical faculty sharpened to the point at which it can change ideas'. Contrary to this view, van Rossum and Hamer (2010) examined the role of universities in promoting reflective thinking, expressing doubts about the universities' ability to fulfil this role. They were of the view that higher education has been erroneously associated with desirable approaches to learning observed in mature learners due mainly to the authentic work and life experiences they have learned from.

Within the current and ongoing debates about the value of university education, Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2013) reviewed how high quality undergraduate education is represented in policy documents. They found various views expressing concern that changes to funding undergraduate education could be compromising the traditional role of universities as autonomous and critical institutions. However, they finally came to the conclusion that although the market oriented aspect of the university appears to dominate the 'transformation' quality, this could be due to the more coherent and consistent presentation it enjoys in the policy documents. Meanwhile, the policy agenda on higher education continues to focus on opportunity for all through extending higher education beyond the traditional undergraduate model.

This was reflected in Higher Ambitions (2009) which committed to promoting a diverse range of new approaches to higher education by giving priority to growing a diverse range of models of higher education most attractive to non-traditional students. Higher Ambitions (BIS, 2009, para 36:37) stated, 'adults in the labour market who do not have higher education qualifications deserve a second chance to improve their own and their families' economic positions'. As a result of the increased economic value of knowledge universities have been pressured to come up with more contemporary and innovative strategies to

enhance teaching and learning. Now running more like businesses, universities have to meet client demands, face competition with other institutions and keep up with technological developments. Funding entitlement is linked to learning and teaching performance and the National Student Surveys (NSS), whose outcome can depend on how students view their university courses and the skills and knowledge they expect to gain from them. In such a climate research- informed teaching is unavoidably increasing simultaneously in value.

Generally, there is an indication that the relevance of the role of the university to develop the skills desired for the work market has grown in policy, educational and political agenda as articulated in the Leitch Report (2006). The report, which has been supported in other literature like Tynjälä (2007), emphasised the need for a wider educational policy development amidst rapid changes in society and working life. This sentiment was also strongly expressed in 'Higher Ambitions' (2010), a paper by the Department for Business Innovation and Skills which urged universities to continue delivering wider participation and driving up excellence through work based routes. It was in response to these recommendations that the programme researched here was developed in the university in September 2006.

From this summary of views, it can be assumed that the role of universities will always be under review by different stakeholders. For educators, the discussions will always be relevant if the design and delivery of university programmes is to continue serving their clients' requirements.

The policy background provided above is particularly relevant to this study as the Early Years sector which, at the point of the Leitch Review, had a largely underqualified workforce (Hordern, 2013) was one of the most affected by the policy changes. Changes in Early Years Education and childcare were seen as a starting point to support economic and social justice. Critical to this change was the need to upskill the children's workforce. Miller (2008) observed that the policy initiatives which opened up opportunities for Early Years practitioners also increased their awareness to the value of professional development. How much this is the case however, largely remains uncertain as various studies conducted in the past few years have been inconclusive about the practitioners' position about their professional development. Examples of these studies are discussed in the literature review, Chapter 2. What is notable is that the government made a commitment to have an Early Years professional qualified to degree level in every setting by 2015 (DfE/DoH, 2011). This was the start of a series of initiatives leading to the current Early Years Teacher Status. The Early Years context is discussed in more detail later in this chapter. This section has looked

at how the context of Early Years fits into the role of universities and the policy within which the profile of work based learning was raised in higher education.

## **Background to the study**

Following the policy landscape portrayed above in this research I investigated variation in conceptions of work based learning arising from the experiences of mature undergraduate students employed in the Early Years sector. Considerable experience as an educator in a variety of contexts including secondary school, further education and higher education had incessantly fuelled my interest in the scholarship of teaching and learning. However, this interest and experience had always been within the traditional contexts of subjects and disciplines where the subject teacher or tutor was always the expert. The work based learning programme was therefore a new experience for me as an educator. Boud and Costley (2007) noted that one of the challenges presented by university work based learning was the emerging role of academics from the traditional one of 'experts' to the new one of 'facilitator'. Although prior experience and knowledge made the transition less of a challenge, after four years of teaching on the programme it was clear there was a lot to be gained from researching the learners' experiences of this mode of learning.

An interesting observation I had made as a tutor on the programme was that there was a marked difference between the undergraduate students and their postgraduate counterparts in the way they engaged with their study on the programme. The postgraduate students appeared to draw upon their practice more readily than the undergraduates. This suggested that although the work based mode of learning was equally new to the postgraduate groups, study towards their first degrees may have equipped them with some transferrable skills which they were able to draw upon. This could also have been an indication that the postgraduate learners were more confident of their prior learning at university and the workplace and how it could be used to engender further learning and development on the programme. Nevertheless, there was no evidence that either of these possibilities applied. There were many unexplored theories. Since it was evident from their articulation of work related issues that the undergraduate learners were very skilled and knowledgeable in their areas of practice, it was not clear what held them back from drawing upon these reserves of knowledge and experience. Those questions constituted the beginnings of this research. The main concern was why the knowledge and skills the practitioners clearly possessed did not readily translate into accessible resources for their study. I wondered if a more traditional, didactic approach would have been more suited to their learning and, if so, why they had chosen a work based learning route.

Since these questions were crucial to how the learners could be supported in their learning this became a very significant rationale for a professional doctorate. A clear, research-informed understanding of the underlying issues could be useful to various stakeholders, including the tutors on the programme, the work based advisors in the workplace and the university in developing support packages for employed adult learners new to university study.

In order for the research to serve this purpose effectively, it was crucial to consider the limitations and opportunities presented by conducting research in one's own work practice. As a tutor on the programme I was aware that my own understanding of the programme could bias the way I conducted the research. It was, therefore, essential that I kept in mind during the whole research process that each individual discerns the world and their experiences of it in a unique way, arising from their own context. As this is true of the researcher as well as the participants, there was a possibility that my own context could limit my openness to the lived experience of the learners. Akerlind (2006) suggested that the researcher puts their own understanding of the subject to one side as much as they can in their design of the research and interpretation of the participants' expressions of their own experiences. Research literature discusses various ways in which this can be achieved. Costley et al. (2010) suggested that the position of the insider researcher can provide opportunities for the researcher to utilise insider knowledge to make sense of the issues being researched. For the present study insider researcher opportunities lay in the understanding of the programme and how it sits within the University systems. Due to the flexibility of the programme, its delivery throughout the year across terms and semesters makes it complex to manage in terms of student profiles, progressions and awards. As an insider I was able to build upon this knowledge, particularly in the design of the questions and following up on responses during the interviews. This insider knowledge also played a part in the analysis of the data and making meaning from the transcripts. The subject of insider researcher is discussed in more detail in the Methodology, Chapter 3.

Since the distinguishing feature of this programme from traditional university courses is the context of learning from work and university concurrently, it was important to consider the role of context in learning. The following section gives a brief review of how context has been viewed in relation to learning.



## Learning and context

There has been a growing interest in how teachers and students view learning. Some researchers have also considered the importance of the context within which the learning is taking place. Ashwin and Trigwell (2006) linked students' approaches to learning and the perception of their learning environment to their prior experiences of learning, evoked motivation and self-efficacy.

Within the context of work based learning, Creswell (2007) and Briga et al.(2011) advocated the need for educators to evaluate the benefits of work based learning programmes from the external stakeholder perspectives in order to be more outward focused and responsive to their needs when designing educational programmes.

Even within traditional university learning, context has been found to play an important role. Prosser and Trigwell (1999) for example, proposed four guiding principles for university teachers. They suggested that university teachers need to be aware of the way they conceive of learning and teaching within their subjects and to examine carefully how the context within which they teach relates to and affects the way they teach. This advice was particularly relevant in this research as the unique context of the learning is that it encompasses work and university simultaneously. Prosser and Trigwell also urged teachers to be aware of and to seek to understand the way their students perceive the learning and teaching situation. The learning and teaching situation in this research differs considerably from the traditional one where tutors are experts, making it a comparatively new experience for both the learners and the tutors. This research sought to enhance the understanding advocated here. Finally Prosser and Trigwell (1999) advised teachers to be continually revising, adjusting and developing their teaching in line with this developing awareness. This research had potential to provide a starting point in this respect. It could also contribute to the future development of a more research-informed partnership between the learners, the tutors and the organisations the learners work for.

A search for examples of good practice within this area of teaching and learning led to a vast amount of literature on adult learning (Andragogy) and some research on aspects of work based learning which did not necessarily encompass the context of work and university in equal measure. Also, research focussing on the learners themselves was extremely limited, making research into the learners' experiences of the context of work based learning increasingly desirable for this doctorate. Examples of the available research on both work

based learning and early years practitioners are discussed in more detail in the Literature Review, Chapter 2.

## **Purpose of the Study**

Since the introduction of university work based learning in the United Kingdom there has been little empirical evidence to show how university work based learning is viewed, particularly from the learner's perspective. Although there have been many academic discussions about its value as a contemporary approach to higher education provision, neither the critics nor proponents of work based learning have, as yet, allowed the learners themselves to fully articulate their own experiences on these programmes. This study intended to do just that and to contribute to what is known about university work based learning from the learner's perspective in order to enhance the way learning is facilitated.

The research would also contribute to discussions on the role of the context in which higher education learning takes place. Research has been conducted in various learning contexts with findings varying with each context. With reservations expressed as to the legitimacy of work as a context for learning, the idea of integrating the workplace as an equal partner in university programmes has raised a lot of interest as will be discussed in the next section. Consequently, the study was designed in a way that would indicate where the learners located their learning and how, if at all, each context influenced learning from the other. The findings could also indicate how experiences of learning in this context compare to experiences of learning in other contexts.

The context of Early Years practice was also valued as an indicator of how a specific work context or area of practice could influence learning as the discipline from which the learners' expertise derives. While work based learning generally refers to learning that relates to one's work, the context of Early Years pins it down to a 'discipline', providing the opportunity to explore its impact on the learners' experiences of learning.

## **The programme within which the study was conducted**

The programme within which this study was conducted was designed to meet several policy initiatives discussed in the policy section earlier in this chapter. It is a programme exclusively for employed people, paid or voluntary, where the learners use their workplace and their practice as a context for learning. Work also provides the bulk of the content upon which the learners can reflect and extend their conceptual engagement. The research focused on

Early Years practitioners who constituted the largest single sector within the undergraduate cohorts on the programme. This was mainly due to the funding made available to the early years sector in line with government policy to upskill and professionalise the children's workforce as outlined in more detail in Chapter 2 under the 'Early Years Context' section.

The research participants were experts in their field of practice and therefore in charge of the content upon which theory from university study could be applied and further learning gained. The content encompassed their knowledge of the relevant legislation, the unquestioning knowledge of the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE, 2012) and its application to their practice within the various work roles. In their practice the practitioners followed the guidance provided by the framework without linking to the underpinning theory. They also followed the practical application of child development principles although lacking in the knowledge of the theory behind it. In the main, they simply did as they were told although they did not always understand why they were doing it. This inevitably limited their practice as well as their own development as practitioners, which was manifest in their lack of confidence to apply their work experience to their study at university. This made them ideal candidates to benefit from university work based learning.

University work based learning is supported by the Credit Framework for Higher Education in England which was designed by the sector following the recommendations of the Burgess Group (2006). The framework provides the essential flexibility to support progression into and within higher education. Within this framework the use of Accreditation for Prior Learning (APL) and Accreditation for Prior Experiential Learning (APEL) have become a big part of entry and progression levels in Higher Education. Building upon the principle of 'Widening Participation', (DfE, 2012) and other policy initiatives discussed earlier in this chapter, the programme responded to the challenge of creating new pathways into higher education to raise the level of skills in the UK while developing the potential of all people regardless of their earlier educational experiences or socio economic position. Although the idea presented several challenges to the Higher Education sector in general, the programme realised great success in the region.

The programme operates within the Negotiated Work Based Learning framework which allows individuals, groups and employers the flexibility to negotiate a programme of study that meets their specific needs and circumstances. The concept of partnership working raised by Boud and Solomon (2001), Fuller and Unwin (2002) and Tynjälä et al. (2007) is fundamental to this kind of provision.

Available at both undergraduate and postgraduate levels, the programme allows undergraduate students to progress from level 4 to 6 (360 credits/Honours degree) in 60 credit awards with the opportunity to exit at different levels with university awards like a Certificate for 60 Level 4 credits, a University Certificate for 120 credits at Level 4, a Diploma for 60 credits at Level 5, a University Diploma for 120 credits at Level 5, an Advanced Diploma for 60 credits at Level 6 and a full Honours degree for 120 credits at Level 6 (See figure 1). Learners can also top up their existing qualifications by taking one module and attaining a statement of achievement at the appropriate level. This is made possible by the availability of each module at different levels and sizes. For example the Learning Contract module is available as a 10 or 20 credit module from Level 4 to 7. The Work Based Project module is available as a 20 or 30 credit module at all levels. The CPD module offers 10, 20 and 30 credit options at all levels. This allows the learners to configure their programmes of study according to their needs and personal or professional circumstances. At post graduate level learners can study towards a Masters qualification from a 60 credit Postgraduate Certificate to a 60 credit Postgraduate Diploma and a 60 credit Work Based dissertation.

Each 60 credit level is an eight to twelve month programme with examination boards in March, June and November. The 60 credit awards have proved to be invaluable when learners just need to top up to a full Honours degree or a full Masters qualification.

This option has also been popular with post graduate students from other Masters programmes university-wide who have seen the advantages of completing a work based project or dissertation. The main appeal is the 60 credit work based quality improvement dissertation project which entails a real life project implemented in the work place to address an issue pertinent to the learner's role and practice. Employers in the region have endorsed this flexible provision for workforce development with activity covering a number of areas like the Children's Workforce, Education and Health. Major learning partnerships have been with various schools, Health Care Trusts, Local Education Authorities and Councils. There are multi- professional groups outside of these strands to afford learners more flexibility and choice. The highest number of undergraduate learners to have engaged with the programme since its inception has been from the Early Years workforce, with the Education area being mainly postgraduate engagement. The Early Years undergraduate cohorts therefore, with their very diverse work roles, the diverse provision and qualification levels represented the most diverse experiences of work based learning for this research, presenting the opportunity to elicit as wide a range of experiences as possible.

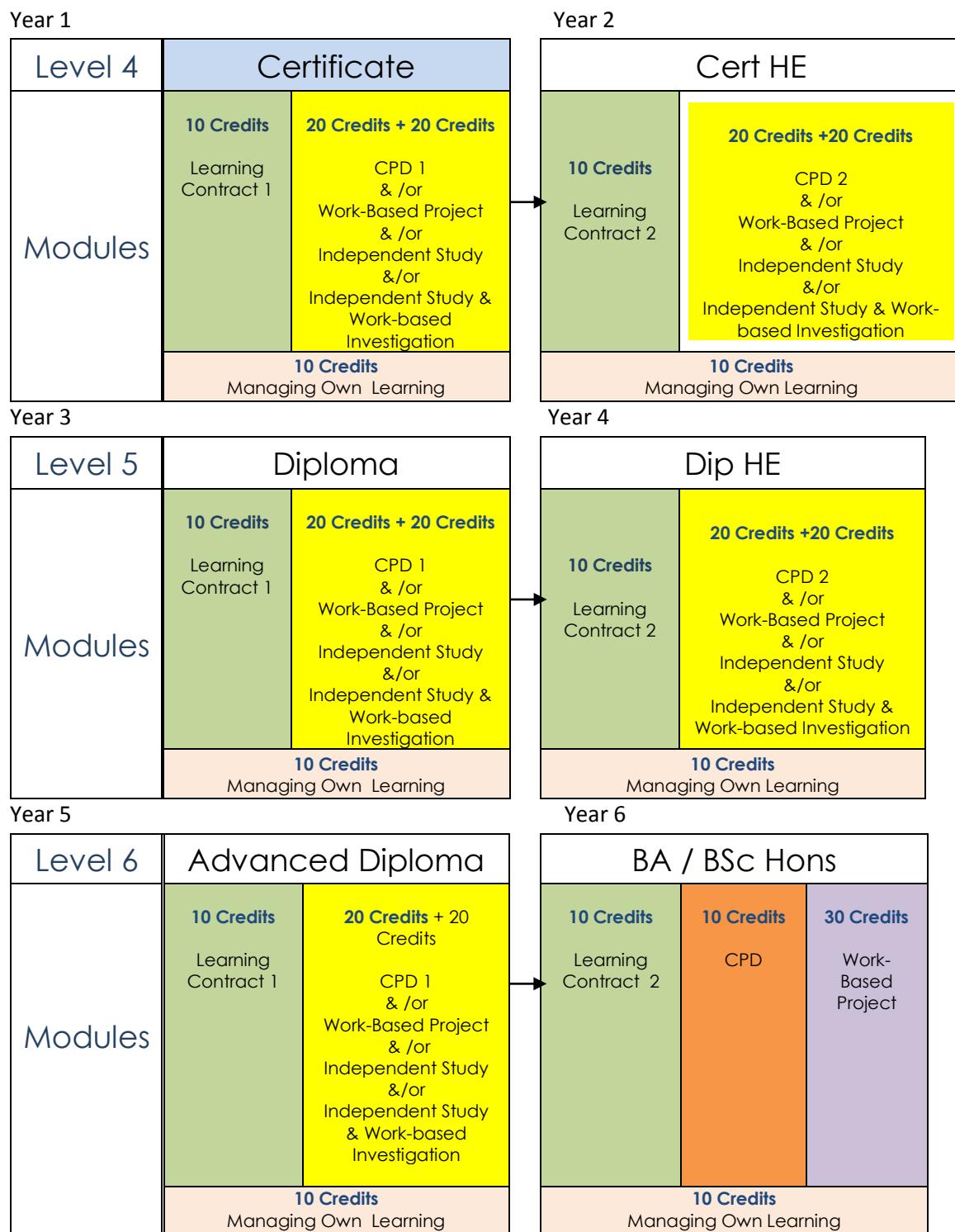
## **The structure of the programme and the opportunities it presents.**

To provide maximum flexibility and choice for the learners, the programme start dates span the terms and semesters. Over the years each of the three disciplines has established a pattern of recruitment guided by the work patterns in their respective work sectors. Although each learner is at liberty to join any cohort, usually, following a recruitment event, Early Years candidates historically have March and October starts. Determined by School terms, the Education cohorts recruit in April for a July Start and in June for a September/October start. The timetable, designed by each programme leader takes each cohort's work commitments into consideration, allowing school staff, for example, to submit summative assessments after half term breaks and when they have had time to complete their work over the summer breaks. Since learners are allowed to move from one group to another at the start of any 60 credit programme, they have the autonomy to plan their study around changing work and family circumstances. This includes stepping on and off the programme when the need arises. University sessions are held at the university or, depending on numbers, at partner organisation venues. The majority of sessions are in the afternoons and evenings, after work, with one daytime cohort attending one Friday a month at the university for those learners who can get time off work.

## **A typical undergraduate student journey**

Typically, an undergraduate student would come on to the programme with a Level 3 qualification, commencing study at Level 4. In order to gain their Honours Degree such a student would follow a six year study route as indicated in (Figure 1). The learner would be advised to utilize a 10 credit Learning Contract, a module that allows them the autonomy to plan their own programme of study based on their work role, their organisation's key drivers and their own ability to meet these drivers. From conducting a review of their prior learning, the student would identify their strengths, their knowledge and skills gaps and devise a 60 credit programme of study which would facilitate their learning and development. The process of developing a Learning Contract is negotiation between the learner and their work based advisor at the workplace and the learner and their tutor at the university. Once the targets have been set the learner identifies the appropriate modules to undertake in order to gain the desired knowledge and skills. They can choose from various modules including a 20 credit Work Based Project where they would implement an initiative at the workplace to address a work related issue. They could also choose a 20 credit Continuing Professional Development, which would entail identifying areas for development relating to the targets set

in the Learning Contract where appropriate, engaging in learning activities to meet those areas and compiling a portfolio of evidence supported by a reflective commentary on their learning and how it applies to their practice. Also in the menu of modules is the 20 credit Independent Study in which the learner researches a subject of interest pertinent to their role, which could be built upon to support their practice or the implementation of a work based project. A typical Level 4 learner would also be advised to complete a 10 credit Managing Own Learning module which would engage them as a reflective practitioner and learner. In this module they would collect and reflect upon critical incidents at the workplace and conduct a personal review of learning on the 60 credit programme, including reflection upon their time management, learning styles, the application of theory to practice and how they coped with challenges during their study on the 60 credit programme. Figure 1 illustrates this journey and the progression after the first year. These configurations will vary from one learner to the other.



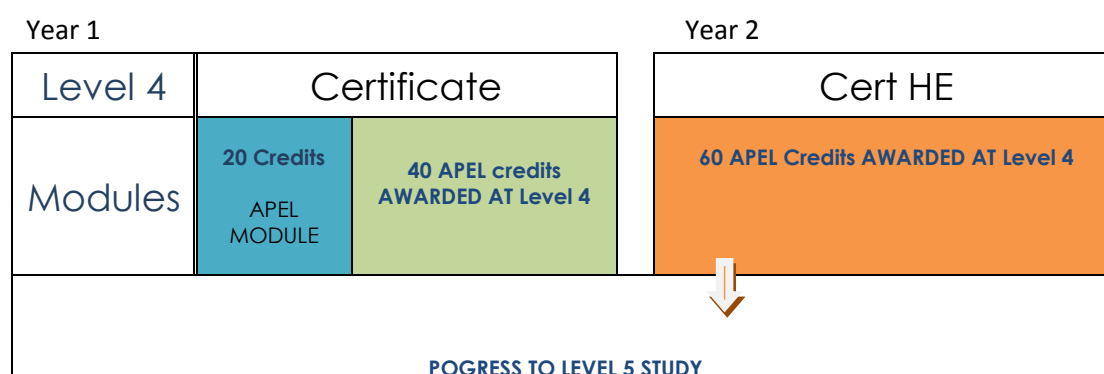
**Figure 1. Programme Module Structure (Programme documents)**

## APEL opportunities

On entry on to the programme some learners are eligible to engage in the APEL process due to the level at which they are deemed to be operating in the workplace. For example, if a candidate has leadership responsibilities or is engaged in project work they are invited to undertake a 20 credit APEL module which also gives them the opportunity to claim credits against the learning that has been gained from engaging in certain activities in their practice. Available at all levels this module engages the candidate in a reflective process which requires them to demonstrate their learning from work activity. They are required to compile a portfolio of evidence, write a reflective essay on the learning arising from the documents in the portfolio of evidence and to attend a 20 minute interview. In addition to the 20 credits from the module, learners can claim up to 300 credits, significantly reducing the duration of their study towards a full honours degree. There is a requirement for each learner to complete a minimum of 60 credits of study towards a full honours degree (360 credits). This process is available at both undergraduate and postgraduate level. The research participants in this study who had taken up this opportunity expressed great satisfaction with the process and the overall outcome. Not all eligible candidates readily take up this opportunity however, with some choosing to start at the beginning of Level 4, particularly if they have been out of formal education for a while.

### Example of an APEL claim

A student coming into Level 4 with significant experience working in a leadership role, for example, could do the APEL module at Level 4, gaining 20 credits. They could then claim another 100 credits at Level 4. This would give them enough credits to progress into Level 5, reducing their study period by two years.



**Figure 2. Level 4 APEL claim**



The APEL process can be used in this way on entry on to the programme to gain a varying number of credits at the beginning of different levels of study.

This section has explained how the programme works, its structure and possibilities. The next section will give a brief overview of work based learning with reference to a few examples of perspectives offered in literature. The literature review in Chapter 2 will go into closer detail on the subject.

## **Work Based Learning**

Views on work based learning can generally be divided into two categories; the learning that arises from everyday work activity in the workplace and that provided by universities on programmes that build upon learning from the workplace. The learning that occurs in the workplace is mainly treated in literature as 'organisational learning', 'the learning organisation' or continuing professional development through 'company training' (Eraut et al., 1998; Boud and Garrick, 1999). Though this form of work based learning is not the focus of this study, the literature provides a sound argument for the workplace as a legitimate context for learning. There are no tensions or contradictions between these two ways of thinking about learning as the university programmes recognise the knowledge and skills gained from practice. These skills are crucial and mandatory for entry on to the programme researched here. Advocates of Work Based Learning have queried limiting learning to the classroom and argued that theory should not be separated from practice ( Raelin 2008; Stenström and Tynjälä, 2009) . The workplace is accepted as a legitimate location for learning. Learning in this context does not see theory as divorced from practice or knowledge from experience. Learning is seen as arising from reflection upon practice although it is understood that certain conditions are necessary for this to happen effectively (Garraway et al., 2011). The distinction between work based learning and traditional learning is, according to Raelin (2008, p.2) the 'conscious reflection on actual experience'. Raelin proposed that work based learning is more than 'experiential' learning which is just about 'adding a layer of experience to conceptual knowledge' (p.64). He argued that theory and practice can be acquired at the same time. However, this perspective is one of the many seen from the 'learning organisation' discourse on the workplace as a setting for learning (Eraut et al., 1998; Boud & Garrick, 1999).

In terms of university work based learning, which is the context of this study, learning from work has been defined in many different ways relating to the perceived role of higher education in the global economies. This could be linked to the factors that contributed to the

advent of work based learning as an alternative to traditional university programmes as discussed earlier in this chapter. Consequently one of the most used summary definitions of work based learning for Higher Education Institutions is ‘the learning people do for, in and through work’ (UVAC, 2008) where it is also seen as a means by which those in work can undertake higher education qualifications (Costley et al., 2008). These definitions echo Boud and Solomon (2001, p.4) who said,

‘Work-based learning is the term used to describe a class of university programmes that bring together universities and work organisations to create new learning opportunities in workplaces.’

Another proponent for university work based learning who renounced the idea that the university is the only location for legitimate learning is Brennan (2005, p.4) who pointed out that the emphasis is on ‘demonstrating learning that has occurred through work-based activity, wherever and however this may be achieved’. This definition concedes the legitimacy of knowledge that comes from work. The key feature of this approach is that the context of the learning lies outside the university as much as it does within. Its academic focus is more on practical knowledge and learning in a work-based context than on disciplinary knowledge. A myriad of views on work based learning are presented in literature, locating it within varying but related theoretical frameworks. These are discussed in the literature review, Chapter 2.

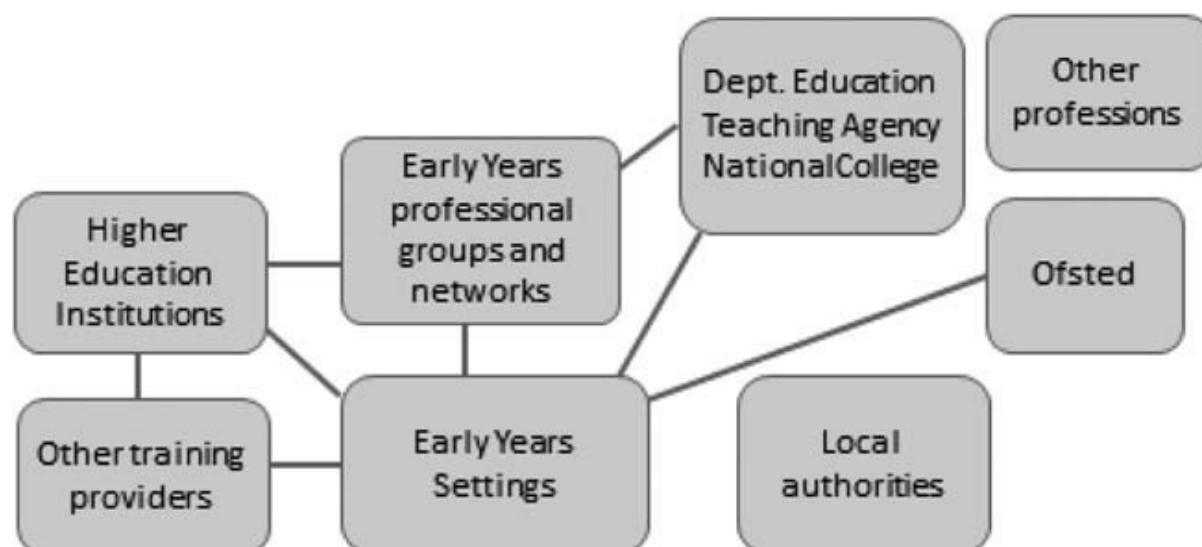
## **The Early Years context**

Although the focus of the study is work based learning, the Early Years sector as the participants’ work context was explored as a possible factor influencing how the practitioners perceive work as a legitimate context for learning. In this section a brief outline of the evolution of Early Years provision in the United Kingdom is provided and linked to the professional development of its workforce. This provided a starting point for the examination of the practitioners’ motivation to engage in university study.

At the end of the 1990s the Department for Education and skills estimated that the childcare and related services were one of the fastest growing sectors of the UK labour market (DfES, 2002a). Nevertheless, in comparison to other European countries, the United Kingdom’s approach to childcare provision had never been fully co-ordinated. As a result, in the past fifteen years the sector has seen a range of policy initiatives including the *Curriculum Guidance for the Foundation Stage* (DfEE, 2000); the ‘*Birth to Three Matters*’ (DfES, 2002b); *Every Child Matters* (DfES, 2003), building up to the *Early Years Foundation Stage*

(DfCSF, 2008) and its later version (DfE, 2012). Meanwhile, the responsibility for child care and education has been split between the statutory agencies, the private and the voluntary sectors. As a result, the education and training of those working with children has varied according to the services they work for and qualifications have varied from none to postgraduate level (Nurse, 2007). Owen (2006) identified 77 different qualifications for people working in various roles and settings in this sector. In 2012 the Nutbrown review identified 445 different qualifications found within the workforce, with 223 of them considered full and relevant (Nutbrown, 2012).

In 2008 private, voluntary and independent providers accounted for 80% of childcare provision. Meanwhile, only 3% of full day care staff was qualified to graduate level compared to 40% of Early Years staff in maintained primary schools (DCSF, 2008). The government made a commitment to address this disparity by 2015. As a result of this interest professional development has featured a great deal in literature and research involving this group of practitioners. For example, Horden (2013) examined the structures involved in the development of Early Years practitioners and came up with the format below.



**Figure 3: Provision for Early Years practitioner professional development (Source: Horden, 2013)**

This structure reflects the diverse provision and the current development opportunities characteristic of this sector. In light of the background discussed above, Early Years practitioners can be defined as ‘all those who work with young children and their families, who have some training and expertise, but with differing qualifications and experience’ (Nurse, 2007, p.3). According to Nurse (2007), when these groups of mature students are

given the opportunity to return to study towards higher qualifications, they lack confidence and are nervous about their academic ability and about their right to a place at the university. A similar view was expressed by Rawlings (2008) who discussed a wide range of life and work experiences that could influence how this group of practitioners develop as learners. It could be inferred that their experience of university study might, to a certain extent be influenced by this. Some of the studies conducted on the subject also reflect this view (Kendal et al., 2012; Payler and Georgeson, 2013; Cotton, 2013). A better understanding of these different experiences could contribute to the informed design and delivery of work based learning programmes in higher education. This could, in turn enhance the potential for work based learning to meet the targets and recommendations set by the various government committees in their reports.

The above sections have given an outline of issues within the subject areas pertinent to this research. The following section provides an outline of the thesis.

## **Structure of the thesis**

The thesis is presented in 6 chapters. Chapter 1, the introduction and background has provided a summary of the context within which the study was conducted including the policy conditions that identified the need for work based learning programmes as a higher education alternative for people who are already in work. A brief synopsis of the programme itself is given together with examples of typical student journeys on a standard route and through APEL on entry. The concept of work based learning is introduced and the chapter closes with a summary of the context of the Early Years sector within which the participants work.

Chapter 2 critically reviews literature, including the concept of learning, the role of universities, work based learning and the accreditation of prior experiential learning, the early years context and conceptions of learning. Chapter 3 discusses the philosophy behind the research and identification of an appropriate research methodology. Phenomenography and the concept of categories of description are examined. The data collection is discussed, including the selection of participants and the data analysis. Chapter 4 presents the results in the form of the outcome space, with examples of the participants' descriptions from the transcripts. Diagrammatic illustrations support this account. Chapter 5 discusses the results with a specific focus on variation in the conceptions of work based learning with reference to literature. Chapter 6 concludes the thesis and makes recommendations for work based learning practice.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Review of the Literature**

The aim of the literature reviewed for this study was, firstly, to examine how work based learning has developed as part of higher education provision. As the purpose of the study was to understand issues arising within a work based learning programme, the review of literature from this area would provide a platform from which to explore and address the issues at programme level. The areas of particular interest were how university work based learning is defined and conceptualised in literature, what form it has taken as part of higher education provision. Key to the present research was an examination of what other research has been conducted as part of the current understanding of work based learning and how it can shape its future development in higher education.

University work based learning, by its very nature is about adult learners. As such, reading around the subject included the wider concept of adult learning, thereby allowing work based learning to be scrutinised within existing paradigms of learning. The review of literature on adult learning encompassed learning from work, learning in higher education and the role of universities in the construction of knowledge. Since there are different approaches to work based learning, the literature on work based learning itself focused mostly on the approach adopted by the university on the programme of study as detailed in Chapter 1. Around this, other forms of work based learning were examined to determine the distinction between this and other approaches. Literature was drawn from publications from different countries and disciplines in order to examine the different contexts and varieties of work based learning and show the development of the approach in higher education generally.

There was, however, a clear distinction sought between learning that was provided by organisations to their staff and that designed by or in collaboration with accrediting higher education institutions. This was done with the intention of eliminating any form of learning that only involved the workplace or in-house training as these fell outside of the remit of the programme investigated here. Literature reviewed comprised conceptual accounts and empirical outcomes in various formats including text books, journals, conference papers, programme reviews by academics as well as government reports. It was envisaged that whatever was gleaned from this literature would be part of the setting within which the participants' conceptions of work based learning could be examined and discussed. It would also indicate which areas of work based learning had already been researched, how they could be drawn upon to address the concerns with the work based programme under

examination and what gaps still remained to be filled if work based learning was to meet the needs of the UK economy and serve the perceived purpose of university learning as a whole. Any such gaps could then be taken into consideration in the design of the study in order to contribute to the knowledge already available out there.

Another area to be reviewed was literature on phenomenography as this was the methodological approach chosen for the study. This literature included texts which looked at the beginnings of phenomenography starting from the Gothenburg studies by Ference Marton and his colleagues in 1983 to the latest views about phenomenography and the opportunities it has presented in researching learning in higher education. This review focused on the development of phenomenography as an alternative research methodology and the criticisms and commendations it has received. The review sought to define phenomenography, review studies that had been conducted in various disciplines and how the researchers had utilised the approach to meet their desired outcomes. This was mainly to inform the study, starting from the choice of approach appropriate to the research questions to the steps to be taken to meet the most useful outcomes of the study. Most of the information gathered from the literature on phenomenography is discussed in the Methodology, Chapter 3. In this chapter the discussion on phenomenography is limited to the phenomenographic view of learning.

As the research was set within the area of Early Years education, where the participants' work activity was located, it was essential to develop a clear understanding of the context of this practice and the impact it might have on how the practitioners viewed learning. It is partly within this context that the participants' conceptions of learning would be formed. The literature reviewed on the Early Years context comprised literature on the development of early years provision in the United Kingdom and what was required of the people who worked with children in order to meet the United Kingdom government's agenda on children's education and care. Fundamental to this was the education and qualifications required to undertake this role in the United Kingdom. The literature also explored how the sector had responded to policy drivers towards ensuring the best provision for children under the age of five. This literature included studies that had been conducted to inform policy and related initiatives over the years, research activity involving Early Years practitioners, reports on overviews of the practitioners' qualification levels and government incentives for the professionalization of the workforce. This summary shows how literature was reviewed to meet the purpose of the research and support a full examination of issues raised in the research questions, including the basis on which literature was included or excluded. The

literature review begins with work based learning. Within this, a review of empirical research into work based learning is made, highlighting the limited availability of research into the conceptions of work based learning from the learners themselves. The review shows trends and themes, revealing important gaps for research. In the same way research involving early years practitioners is discussed and themes are identified. The review of research literature shows that in the past five years early years practitioners have been involved in different studies like researching their practice and the professionalization and development of their workforce. Nevertheless, their experience of learning in higher education has largely remained unexplored. This has remained a missed opportunity in the development of enhancement programmes for this workforce. This chapter also examines research on conceptions of learning in the light of increasing phenomenographic activity in higher education, showing a gap in research into the learners' experiences of learning. This was unexpected, considering the volume of literature theorising upon work based learning.

## Work based learning

Work based learning (WBL) has been defined in many different ways. In traditional Higher Education work based learning has also been defined as 'work experience', where traditional university degrees have included a work experience component which students can meet in various ways depending on the degree or discipline. Costley and Dikerdem (2011) identified 7 different models of work based learning (Table 1). For some of these models students do not have to be employed by the organisation from which they are gaining their experience, although companies have been known to use the opportunity to employ newly qualified staff. Bearing in mind that the focus of this study was on people who are already in work and experts in their own field of practice model 1 is closest to the programme researched.

Models	Typical attributes
1.Work based studies degree (for individuals)	Content negotiated by learner, P/T degree programme F/T employment
2.Degree in cohorts	Content designed with contribution of employer, P/T degree programme F/T employment
3.Foundation degrees	Content designed by HE in relation to employer, F/T or P/T degree programme
4.Sandwich year	Content designed with employer, 1 year F/T work as a part of a degree programme
5.In-house training (e.g. NVQ)	Short courses to contribute job roles during employment
6.Conventional degree programme to support work role (e.g. MBA)	Content designed by HE, P/T or evening degree programme F/T employment
7.Work placement within a programme of study to integrate aspects of professional life to L&T experience	Specific outcomes to be delivered for the programme of study

**Table 2: Models of Work Based Learning (Source: Costley and Dikerdem (2011, p.6))**

Typically, in model 1 of work based learning the learner negotiates their own learning built around their work roles and the needs of their organisation. The three way relationship between the learner, the organisation and the university can be presented as shown in figure 4 below.



**Figure 4: The tripartite model of university work based learning**

In this model, the learner identifies the key drivers of their organisation. Locating themselves and their work role within these drivers, they review their competencies against the desired outcomes. They then identify their strengths and development areas using various diagnostic tools. This enables them to identify the strengths which can be used in the development of new knowledge, skills and competencies. Together with an appropriate person in their organisation they identify opportunities for development activities which the



learner uses to plan a programme of study towards the appropriate level of credits. An accumulation of such credits at progressive levels from 4 to 7 culminates in a higher education qualification as shown in figure 3. This process is supported by the modules and processes outlined in the programme structure in Chapter 1.

The main feature of this model of work based learning is the recognition of learning outcomes through higher education awards and academic credits. This is made possible by the use of the UK higher education credit framework (Burgess, 2006). Related to this is the now prevalent use of generic level-based descriptors or criteria that are designed to accredit trans-disciplinary or work experience into qualification frameworks ( Costley, 2000; Paulucy, 2000;Ufi Ltd, 2001)This approach values the diverse range of knowledge and skills brought to the programme by learners (Costley, 2000;Boud, 2001) and encourages critical reflection, building on the learner's expertise and experience for further development (Doncaster, 2000; Armsby et al., 2006; Walsh, 2006). This is also the aim of the modules on the programme.

HE Qualifications in the UK			
Level	Qualifications		
4	Certificate 60 credits	University Certificate 120 credits	
5	Diploma 60 credits	University Diploma 120 credits	
6	Advanced Diploma 60 credits	BA/BSc Hons 120 credits	
7	Postgraduate Certificate 60 credits	Postgraduate Diploma 120 Credits	Masters MA/MSc 180 credits
8	Doctorate 540 credits (360 at L8 + Masters)		

1 credit = 10 hours study

**Figure 5: Simplified UK HE Credit Framework (Courtesy of Programme marketing materials (2014))**

The development and delivery of such programmes has been possible since the late 1980s and early 1990s when the Employment Department funded initiatives that made it possible for universities to design and deliver work based learning programmes. Consequently, work

based learning activity has increased in the universities in the areas of research and curriculum design (Brennan & Little, 1996). Portwood (2000) pointed out that the roots of work based learning go back further than this, although work based learning is still seen as a new concept in higher education. This could be an indicator that more needs to be done to raise the profile of university work based learning.

The value of work based learning programmes in higher education has also been discussed by various authors like Boud and Solomon (2001) who argued that it is one of the few post-secondary teaching and learning innovations 'that is attempting to engage seriously with economic, social and educational demands of our era' (2001, p.1). Another argument in favour of work based learning was put forward by Gibbons et al.(1994) who described knowledge gained this way as 'non-disciplinary' and 'trans disciplinary'. However, wider discussions have questioned the creation of knowledge within the work based learning context, expressing concerns about workplaces as suitable places for learning (Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Brennan & Little, 2006). Judging from all these discussions, there is no doubt that work based learning continues to increase in economic and higher education discourses. Requirements for a better understanding of the issues pertinent to work based learning are essential as demand for work based learning programmes increases. What seems to be lagging behind in this development is the engagement with work based learners whose contribution to the discussions would validate whatever claims are made in the literature.

While scholars and theorists have been expressing these views, research into learning in a work based context, in particular university work based learning has been very limited although as far back as 1989 a group of educators at Portsmouth University, dubbed the risk takers introduced the first university work based learning programme. The period since then has seen some interest in conceptualising, evaluating and researching the area of work place and work based learning. In one of the earliest publications on work based learning, Boud and Solomon (2001) explored the challenges presented by this mode of higher education delivery. Amongst the challenges was the emerging role of academics from the traditional one of 'expert' to that of 'facilitator' (Boud and Costley, 2007). Other concerns about university work based learning programmes have been around academic rigour and standards (Boud and Solomon, 2001; Bellamy, 2008). In this literature, considerable attention is devoted to the definition and discussion of 'partnership' and the relationship between the workplace and the university. Perspectives from the learners are significantly limited.

Boud and Solomon (2001) suggested that the main challenge in WBL is the very foundation on which the concept is built; partnership working which they asserted 'involves a clash of cultures between the worlds of the academy and business, and a considerable rethinking of what constitutes legitimate knowledge and academic learning' (p. 216). This is not surprising as other authors have echoed this sentiment, expressing concern over the challenges placed by work based learning programmes on the university systems, structures and procedures designed for traditional routes (Garnett, 2007). Jarvis (2001) proposed that tensions might arise from the power of the university in the design and delivery of the curriculum. However, Boud and Solomon (2001) did not see this as a problem although conceding that for learning to be effective, excellent relationships need to be formed between the institutions and the employers. Fuller and Unwin (2002) also disputed a clash of cultures and proposed that the relationship between the workplace and the academic institutions can only be complementary. They argued that while workplace activity can be routine and limiting to innovation, by focusing on the learner's autonomy, higher education can promote opportunities for learning in the workplace. This model, based on Engeström's activity theory (Engeström, 2001) provided a new way of looking at the relationship between learning in the workplace and higher education. However, Phelan et al.(2004) found that collaborative working on research projects between academics and health practitioners required a huge amount of negotiation, adjustments and understanding of each other's cultures. Light (2006) and Garnett (2007) still suggested that despite the challenges, these partnerships can be highly creative. Other concerns expressed have been about how learning takes place at work (Chisholm et al., 2007), particularly given that workplaces may vary in how they promote learning (Sung and Ashton, 2005; Brennan and Little, 2006).

These discourses, however, despite the tensions and controversies raised, have been instrumental in opening up new routes for research into the area of work based learning. For example, in a more recent study into work based learning pedagogies and academic development Costley and Dikerdem (2011) found that staff expertise and a good understanding of the epistemology of practice is essential for the successful delivery of work based learning. The qualities required included being proactively engaged with the private and public sectors and professional bodies. It could be argued that a good understanding of the epistemology of practice can only be created from the teaching community gaining a better understanding of how their students conceive of their learning within this context. This would lead to engagement with the issues raised in the literature above about cultural differences (Jarvis, 2001; Garnett, 2007), university programmes enhancing autonomous

learning (Fuller and Unwin, 2002) and universities supporting their partner organisations to promote learning (Sung and Ashton, 2005; Brennan and Little, 2006).

Similar ideas have been supported elsewhere in literature where suggestions have been made that work based learning programmes should be designed to provide strong learner support processes that enhance reflective practice and action learning as well as the ability to utilise opportunities offered by organisational activity (Billet, 1999; Boud, 1999; ; Miller, 2003; Graham et al., 2006; Cunningham, 2011). However, with the very limited evidence of research exploring the impact of current work based learning programmes, the basis for developing stronger learner support remains significantly compromised. These programmes can only be developed with a clear understanding of the factors influencing the learners' engagement with the programmes.

Also in agreement with the above notions, Tynjälä et al. (2009) proposed that the key to effective pedagogy is a firm connection between abstract thinking and practical action through collaborative activity between education and work. This can be achieved through connective learning opportunities involving individuals, work communities and educational institutions. This way the potential for transformational processes can be created through connecting activities that have traditionally been kept separate. They put forward 'connectivity' and 'transformation' as the theoretical concepts behind their thinking. This is where change and development are nurtured through the creation of 'close relationships and connections between different elements of learning situations, contexts of learning and systems aiming at promoting learning' (Tynjälä et al., 2009, p.4).

The present study, therefore, by examining how the early years practitioners articulate their experiences of learning from work and university concurrently, can make a significant contribution to the discussion on the extent to which work based learning can be seen to bring together the learning opportunities from the university and the workplace as suggested by Tynjälä et al. (2009) and reflected in Engeström's activity theory (2001). These theories and ideas have so far remained untested from the learner's point of view.

The different views expressed here have significant implications for the implementation of work based learning programmes in universities and the future of researching learning in this context. Arguably, these and other related discussions on the subject have contributed to the development, so far, of work based learning as a legitimate alternative approach to higher education delivery. They have also stimulated further research into how to best design and deliver work based learning programmes, making it possible for universities to meet the

government's vision to increase skills and knowledge in the workforce without compromising standards, rigour and quality. There are still indications, however, that more could still be done to push this agenda further. This study's focus on variation in the learners' conceptions of work based learning sought to contribute to that growing body of knowledge and understanding. As Costley et al. (2008) noted, there is limited activity evaluating the impact of work based learning programmes. The outcomes from the present study, positioned as it is within a similar context, will add to the limited evidence from work based learners themselves which could be used by universities to develop strong learner support processes in the university and the workplace. The participants are well placed to portray the experience of learning from both the workplace and the university from their own experiences. All the various perspectives expressed in the literature could be seen in a different light if certain aspects of work based learning were to emerge from the practitioners' experiences and conceptions. It is this gap in knowledge that the study sought to address; the absence of the voice of the major players in university work based learning, although research in other areas of work based learning has enjoyed significant attention. From the descriptions of their own experiences the participants of this study could offer perspectives of the debates that have so far been overlooked. Examples of the available research, showing themes and trends are discussed later in the section on 'Researching work based learning'. The next section examines an important feature of work based learning, the accreditation of prior experiential learning.

## **Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning**

Accreditation of prior experiential learning (APEL) represents the acceptance of work as a legitimate context for the generation of knowledge. It also acknowledges the learner's ability to identify where the learning has come from in the workplace. As reflection upon learning from practice is the major tool in this process, it also places value on the learner's ability to determine the extent of their learning based on an evaluation of content that the APEL assessor had no prior knowledge of. Consequently, the APEL process underpins the way work based learning is conceptualised. It is therefore befitting that Armsby et al. (2006) suggested that the process of acknowledging work-based knowledge, also termed 'mode 2 knowledge' by Gibbons et al. (1994) through accreditation of prior experiential learning is a challenge to universities' monopoly over knowledge creation. Nonetheless, they believed that the process is a positive outcome for both the universities and work based learning as a comparatively new approach to higher education access.

APEL claims have a very valuable role in work based learning as the claimant reflects on experience, identifies the learning achieved and demonstrates how they met the learning outcomes through evidence and/or argument (Brennan, 2005). Doncaster (2000) saw the value of APEL as helping the learners to engage in critical reflection and identifying their learning against academic standards. There is some consensus that the APEL claim can be a part of the development process (Armsby et al., 2006; Walsh, 2006; Lester, 2006).

Lester (1999) added that the APEL process can enable work-based learners to become 'map-makers' rather than 'map-readers' through the evaluation of past learning in relation to future goals. This can bring about a certain degree of self-discovery and self-evaluation, mainly in relation to organising ideas and planning future learning. For the work place, accreditation can provide external credibility if the credits are valued by customers or clients. APEL has also been seen to enhance the individual's motivation to learn, providing scope for continuing professional development and the development of a reflective, researching and enquiring orientation among the workforce (Mumford, 2006; Coombs and Denning, 2006; Harvey & Norman, 2007 ). This is to be expected as university learning outcomes require that learning demonstrates reflection, understanding and informed judgement (Graham et al., 2006). This, and other literature suggests an increasingly common ground between the interests of the university and the workplace, with a growing tendency for employers to see worthwhile benefits in developing their workforces (Teare & Neil, 2002; Mumford, 2006; Nikolou-Walker, 2007). The APEL process makes this link between work and study explicit. Studies on work based learning are therefore highly likely to make reference to APEL. Still, until there is clearer understanding and consensus on the role of the workplace in the construction of knowledge, APEL and other work based learning processes will remain under scrutiny. University work based learning still faces a number of challenges which are discussed in the next section.

## **Challenges to HE Work Based Learning**

Despite the establishment of the higher education credit framework through which full academic recognition of learning in the workplace has become possible, several challenges have been faced by academics introducing work based learning as discussed in the earlier section defining work based learning. Similarly, work based learning and its attempt to engage with the economic, social and educational demands of modern society (Boud and Solomon, 2001) has met opposition from sceptics who see this as threatening the symbolic features of the traditional university (Symes, 2001) which operated in an elite tradition. More recently, Lester and Costley (2010) identified three main criticisms to work based learning.

The first was its lack of a specific curriculum and not being positioned within any academic discipline as is the norm in traditional university programmes. This can be seen to fuel the uncertainty about knowledge construction within this context. The other criticism they highlighted was the change in the tutor's role from that of teacher to that of facilitator. As the tutor is seen as representative of the university this could, arguably be seen as an indication of the university's reluctance to relinquish monopoly over knowledge construction. The third problem they identified was the association of work based learning with training that is provided by employers, which has implications on issues of rigour and the position work based learning occupies in the university.

These are challenges that are faced by people running these programmes. Costley and Lester (2010), however, saw these as a vehicle through which the current management of work based learning in the university can be challenged and developed until universities accept the legitimate role of university work based learning. These criticism could be a sign of the lack of understanding of what can be achieved through work based learning and possibly a fear of devaluation of what higher education is seen to epitomise. These concerns can only be expelled through research that explores work based learning from all stakeholders, not least the ones that have engaged in it as learners. As already noted, the literature examined showed that engagement in this form of research has been extremely limited.

While the challenges discussed above have been inevitable, as Boud and Solomon (2001) suggested and more recently, education policy has indicated, there is clearly an increasing need to develop an acceptance of higher education learning as an activity to be engaged in widely, not just by a few elite. The section on the role of universities in Chapter 1 examined the various views from different stakeholders, mainly political, economic and academic. Reference to 'traditional' roles of universities (Castells, 2001) reflected the economic, political and technological changes and the need for universities to adapt. The professional or transformational role of universities seemed to be somewhat taken for granted. It should be noted that this study was conducted within the premise that university work based learning is served well by the higher education establishment, with context as the defining point, rather than the point of departure. The focus of the research was learning, albeit within a specific context. It is therefore imperative to define learning and examine the theoretical frameworks within which it is located in literature. The next section addresses that aspect.

# Defining Learning

## Theoretical frameworks

Although this study occurred within a specific context of learning, it was important to define learning in general and examine the various theoretical frameworks within which it is positioned. It is from this framework that we can understand the different ways in which work based learning could be conceptualised. Synergies with literature on work based learning will help in the interpretation of the findings and fill gaps in terms of learning theory. The following discussion acknowledges the role of context as a defining feature of how learning is perceived. Examples of learning within different contexts will be reviewed. The form of learning under examination in this study is that which is located within the context of work and the university concurrently.

Many theories have contributed to an understanding of the concept of learning, primarily in children (for example, Brunner, Vygotsky, Piaget). To a certain extent, learning remains a conceptual and linguistic construction that changes with culture and context. Sfard (1988), for example, saw the nature of learning as a contest between the metaphor of acquisition and that of participation. Each of these metaphors has certain implications for how learning is defined. In the case of work based learning it is useful to consider both perspectives.

The concept of acquisition is associated with cognitive approaches to understanding learning where knowledge is acquired with an explicit intention (Bereite, 2002; Mason, 2007). This could imply that beyond the intention for which the knowledge was acquired, the knowledge becomes obsolete. This is the case in rote learning when knowledge is acquired for a specific purpose like examinations. In such a situation most of this knowledge is not available for later use. However, Davies (1998, p.154) noted that when 'cognitive knowledge' is allied with 'applied knowledge' it creates an understanding that enhances creativity and self- motivation, qualities which are highly desirable in all the diverse learning contexts. This is the case in work based learning where theory and practice are equally valued in the creation of knowledge through participation. From the literature defining work based learning and the theories relating to learning in different contexts, it could be argued that this is the most appropriate way to conceptualise work based learning.

The metaphor of participation draws upon constructivist theories of transfer which suggest that what is already known to the individual and the environment gives rise to new or adjusted knowledge forms (Tuomi-Grohn and Engeström, 2003). It should still be noted,



however, as Garraway et al. (2011, p.529) pointed out, that 'meta-cognitive ability is important in reflecting on what has previously been learnt and what the new situation requires'. This places value on the learner's experience and emphasises the importance of active engagement for successful learning while rejecting cognitive interpretations which place learning away from the practical world. Constructivists Chaikin and Lave (1996, p.6) postulated that 'in a theory of situated activity, de-contextualised learning activity is a contradiction in terms.' They observed that fundamental to the meaning of learning is that 'situated activity always involves changes in knowledge and action' (p.6). This paradigm views learning as an active constructive process and the learner as an 'information constructor who actively constructs their own subjective representations of objective reality by linking new information to prior knowledge' (Chaikin and Lave, 1996, p.6). These observations are shared by various other theorists like Dewey (1859-1952), Vygotsky (1896-1934) and Piaget (1896-1980). The idea that the learner is a passive recipient of knowledge is rejected as constructivism is a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that each individual's reflection on their experiences leads to the construction of their own understanding of the world. Each individual then generates their own models and rules which are used to make sense of their experiences. The adjustment of these models to accommodate new experiences defines the process of learning. The guiding principles of this philosophy are that:

- learning is a search for meaning
- meaning involves understanding wholes as well as parts. The learning process therefore focuses on primary concepts rather than isolated facts.
- in order to teach well teachers must understand the rules and models that their students use to perceive the world and the assumptions they make to support those models.
- the purpose of learning is for individuals to construct their own meaning, not to memorise the content in order to reproduce it on demand.

These principles have significant implications for teaching and supporting students at university level. If this is to be done well, research into all aspects of students' learning should underpin how tutors facilitate learning. This is of particular importance in work based learning where learners build upon their learning from work activities to develop better understanding and competences.

Ashby (1973, p.147) agreed with this, suggesting that 'in higher education there must be opportunities for the intellect to be stretched to its capacity, the critical faculty sharpened to the point at which it can change ideas'. Dewey (1997, p.25) endorsed this view but also argued that although experience is the basis for learning, not all experiences are 'genuinely or equally educative', adding that critical analysis is essential in the process of learning from experience.

Such views contribute to a multi- dimensional analysis of learning and the contexts in which it takes place. In the context of work based learning, Cairns (2003) suggested that in order for effective learning to take place the learner needs to be aware of where their learning works, be it at work, at an educational institution or in relation to self-study. Considerable interest in researching the workplace as a place for learning and how people learn in their work has developed around the premise that experience is the foundation of and the stimulus for learning (Gerber, 1988; Boud et al.,1993). Learning is seen as continual reflection and building on one's earlier experiences in order to 'add to and transform them into deeper understandings' (Gerber, 1988, p.170). Gerber cautioned, however, that since learning in one's work takes different forms, it is important to understand how workers learn in their own context. This further supports the rationale for more research into how the workers, as work based learners, engage with learning that takes cognisance of their work roles and activities.

Also occurring under the constructivist paradigm and constituting a major principle of university work based learning is the individualised approach explored by Boud and Solomon (2001), which involves partnership learning and taking cognisance of the learner's current competences and the learning they wish to engage in. For example, projects and other forms of learning are undertaken in the workplace and assessed by the university against a trans-disciplinary framework. Work based projects, another major feature of work based learning, have increasingly been seen as a vehicle for knowledge creation within the workplace (Garnet, 2005). This could be attributed to the emphasis on what Lester and Costley (2010, p.563) defined as 'reflecting on and enquiring into work activity and on developing people as reflective, self -managing practitioners who are committed to their own development.' This has significant implications if the work environment has no capacity to support the learners' development in this way. Universities therefore have a role within the partnerships to ensure the learners can be appropriately supported in the workplace.

Another theory on learning through which work based learning could be conceptualised is experiential learning. Chisholm et al. (2009) explored the role of this theory in

conceptualising work based learning based on the relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge. Their analysis of a historical perspective of learning processes reiterated the legitimacy of linking theory to practice, pairing cognitive thinking with constructionist ideas and acquisition with participation. They also linked experiential learning to socialisation processes and the socio-cultural concept of interacting with others as part of the learning process, drawing upon the social view of learning explored by Wenger (1988). Wenger proposed that all learning is social and questioned the assumption that learning takes place through the teaching of subject content. Although he acknowledged that theoretical models may be informative, he warned that 'codification of knowledge into reified subject matter' (Wenger, 1988, p. 272) can put barriers between the learner and the learning activity. He argued for the importance of providing students with experiences that allow them to take charge of their own learning. In support of the idea of merging theory with practice, Marton (2014, p.9) also argued that pedagogy is 'far from a necessary condition for all learning' and that learning can be a result of participation as much as it can be of efforts to learn under instruction. He suggested that instruction and support from others will equip the learner with skills to extend their knowledge, stating,

'when humans learn in the company of others, they almost always get some support from others, and if they learn from being taught, they frequently get involved in activities with purposes other than learning (p.11)'.

This understanding of learning dominates the discourse of learning at work. It supports the constructivist perspective, placing the social and cultural context at the centre of the theoretical framework. Lave and Wenger (1991) associated learning with becoming a full participant of a community of practice with the underlying assumption that learning is situated and cannot take place in isolation from the social relations that shape authentic participation. This stance shifts the focus to communities as learning resources. Wenger (1998, p.5) associated the theory of learning to the integration of four components:

- community: learning as belonging
- practice: learning as doing
- identity: learning as becoming
- meaning: learning as experience, where learning emerges from interpersonal relationships.

Coffield (2002) expressed a similar viewpoint and suggested that learning is located in social participation and dialogue, shifting the focus from individual cognitive processes to the social relationships and the construction of learner identities in a social and cultural environment. The knowledge and skills learned are context based. In the same vein, Felstead et al. (2005, p.362) substituted 'learning as acquisition' with 'learning as participation'. Eraut et al. (2002) also investigated informal learning that is highly situated and dependent on social relationships within the workplace, identifying two types of relationships:

- within groups of employees at work
- with people from outside these work groups, like professional networks.

They concluded that as well as being embedded in organisational activities, knowledge exists as a continuum within individuals, co-workers and specialists (Eraut et al.,2002). Fundamental to this theory is the observation that since individuals can belong to different communities of practice, their learning can be influenced by all these contexts as the learning acquired in one context can be re-situated in a new context and then integrated with the knowledge gained in the new situation. This relationship is mirrored in the tripartite relationship between the workplace, the professional groups and the university in work based learning programmes (Figure 4).

The discussion above has looked at literature and theories within which work based learning can be conceptualised, supporting the premise that the practical experiences from work, combined with the theory from the university provide an opportunity for reflection and an ideal context for learning and development. It is important to reiterate that these theories are not disparate to the theories on learning that inform traditional forms of higher education. In traditional higher education generally, theoretical perspectives have placed learning on a spectrum that ranges from surface learning to deep learning. Learning has therefore been associated with simple knowledge acquisition to the more complex conception of learning as understanding (Marton et al.,1993; Saljo,1979). Nevertheless, the more complex forms of learning have indicated constructive processes of engaging with learning which are already embedded in university work based learning. Studies of conceptions of learning have aimed at steering educational provision away from reproductive towards constructive approaches to learning (Beattie et al.,1997). Svensson (1977) suggested that deep learning engages students in a way that seeks meaning and understanding where knowledge is stored in formats that can be applied in other contexts. This process lends itself to the development of higher cognitive skills arising from deep approaches to learning (Booth et al.,1999;

Davidson, 2002). Work based learning, through linking practice to theory is largely expected to foster this style of learning, limiting surface learning arising from rote learning which cannot be readily applied in other contexts (Svensson,1977; Saljo,1987; Davidson, 2002). This emphasizes the need for research into the learners' conceptions of learning (Beattie et al., 1997; Sharma, 1997) so that appropriate approaches can be encouraged in the learners as research into learning has linked conceptions of learning, approaches to learning and learning outcomes. Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith (2014) observed that with work based learning becoming more established in modern higher education there is an increase in conceptual models of the pedagogies underpinning the practice. They suggested that there is also an increasing recognition of the need to examine and make explicit the values and assumptions underlying work based learning in order to support the facilitators and learners engaged in work based learning for the first time. They insisted;

'One of the principal challenges for the academy-aligned facilitator in such a situation is less to introduce new propositional and procedural knowledge to learners, as an academy-based colleague might, but instead to work with practitioners to surface and make explicit that which, through repeated exercise, has become tacit' (p81).

Marton and Ramsden (1988) were of the same view, suggesting that higher education programmes should produce independent learners who have the knowledge, competencies and skills to perform effectively throughout their working lives. As educators we should therefore seek a better understanding of the factors that stimulate this approach to learning in students and should teach and design courses accordingly. In work based learning this entails acknowledging that work based learners, who often have insider knowledge, are primarily concerned with professional practice. Consequently there should be a deliberate focus on student autonomy and capability (Osborne et al.,1998;Stephenson and Yorke,1998).

Various work based learning discussions have linked reflection to this autonomous learning and development based on three work based learning principles identified by Raelin (2008); that learning occurs in the midst of action, knowledge-creation and utilisation is a collective and social process and a positive disposition towards learning to learn.

The message from the literature examined here seems to place responsibility on university tutors to support learning on these programmes (Breier, 2006; Chisholm et al., 2007). It also suggests the need for a better understanding of how adults learn, which is the focus of the next section.

## **Andragogy and Adult Learning**

Until the early 1920s pedagogy, defined as the art and science of teaching children (Knowles, 1975) was applied to adult learning by default. This section will discuss the emergence of a move towards an adult learning theory while demonstrating common grounds with the other theories discussed so far.

Around the mid -1920s, with the realisation that their students' characteristics did not fit within the pedagogical assumptions about learners, teachers of adults began to express concerns over applying the principles of pedagogy in the teaching of adults. They experimented with teaching to different assumptions, publishing the results in the Journal of Adult Education between 1929 and 1948. Although this teaching returned better outcomes, the teachers still expressed guilt about violating academic standards. It was the subsequent analysis of these reports which led to research into adult learning by psychologists, notably the life-span developmental psychologists. The results gave theorists enough to draw up a coherent theory of adult learning (Knowles, 1975). The principles embedded in this theoretical framework were the assumptions that adult learners are self-directed; that the experience they have accumulated over time is a rich resource for learning and that their desire to learn stems from the knowledge and skills gaps relating to their work roles. Their attitude to learning is therefore more performance than subject centred. These assumptions encapsulated Andragogy, a term coined by European adult educators to distinguish adult learning from children's learning; pedagogy. Knowles adopted the term in 1968 to describe the art and science of helping adults to learn (Knowles, 1975).

The 20th Century saw the onset of big cultural changes brought about by a rise in technological innovation and changes in political and economic systems which in turn created a big gap in knowledge and skills held by individuals. The 'old' knowledge was becoming obsolete at a faster rate than known before. There was a need to redefine education and its role in developing individuals and societies as a whole. It was no longer enough for education to just transmit what was known (Knowles, 1980). It needed to develop the skills of learning how to learn and to develop in the learners a culture of self-directed inquiry.

Although adult education has been recognised as a field of practice since the 1920s, Merriam (2001) observed that there was still no single theory on what is known about the adult learner, the various contexts in which the learning takes place or the learning process itself. The more traditional adult learning theories include andragogy, self-directed learning

and transformational learning. The more contemporary views look deeper into how context impacts on adult learning.

Andragogy makes certain assumptions about adult learners which have practical implications for the design and delivery of adult learning programmes, including work based learning. The assumptions include 'the adults' need for a purpose for learning something, the need to learn experientially, the need to approach learning as problem-solving and the need for immediate value to what is learnt' (Mullholland and Turnock, 2013,p.16). In order to meet the learners' needs educators need to keep this in mind when working with adult learners. Earlier on, drawing upon the same principles Boud (1994) had devised a model for facilitating learning based on the assumption that learning is always rooted in prior experience and any new learning should take account of that experience. The model was also based on the assumption that learning from experience is an active engagement in the social, psychological and material environment in which the learner is situated. This acknowledges the possibility of learning from the experiences of others where the learner might 'identify with and make the experience of others part of themselves' (Boud,1994,p.2).

Also supporting adult learning theory is the concept of Experiential Learning (Kolb, 2001) where a learner continuously gains knowledge through personal and environmental experiences. The extent of this learning is dependent on the learner's ability to reflect on the experience. The learner must possess analytical skills which they can use to conceptualise their experiences and generate ideas to apply in practice. In work based learning, the university endeavours to develop these analytical skills to be applied in the learners' practice to foster a cycle of continuous learning between work and study.

Other views of learning that have come into the discussion, particularly in higher education have resulted from the increase in educational research. Phenomenographic research, which has been gaining significance in higher education has brought its own way of looking at learning. This is examined in detail in Chapter 3. A brief perspective on learning is provided here, showing some common trends with other theories on learning considered earlier. Starting from the phenomenographic non-dualistic relationship between the learner and the world, (Ramsden et al.,1993) learning is seen as arising from each individual's experience of phenomena in the world. Ramsden et al. (1993) stressed

'...there are not two worlds (an objective outside world and an internally constructed subjective world). There is only one world to which we access - the world-as-experienced' (p.303).

Marton and Booth (1997) agreed, adding that knowledge lies in each individual's unique internal relationship with the world in their own experience. Learning comes about when an individual's way of experiencing the world changes and they reconstitute their relationship with the experienced phenomena. With each new experience the learner's internal relationship with the phenomenon changes, becoming more complex and bringing about a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This change was defined by Marton and Booth (1997, p. 139) as 'reconstituting an already constituted world.' In support, Booth (1997) believed that when this happens it can be assumed that learning has taken place.

A phenomenographic perspective of learning is therefore seen as 'shifting from not being able to do something to being able to do it, as a result of some experience' (Ballantyne and Bruce, 1994, p.3) or 'coming to see something in a certain way as a result of undertaking learning tasks that are met in educational settings' (p.4). Marton, (2014), however, suggested that in order for this to occur there are certain 'critical aspects' and critical features that should be discovered by each learner. He defined the critical aspects as those aspects that the learner has to notice, but is not yet able to. He proposed,

'the learner must learn to discern the critical aspects of the object of learning and *some* critical feature simultaneously and, by doing this, enhance the likelihood of being able to discern the same or *other* critical features of novel tasks' (Marton, 2014, p.26)

The problem arises in that these critical features are not easy to find as they cannot be set as educational objectives. What the learner discerns in that situation is the 'objective of learning as seen by the learner' (Marton, 2014, p.27). This has implications for the competencies required of the people who are tasked with supporting learning and the identification of such critical features. Research into learning, particularly conceptions of learning can contribute to the development of these competencies. The next section examines research that has focused on conceptions of learning.

## **Conceptions of learning**

The sections above have established that learning can be viewed in many different ways. Various theoretical perspectives provide the lenses through which learning can be scrutinized as shown above. This section will define conceptions of learning and explore their relevance to the knowledge and understanding sought in this research. It will also present research that has been conducted into learning within various contexts.

Richardson (1999) stressed the importance of understanding learning experiences from the learner's rather than the researcher's point of view. Grácio, Chaleta and Ramalho (2012, p.



6) also observed that while the student's role as an active agent of their own learning is becoming recognised and research on education has increased, 'studies on the teaching-learning process as students experience it are still scarce'.

Lin, Tsai and Liang (2012) noted that conceptions of learning reflect a learner's beliefs about why they are learning, how they can learn and where they can best learn. They also reflect how they understand and relate to the phenomenon under consideration (Marton, 1981, 1986; Trigwell, Prosser and Taylor 1994). Consequently, research into learning and teaching in higher education has increased significantly, revealing, amongst other things, 'relationships between students' approaches to studying, their conceptions of learning and their perceptions of their academic context' (Richardson, 2005, p. 673). Research has also highlighted the possibility that students' approaches to studying depend on their conceptions of learning and conceptions of themselves as learners (Marton, 1976; Sadlo and Richardson, 2003). Grácio, Chaleta, and Ramalho (2012) also noted that conceptions of learning are developed in particular contexts and are contextually dependent. It has been suggested that focusing on the experiences of the learner has helped teachers to recognise their responsibility for guiding the conceptualisations reached by their students. They can plan learning and teaching in a way that raises the students' awareness of conceptual features of the tasks they are working on. While there are theoretical guidelines for these processes in traditional higher education programmes, the developing role of the tutor in work based learning could still benefit from a higher volume of research into these relationships.

Costley and Dikerdem (2012) examined the pedagogical practices of work based learning tutors in England and Wales and identified one of the potential barriers to successful delivery as a lack of adequately prepared facilitators. One of their recommendations was to ensure that tutors possessed the expertise required to operate effectively within the 'epistemology of practice' (Costley and Dikerdem, 2012, p.4). This can be achieved through research activity. The next section will provide a summary of the gaps identified from the literature review and a brief outline of how the present study could contribute to filling those gaps.

The literature reviewed on higher education research indicated a significant gap in research that could contribute to the development of work based learning tutors in the way suggested by Costley and Dikerdem (2012). Firstly, the theory on learning examined earlier in the chapter emphasised the difference between subject based and practice based learning where the focus is trans-disciplinary knowledge (Boud and Solomon, 2000; Raelin, 2008; Durrant, Rhodes and Young, 2011). The issues identified by Costley and Dikerdem could

be attributed to this distinction, considering that most of the tutors running work based learning programmes are products of the traditional, discipline based education system and the 'epistemology of practice' (Costley and Dickerdem, 2012, p.4) is a relatively new concept to them. Research to inform the development of expertise in this area is required. Not least in importance is the perspective of the learner who has first-hand experience of work based learning. The research would need to address all aspects of teaching and learning specific to work based learning, informed by theory on adult learning and learning from work as discussed earlier in the section on learning theory. Research has suggested that desirable approaches to learning can be brought about by appropriate course design, teaching methods and assessment (Marton, 1976; Laurillard, 1979; Ramsden, 1979). Evidence from the review by Costley and Dickerdem (2012), suggests this is currently limited in work based learning programmes in England and Wales.

On the other hand, a lot of research has informed the design and delivery of programmes in higher education in general. However, the bulk of research so far has been conducted within traditional academic learning contexts (Marton, Dall'Alba and Beaty, 1993; Marton, Watkins and Tang, 1997; Tynjälä, 1997; Entwistle and Peterson, 2004). The studies have looked at various subjects and areas of specialism such as Engineering (Marshall et al., 1999), Accounting, (Byrne and Flood, 2004) and Geography, (Bradbeer et al., 2004). No studies to date have investigated students' conceptions of work based learning. From the literature defining learning and the theoretical concepts and principles behind work based learning we can see that only some aspects of these studies are applicable to work based learning, making work based learning specific studies necessary to develop the expertise of the tutors and inform best practice. Meyer and Boulton-Lewis (1999) identified three key areas for research to build a body of knowledge to support students' achievement: what students know about their own learning, what they think learning is and the impact this has on how they engage in learning. The focus on learners' conceptions of learning in the present study could contribute to this knowledge from a work based learning perspective, particularly since other research has suggested that students have varying preconceived ideas of what is meant by learning (Saljo, 1979; Marton et al., 1993) and that these views provide important insights into the ways in which they choose to approach their learning (Rossum and Schenck, 1984; Marton and Ramsden, 1987). In conclusion, since the value of conceptions of learning in higher education has been established, the absence of conceptions of work based learning could be seen as limiting to the development of university work based learning. This research could contribute to that body of knowledge.

The second gap indicated by the literature relates to the value of the differences in the way learning is perceived by learners. While most of the research into learning in higher education has so far developed around links between the learners' conceptions of learning and their approaches to learning, more recent developments have indicated the need to examine the significance of variation in conceptions of various aspects of learning (McLean et al., 2014). Where attention has been paid to variation in conceptions the findings have been more applicable to practice. Evidently, this is a gap in the use of phenomenographic research to meet educational outcomes. The present research intended to contribute to this new direction in phenomenographic research.

Finally, the research intended to examine the role of the work context in how learners conceptualised learning. The literature indicated no such research in the area of work based learning or within the context of early years practice. With the current and ongoing reforms in early education and the argument that educational reform as a whole should lay its foundation in early beginnings (OECD, 2012) this gap is not a very good indicator for future progress in the United Kingdom in comparison to other developed countries. From such research tutors can enhance their understanding of their students' preconceptions about learning and build upon these to construct a common understanding of what learning entails within the contexts of their programmes. Within this common framework the students can be empowered to take control of their learning early on in their study at the university.

Dalrymple, Kemp and Smith (2014) observed that while many work based learners are experts in their own fields, their awareness of how they learn can remain deeply buried and that it is the role of the facilitator to encourage the learners to critically evaluate their practice and understanding through the pedagogy of work based learning.

A growing body of research starting from the 1970s has explored the process of learning in an effort to discover why some students learn better than others (Marton and Booth, 1997). It has indicated that a student's conception of learning is an important variable in their learning as it influences their approach to learning which, in turn, affects the quality of the learning outcomes (Marton and Saljo, 1976; Van Rossum and Schenk, 1984; Prosser and Millar, 1989; Trigwell and Prosser, 1991, 1996; Dart, 1998;). Gibbs (1995, p. 23) goes a step further to suggest that the connection between conceptions of learning and approaches to learning is so strong that 'it is possible to predict the quality of the learning outcomes directly from students' conceptions of learning'.

Studies on students' conceptions of learning have also, to a great extent revealed some similarities in the conceptions of learning (Saljo, 1979; Marton et al., 1993;

Tynjälä, 1994, 1997; Eklund-Myrskog, 1998) with variations mainly according to context. Of interest to this research was the 'educational context' cited by Tynjälä (1997) and Eklund-Myrskog (1998) as a possible influence on learners' conceptions of learning. Educational contexts can vary in relation to subject area or discipline, medium of delivery, venue of delivery as well as the mode of delivery. Within traditional higher education, contexts of learning have been associated with campuses, lectures, examinations and graduation, followed by job applications and going out into the world to learn new skills required by the workplace. University work based learning works differently as the learners are already in employment and experts in their own practice and their organisations' needs. Researching this mode of learning is influenced by this context. The studies examined in the literature review indicated that this specific context is not represented in the conceptions of learning that have been researched so far. The next sections will examine research that has been conducted on conceptions of learning in various contexts. The review will identify themes and views that have contributed to an understanding of learning and highlight gaps where more still needs to be done in relation to other contexts like work based learning.

In the various studies examined, the study closest in context to the present research was by Marton et al. (1993), who identified six qualitatively different conceptions of learning from distance learning students. The six conceptions were 'increasing one's knowledge', 'memorizing and reproducing', 'applying', 'understanding', 'seeing something in a different way and changing as a person'. In the absence of examples of research into conceptions of work based learning there was no way to determine with certainty if these conceptions could represent some ways in which work based learning has been conceptualised. However, work based learning as an educational context has several defining features that distinguish it from distance learning. Since the study by Marton and his colleagues, a large amount of research has revealed different conceptions of learning depending on the varying contexts. Eklund- Myrskog (1998) and Tsai (2004) identified seven conceptions of learning, namely: 'memorizing related knowledge', 'attaining a better status', 'calculating and practising', 'increasing of knowledge', 'successful application of acquired knowledge', 'the development of true understanding of knowledge' and 'seeing in a new way'. Some of these conceptions are comparable to the conceptions identified by Marton and his colleagues in the initial study in 1993. Saljo (1979) identified the following conceptions of learning from the learner's perspectives: 'increase in knowledge', 'memorising', 'acquisition of facts, procedures, which can be retained or utilised in practice', 'abstraction of meaning' and 'an interpretive process aimed at understanding reality'.

In a study of e-learning Stein et al. (2011) found it was seen as 'tools', 'equipment', 'hardware and software', 'a means through which learning interaction is facilitated', 'learning', 'a means through which to reduce distance between and among teachers, students and the course material', and 'a collaborative enterprise'. In 1997, Purdie and Hattie developed a tool to measure secondary school students' conceptions of learning and found the following conceptions: 'increasing one's knowledge', 'memorizing and reproducing', 'means to an end', 'understanding', 'seeing something in a different way', 'personal fulfilment', 'duty', 'process not bound by time or context', and 'developing social competence'. Tsai et al. (2011) examined college students' conceptions of context-aware ubiquitous learning where it was associated with 'the application of technology', 'a platform for attaining information', 'an increase of knowledge', and 'active learning'. In a more recent study McLean, Bond and Nicholson (2014) examined the role of feedback in learning, adding to the many aspects of teaching and learning that have been examined in research.

These are few examples that indicate the level of interest in researching learning and how it is conceptualised. The conceptions identified show commonalities in the experience of learning despite the different educational contexts, notably where learning is seen as 'increasing knowledge', 'application' and 'understanding'. Beyond the common conceptions the differences can be attributed directly to specific contexts like 'reduction of distance' and 'the use of tools', 'equipment' and 'hardware' in e-learning (Stein et al., 2011) or 'application of technology' in U-learning (Tsai, 2011). This further endorses the role of context discussed earlier in the chapter but also suggests that there is a lot of common ground on which learning is experienced and conceptualised. What is also striking is the absence of the context of work based learning. Although Saljo's (1979) research encompassed both teenage and adult learners, they were not work based learners. Various other educational contexts have been discussed, including secondary school (Marton et al., 1993; Purdie and Hattie, 1997), tertiary education (Stein et al., 2011) and colleges (Saljo, 1979; Tsai et al., 2011). It was of interest to see how the conceptions of work based learning would compare to the conceptions of learning within these well-established contexts. The work based learning perspective of learning is now overdue with the increasing focus on the role of learning from work in the changing global economies.

## **Research into work based learning**

The approach to researching learning is influenced significantly by different ways of understanding learning (Hodkinson and Macleod, 2010). Taking into consideration that the nature and concept of learning is still open to debate, researching learning in higher

education has varied according to the contexts of the learning. As demonstrated above, although studies of conceptions of learning have become very common in the area of teaching and learning in higher education, the focus on work based learning has been limited (Siebert, Mills and Tuff, 2009). The focus of research in this area has so far been dominated by the relationship between the employer, the university and the student or the nature of knowledge created in the workplace (Eraut, 1994; Costley, 2000; Boud, 2001). A review of work based learning literature conducted by Costley et al. (2009) also showed a scarcity of research around higher education pedagogy relating to employee learning, with empirical research tending to focus on benefits, barriers and other challenges or successes of work based learning programmes in higher education.

This focus has been useful at the time when universities and programme teams have been developing the programmes and exploring different ways of forging relationships with partners outside of the academic world. To a great extent, this process has been established and higher education institutions have realised varying successes with a diverse range of work based learning programmes.

What is needed now to support the development of university work based learning is research into conceptions of work based learning. Findings from such research can be used to validate or dispute the views expressed by the employers and the programme leaders in the existing research. It can also inform the development of teaching and the support of students specific to work based learning as theory on work based learning has strongly suggested that conceptions of learning from other contexts are not always readily applicable.

Yet a significant gap is still evident in research that is of direct relevance to tutors supporting the development of work based learners' skills and knowledge or their own research into higher education work based learning. This is in spite of the high prevalence of literature conceptualising work based learning like the concept of reflective practice (Schon, 1983) experiential learning (Kolb, 1984), learning from experience (Jarvis, 1987; Boud, 1994), and the social context of learning from experience (Chisholm et al., 2009). More recently, Costley and Dikerdem (2011) interviewed work based learning tutors and conducted a literature review examining the pedagogical practices of tutors working on Work Based Learning programmes in HE in England and Wales. They made recommendations for appropriate development for facilitators of work based learning.

Regardless of the gaps in the research about the student experience, a few studies identified in the literature review provide a sound foundation upon which the facilitators' development could begin. These studies are discussed next, with themes and trends identified.

The most prevalent theme has been that of academics reviewing their own practice on work based learning programmes. Owens and Rutherford (2007) conducted a case study evaluating the development of work-based learning as part of post-qualifying education in the School of Nursing, University of Salford.

Sobiechowska and Maisch (2007) conducted a case study evaluating the key features of a work based, competency-led CPD programme for social workers. The research involved learners, employers and tutors. The findings highlighted issues faced by learners who are studying while on full time employment, leading to the design of an updated model of CPD. The study supports the legitimacy of the workplace as a place of learning while revealing the challenges of developing work based CPD programmes. It contributed to some understanding of work based learning. However, it did not address the issues of variation in how work based learning is conceptualised by the learners themselves.

Siebet, Mills and Tuff (2009) worked with a group of undergraduate and post graduate work based learners to determine the role of learning from participation. They conducted a survey, one to one interviews and a focus group with 16 undergraduate and 7 postgraduate students on 2 work based learning programmes. The study examined the students' perspectives of the two programmes. The emphasis, however, was more on the programmes than the students' experience. They concluded that work based learners learn effectively from both their community of practice at the workplace and their learning group at the university, suggesting that a design and delivery that integrates learning from the workplace community and learning from the university peer group would be of benefit to the students. This is reflected in other studies and debates on the nature of work based learning and the implications for practice. Though the individualised approach is valued for learner autonomy, the benefits of focusing more on the social aspect of learning and interaction within the learning group cannot be overlooked.

This was a valuable finding considering the issues discussed earlier in this chapter on the legitimacy of the workplace as a place for learning. However, the restriction of the research to the role of participation, based on asking them about the programme could have been limiting to the participants' descriptions of their whole experiences of learning from work and university at the same time. So much more could have been gleaned from the research

outcomes if conceptions of work based learning as a whole had been investigated and the variation in conceptions analysed.

As one of the objectives of the present study was to explore what motivated the participants to join the work based learning programme, one particular study provided useful background thinking. In this study Nixon et al. (2006, p.38) identified four key elements of work based learning based on the motivations for embarking on this sort of engagement:

- To improve personal performance in securing new work
- To bring knowledge and skills into the organisation
- To improve personal and professional performance in existing work
- To improve organisation's performance and competitiveness.

The scope in this research was much wider than that of Siebert, Mills and Tuff (2009) as it allowed the participants to explore their own choices and motivations without requiring them to demonstrate an understanding of the programme concerned. However, the study was also limited to the one aspect of their engagement. Their experiences and conceptions of work based learning as a mode of provision were not examined. In the present study learners were encouraged to describe all aspects of their experience of work based learning in order to examine the variation in how learning is perceived and the significance of this in teaching and learning.

Nevertheless, findings like these from empirical research offered a sound background within which the present study and other studies could be positioned and a greater understanding of work based learning developed.

Another research reviewed for the similarity of the provision was a case study of the effectiveness of the delivery of university work based learning programmes conducted from the perspective of all stakeholders in Computing, Engineering and Information Sciences (Lalith, 2013). This study was of particular interest as it was conducted in a programme similar to the one in which the present study was conducted but delivered as an on-line programme. The on-line context of the delivery represented a significant distinction between the two studies. This, however, could be an interesting area for comparison between the two modes of delivering work based learning, especially regarding the student experience. One of the limitations for the purpose of comparison would be that the students were only part of



a wider range of stakeholders involved which included programme leaders, tutors, university support services, employers and professional bodies. The other limitation was that the focus was on the effectiveness as opposed to the learners' conceptions of learning in the programme concerned. The findings would still not inform the development and delivery of work based learning programmes in the same way that variation in the conceptions of work based learning could be used.

However, relevant to the present study was the value placed on employer support in the negotiation of the programme learning contracts and the level of support given at the work settings. Where professional registration was required the professional bodies were found to be of great value and the associated accreditation of programmes was found to be a motivational factor for engaging in work based learning (Lalith, 2013). The case study approach, appropriate to the purpose of the study, focussed on a much wider view of the programme within the whole university. This made it possible to review the provision as a whole, an outcome which would be applicable to the development of various aspects of practice in the future. The phenomenographic approach adopted for the study reported in this thesis aimed at a closer examination of the students' experiences and conceptions, an outcome that could be used to address issues relating to the actual learning in this context.

Although all the research discussed above makes an invaluable contribution to a greater understanding of work based learning at programme level, in comparison, the student experience and conceptions of these programmes are still significantly under-represented in the overall HE research activity. It was hoped that the present research, with its focus on the experience of the student and their conceptions of work based learning, would contribute to the voice of the student. The above summary of literature has demonstrated the need for the current research to contribute towards the developing role of work based learning in higher education.

## **Early Years context**

The background to the Early Years context discussed in Chapter 1 provided the policy context and historical evolution of current practice in the sector. This section will look at the subsequent research activity in this area of practice. The activity discussed here has been influenced in one way or another by policy initiatives outlined in Chapter 1.

Policy drivers focusing on the education of children identified the children's workforce as needing developing and professionalising as identified in studies such as the Effective

Provision of Preschool Education (EPPE) (Sylva et al., 2004) and the Nutbrown Review (2012). This led to a mass movement to enhance the qualifications profiles of the Early Years practitioners. As a result research into this area has been dominated by studies on the professional development of the practitioners themselves, with examples including, but not limited to Payler and Georgeson (2013); Cotton (2013), Hordern (2013); Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons(2014), Ingleby and Hedges( 2012), Brock (2012) and Kendall et al. (2012).

The study by Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons (2014) led on from the recommendations to professionalise the Early Years workforce and examined the self-concept of the practitioners and how it could be related to academic achievement and wider societal perspectives. Starting from the observation that the status of Early Years Practitioners in England has traditionally been a low one, they noted that the initiatives to address this seemed to take the same deficit model where the workforce was seen as needing improvement. Through interviews and focus groups with Early Years practitioners studying on foundation degrees they identified two closely related identities from the participants. One was 'practical identity', located within their work competencies. The other was the 'educated Early Years practitioner identity' (Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons 2014, p. 39) which was associated with professionalization through study. In the analysis reference is made to the practitioners' transition from practice related knowledge to the confidence and empowerment they gained through study, leading to enhanced professional identity. In conclusion the researchers acknowledged the overlap between self-efficacy and self-esteem and acknowledged that the foundation degrees had gone some way in enhancing the status of the Early Years practitioners.

Also, following policy recommendations to open up opportunities to professionalise the Early Years staff through Foundation Degrees, Kendall et al. (2012) demonstrated the complexities of making the decision to undertake higher education study for Early Years practitioners. In their research into barriers to HE progression for Early Years practitioners they compiled a quantitative and qualitative summary of the qualifications and aspirations of 20 Early Years practitioners. The participating practitioners, most of whom had level 3 qualifications seemed to be content with their jobs and did not show any particular interest in higher education qualifications or professional progression outside their work roles. However, a closer look at the findings would suggest that there was more to the participants' views than just satisfaction with their jobs. For example, the researchers identified four factors the practitioners expressed as barriers to progressing to higher education study; family responsibilities, support from employers, notions of professionalism and self-identity.

So, it could be argued that the pull factors for engagement in higher education may not have been strong enough to undermine the barriers identified in the study.

In relation to professionalism the practitioners did not seem to hold a strong sense of professional identity. They did not see themselves as part of a professional community, accepting without question the notion that they were rated as second class to teachers. As such, they did not seem to place much value in higher qualifications. This could be related to the fourth factor identified in the research; that of self and identity. Participants expressed concerns about their academic capabilities and educational confidence, more so when they had been out of formal education for a long time. The concerns expressed were of relevance to the research reported in this thesis in as far as they focused on HE progression within the context of Early Years Practice. Also of significance was the focus on the Early Years practitioners' views. While acknowledging that the study by Kendal and her colleagues was conducted with practitioners who had not made the decision to embark on HE, these views could be representative of some of those held by the participants of the present study before they embarked on the programme. If this is the case, these views could impact on how the learners conceptualise work based learning and how they engage in their studies. Also not to be overlooked is that the HE option considered in the study was the Foundation degree route, whose provision could require different commitments from the learners. The comments made by the participants about progression to HE could, perhaps, be addressed through work based learning routes. This claim could be supported by the recommendation from the research team in their conclusion that:

‘..... It is clear that universities in the UK, as providers of Early Years' professional education have a responsibility to create dialogic learning spaces that enable practitioners to grapple, critically and reflexively with their ways of doing and being that enable them to engage proactively and dynamically with the field of Early Year's education' (Kendal et al.,2012, p.558).

The findings from the studies detailed above can be related to the problems with the learners' engagement on the programme researched in the present study as described in the introduction in chapter 1. While they confirm the impact of learner confidence and prior study experiences, these studies suggest that the factors could be more complex. Either way, research into the learners' conceptions would provide some answers that could then be used in supporting the learners on the programme.

Another study exploring attitudes and perceptions of Early Years practitioners without Qualified Teacher Status towards a university training course was conducted by Bishop and

Lunn (No date). This study differed from the one discussed above as the participants were already engaged in HE study. It involved Early Years practitioners who took part in a series of one day courses on a university programme as part of in-service training. The similarity was the focus on attitudes and perceptions of Early Years practitioners to higher education study and interest in constraints to this form of engagement. The study, however concentrated more on evaluating the teaching aspect of the programme through questionnaires and follow up interviews with all the 192 practitioners who took part in the course. Although the research approach and the programme were different from the present study, the findings were relevant in the identification of low self-esteem of the practitioners and the lack of confidence in their own learning compounded by a style of teaching that initially did not take into account the learners' skills and knowledge. This changed when the lecturers changed their teaching approach, leading to the recommendation that:

'If there is a pedagogy for access courses for early years practitioners seeking further qualifications it needs to be one that connects with the individual and their way of working through a teaching and learning approach which follows a holistic model, engaging the whole person with all their interests and experiences, and which is sensitive to and values each individual's contribution to a shared learning experience' (Bishop and Lunn, No date, p.8).

The facilitation of learning on the programme which is the focus of this research reflects these recommendations by building upon the learners' practice. It also acknowledges the knowledge and skills they already possess, allowing the learner to use their expertise to co-construct new knowledge in collaboration with their peers at university, their colleagues at work and their university tutors. If this is the form of learning that meets the requirements identified by the two studies discussed above, the present research will contribute to the knowledge already building up around the professional development of the workforce responsible for the development of the children in their care.

Other research within the area of Early Years practice has focused on the professional development of the practitioners within their own work communities and groups. Payler and Georgeson (2013) conducted a case study of Early Years practitioners' engagement with multi-disciplinary working. Drawing upon Social Practice Theory (Holland and Lave, 2009) they worked with Early Years practitioners, to determine the factors that influenced their success in working with other agencies where the children in their care required it. Five case studies involving five Early Years settings, one child with special educational needs per setting and five parents used a mixed methods approach to data collection. The study identified structural arrangements, interpersonal relationships, history and contentions as contributing factors to the practitioners' effectiveness in working this way. The findings shed

some light into some of the issues that impact upon the Early Years practitioners' effectiveness within the repertoire of roles they fill within their practice. The suggestion of the findings that qualifications had no significant influence on the practitioners' ability to deliver multi-professional provision for the children is also of importance as it raises interest in what value the Early Years practitioners themselves would place in accreditation and qualifications. This could be attributed to the other conclusion that this provision was more of a shared capacity within the setting than individual potency.

Within the same context of professional development Cotton (2013) conducted a case study examining how 15 Early Years practitioners in different settings, with different qualifications and work roles could work and learn together. This study was facilitated through a project on water play across a small group of settings. The project, which utilized interviews, questionnaires and minutes from meetings, identified barriers to collaborative working and learning together. These, however were more related to factors beyond the individual practitioners. At an individual level, participants reported positive outcomes which included changes in their personal practice, enhanced ability to support parents and children and the impact on other practitioners at their settings. A good point of reference from this study is how Early Years practitioners' professional learning is seen as a social process and knowledge as co-constructed through communities of practice (Cotton, 2013, p.19). A few studies have reported on research conducted in partnership with Early Years practitioners on issues relating directly to their practice like the development of children; for example , Fisher and Wood (2012), Aubrey and Ward (2013). In comparison, there has been noticeably limited research activity relating to practitioners' experiences of the programmes which have been made available for their professional development; for example, Ingleby and Hedges (2012), Bishop and Lunn,(No date ). Overall, the research involving Early Years practitioners can be divided into three main areas. The table shows the three areas of recent research activity.

Researcher.	Title and methodology	Focus
<b>Professional development of practitioners</b>		
Alexandra Kendall , Danielle Carey , Andy Cramp & Helen Perkins (2012)	Barriers and solutions to HE progression for Early Years' practitioners. A quantitative summary of the qualification profile of the Early Years workforce followed by a qualitative case study using interviews	Explored, described and analysed the career trajectories and aspirations of a range of practitioners at different stages in their professional development.
Jane Katherine Payler & Janet Georgeson (2013)	Personal action potency: early years practitioners participating in inter-professional practice in early years settings	Structural arrangements, interpersonal relationships, history and contentions were found to influence inter-professional practice
Lizzie Cotton (2013)	'It's just more in the real world really': how can a local project support early years practitioners from different settings in working and learning together?	Collaborative learning in Early Years settings
Wendy Sims-Schouten & Helga Stittrich-Lyons (2014)	'Talking the Talk': practical and academic self-concepts of early years practitioners in England	Self- identities of practitioners studying on Foundation degrees
<b>Practitioners' experiences of work based learning programmes</b>		
Ewan Ingleby & Clive Hedges (2012)	Exploring the continuing professional development needs of pedagogical practitioners in early years in England Quantitative and qualitative data from students and tutors on Endorsed Early Years Foundation degrees. Tutors and students	Lack of confidence to use information technology, suggesting a need for CPD.
Alison Bishop and Paul Lunn (No date).	Exploring attitudes and perceptions of early years practitioners, without Qualified Teacher status, to a university training course. Participatory methodology. Questionnaire, interviews	Issues raised were confidence and self - esteem.
Carla Louise Solvason (2013)	Research and the early years practitioner-researcher, Early Years	Critique of approaches to teaching research to early years practitioners on a work based degree. Tutor's perspective
<b>Researching child development-practitioners' own practice</b>		
Jane Katherine Payler & Janet Georgeson (2013)	Personal action potency: early years practitioners participating in inter-professional practice in early years settings. Case studies.	Practitioners' ability to work with multi-professional partners in SEN provision
Julie Fisher & Elizabeth Wood (2012)	Changing educational practice in the early years through practitioner-led action research: an Adult-Child Interaction Project	Examined practitioner led action research into effectiveness of adult child interactions in the early years
Carol Aubrey & Karen Ward (2013)	a survey and follow-up interviews with early years practitioners on early identification and intervention of young children with difficulties in PSED	Early years practitioners' views on early personal, social and emotional development, Emotional and Behavioural Difficulties,

**Table 2: Three major areas of research into Early Years practice**

The literature reviewed in this chapter has examined the subject areas pertinent to the research conducted here, laying the foundation for the process and the framework within which the findings can be critically evaluated. The subjects of work based learning and Early Years are quite vast. The literature review presented has endeavoured to limit the scope in order to maintain a focus and audit trail for the research. Constant attention has been paid to the aims of the research and the purpose for which the findings are intended, which is to contribute to the understanding of work based learning in general and within the specific context of Early Years practice in order to inform future practice.

## Chapter 3

### Methodology

A number of issues had to be considered in the choice of a research methodology. The most important of these were the research questions and how they could best be answered. The questions were:

1. What is the variation in Early Years practitioners' conceptions of work based learning?
2. What impact does working in the Early Years sector have on the learners' conceptions of their own learning through work and study?
3. How do the practitioners articulate their experiences of learning from work and university concurrently?

It was essential to choose a research methodology that suited a full examination of issues, making it possible to find answers to these questions.

The suitable methodology would have to address the question of variation in the way that work based learning is viewed. Secondly, the methodology would have to yield data that would make it possible to determine how the participants' conceptualised work based learning. These two factors pointed at phenomenography as the most appropriate approach.

Phenomenography also had potential to help address gaps identified in the review of literature like the limited research into conceptions of university work based learning from the perspective of the learners. The examples of studies discussed in Chapter 2 showed that phenomenography has been used successfully to examine conceptions of learning in various contexts, particularly in higher education. This made the approach more appealing for the examination of conceptions of university work based learning.

Additionally, methodology determines how the whole research is conducted, including the role of the researcher and how the data is collected and interpreted. Consequently, a choice of methodology is influenced by the researcher's philosophical underpinnings and how they view reality. Phenomenography fitted in well with the way I view learning, which in turn had a bearing on the way I wished to examine how work based learning is conceptualised.

Finally, the study set out to examine the influence of the participants' work context on how they conceptualised their learning and articulated their experience of learning from work and

university at the same time. To meet these outcomes the research approach had to allow the participants to freely express their own experiences. Again, phenomenography has been used successfully in this way to examine the various factors that influence participants' experiences of a phenomenon.

The introduction to this chapter has given a brief outline on how phenomenography was chosen for the present study. The following section will provide a referenced rationale for the choice in relation to some of the key points raised in literature.

## **Philosophical underpinnings**

Colin, Manion and Morrison (2011) emphasized the importance of locating research within a given philosophy or paradigm. They argued that any research conducted takes a philosophical stance and makes assumptions about how the world is perceived and how it can best be understood. This is in agreement with Hitchcock and Hughes (1995) who also suggested that assumptions about the nature of reality (ontological assumptions) have bearing on how the nature of reality is researched (epistemological assumptions), arguing that it is from these assumptions that methodological considerations are made and research methods chosen. It is also within this framework that decisions are made about the way the research is conducted, what role the researcher plays, how the questions are asked and the answers interpreted.

Broadly speaking, research paradigms or philosophies can be divided into two; positivism and naturalism. Rubin and Rubin (2012, p.9) proposed that these two paradigms are 'the lenses through which people view events, the expectations and meanings that they bring to the situation'. Each of these paradigms has implications for how a research is approached and what research tools are employed. The paradigms also differ in what they consider to be worth studying and what standards can be used to judge the quality of the research.

Positivism assumes that reality is fixed and therefore directly measurable and that the clearest possible ideal of knowledge can only be obtained from science (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). It also assumes that there is one external reality or truth. Consequently, this paradigm lends itself more to quantitative approaches which involve counting, measuring, and testing theory. Such research tends to be deductive, starting from hypotheses and systematically testing them. Subsequently, application of this philosophy has proved to be problematic when applied to complex social contexts like teaching and learning. The major criticism against positivism in such contexts has been its lack of consideration for human



individuality and freedom; its 'mechanistic and reductionist view of nature' which, according to Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2007, p.17) 'defines life in measurable terms rather than inner experience'. As a result, this way of thinking and the related research approaches are limiting to the examination of human experience from the participant's perspective. It was on this basis that the positivist stance was considered not appropriate for researching learners' conceptions of work based learning.

Naturalism, on the other hand, assumes that reality is constantly changing and can only be understood through people's interpretations (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Creswell 2007). The naturalist paradigm emphasises the importance of context and the complexity of examining situations in which many factors interact. As such, it accepts the possibility that there are different versions of reality. Within this paradigm, one school of thought, interpretive constructionism, argues that the core of understanding is learning what people make of the world around them. Interpretive constructionists believe that reality cannot be measured directly but can only be perceived by each individual from the perspective of their prior experience and knowledge; how they interpret what they encounter and how they assign meanings and values to events.

So, while positivists believe that there is one correct version of reality (ontology), a naturalistic view, guided by a social constructionist approach, focuses on how people perceive their world and how they interpret their experiences (Rubin and Rubin, 2012). This outlook purports that people build or construct their own understanding of the external world, implying that what is known is always subjective and meaning is always contextual. As such, the paradigm favours research approaches which allow the generation of multiple versions of reality. It supports approaches that are more inductive, building meaning from the participants' responses and working towards a theory or themes. Since the present research set out to examine how the learners described their experience on the programme, this perspective appealed. There was no hypothesis as a starting point. There were questions that needed answers from which there was potential to formulate themes on how work based learning was perceived by the learners on the programme. This paradigm would allow the learners to articulate their own understanding of work based learning from their own contexts and experiences. Positivist approaches do not afford this autonomy and, as Creswell (2007, p.40) argued, 'to level all individuals to a statistical mean overlooks the uniqueness of individuals in our studies'. This uniqueness of individuals' expressions of their experiences was crucial to the identification of variation in the conceptions of work based learning held by the Early Years practitioners who participated in this research.

However, in deciding to adopt approaches that allow such a level of autonomy for the participants, caution had to be exercised in how the research was conducted and the data interpreted. Hasselgren and Beach (1997) warned that care should be taken in the use of interviews to show other people's understanding of a phenomenon.

In addition to the two ways of viewing reality discussed above, another valuable way of identifying a suitable approach to researching learning was a comparison of different perspectives of learning and how the learner is viewed in relation to the world. Cope (2006) asserted that a dualistic view of the learner/world relation is inhibiting to research into student learning. These arguments could, debatably, explain why qualitative approaches have been preferred in research relating to teaching and learning.

### **Choosing a research methodology**

In view of the philosophical issues discussed above, several approaches were considered to ensure the research questions outlined in the introduction to the chapter were answered and the intended outcomes met (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). Accordingly, after ruling out the positivist approaches only naturalist approaches and the associated methods were considered. Taking into account views on learning examined in Chapter 2 and concerns that a dualistic view of learning is limiting to researching learning (Cope, 2006) choosing a methodology was narrowed down significantly. In support of Cope, Prosser and Trigwell (1999) also recommended the non-dualistic perspective for researching student learning, recommending phenomenography, with its emphasis on interpreting students' expressions of their own learning experiences. This was endorsed by Yates (2015, p.221) who stated, phenomenography 'places emphasis on exploring variation in the ways people experience a particular phenomenon and providing experiential descriptions that reveal this variation'.

Accordingly phenomenography was chosen for the present study, to address the specific focus on variation in the understanding and experiences of work based learning by the research participants.

Phenomenography has contributed its own way of conceptualising learning. Starting from the phenomenographic non-dualistic relationship between the learner and the world, (Ramsden et al., 1993) learning is seen as arising from each individual's experience of phenomena in the world. Ramsden et al. (1993) stressed

‘...there are not two worlds (an objective outside world and an internally constructed subjective world). There is only one world to which we access - the world-as-experienced’ (p.303).

Marton and Booth, (1997) agreed, adding that knowledge lies in each individual’s unique internal relationship with the world in their own experience. Learning comes about when an individual’s way of experiencing the world changes and they reconstitute their relationship with the experienced phenomena. With each new experience the learner’s internal relationship with the phenomenon changes, becoming more complex and bringing about a deeper understanding of the phenomenon. This change was defined by Marton and Booth (1997, p. 139) as ‘reconstituting an already constituted world.’ Booth (1997) also believed that when this happens it can be assumed that learning has taken place.

A phenomenographic perspective of learning is therefore seen as ‘shifting from not being able to do something to being able to do it, as a result of some experience’ (Ballantyne and Bruce, 1994, p.3) or ‘coming to see something in a certain way as a result of undertaking learning tasks that are met in educational settings’ (p.4). Marton, (2014), however, argued that in order for this to occur there are certain ‘critical aspects’ and critical features that should be discovered by each learner. He defined the critical aspects as those aspects that the learner has to notice, but is not yet able to. He proposed,

‘the learner must learn to discern the critical aspects of the object of learning and *some* critical feature simultaneously and, by doing this, enhance the likelihood of being able to discern the same or *other* critical features of novel tasks’ (Marton, 2014, p. 26).

The problem lies in that these critical features are not easy to identify as they cannot be set as educational objectives. What the learner discerns in that situation is the ‘objective of learning as seen by the learner’ (Marton, 2014, p.27). This has implications for what competencies are required of the people who are tasked with the responsibility of supporting learning and the identification of such critical features. This is the understanding of learning that supported the choice of phenomenography for the investigation of learning undertaken in this research. The next section will define and discuss phenomenography as a research methodology and how it has developed since its initial use by Marton Ference and his colleagues.

## **Phenomenography**

Phenomenography can be described as the study of how people experience and understand a given phenomenon in their world, or variation in human meaning (Marton, 1981; Marton

and Booth, 1997). It started in education research by Ference Marton and his colleagues at Gothenburg University. The original study focused on how students approached a task involving reading a text. Before that pivotal study, phenomenographic activity had been developing in educational research in Sweden in the late 60s and early 70s where the aim was to see the world from the student's perspective. Later the aim of phenomenography was associated with the variation of people's conceptions of a given phenomenon in the surrounding world. The attention is not on the phenomenon itself but the variation of how people experience or understand the phenomenon.

### **Developmental phenomenography**

Phenomenography has been defined by many researchers who have built upon the work of the original phenomenographers from the 1980s. Different forms of phenomenography have been identified since the original studies as discussed in Chapter 2. However, Bowden and Green (2009) divided the research conducted into two groups, based on the purpose of the research. They contrasted between pure and developmental phenomenography, suggesting that in pure phenomenography the outcomes are an end in themselves while in developmental phenomenography the aim is to address an issue, usually an educational one. Bowden (1995) in Bowden and Walsh (2000, p.3) stated that developmental phenomenography,

'seeks to find out how people experience their world, and then to enable them or others to change the way their world operates, and it usually takes place in a formal education setting'.

Similarly, Ashworth and Lucas (2000) advised that the most appropriate means of obtaining an account should allow maximum freedom for the research participant to describe their experience. It was on this basis that developmental phenomenography was employed in this research.

### **Phenomenography and phenomenology**

The two have been linked due to the shared interest in 'phenomena' in our world. Phenomenography aims to describe ways in which a group of people understand a phenomenon (Marton, 1981). Phenomenology, on the other hand aims to explain the structure and meaning of a phenomenon (Giorgi, 1999). It seeks to understand how people construct meaning from their experiences of a phenomenon. Phenomenography owes some of its theoretical foundations to phenomenology.

As an empirical research tradition, ontological assumptions in phenomenography are concerned with the 'conception' as the research object. This constitutes the observable nature of the phenomenon or the object of study and how it relates to the nature of knowledge and thinking. Marton (1988) explained that it was the critique of the schools of thought that provided the scattered attempts with epistemological foundations such as phenomenology, hermeneutics and symbolic interactionism that forced them to develop an alternative approach where reality as we know it does not lie in consciousness or physical matter. In phenomenography knowledge is seen as based on thinking, created through a combination of thinking and human activity but also dependent on the world external to the individual which links thinking and activity (Svensson, 2006). Knowledge is thus seen as 'relational, not only empirical or rational, but created through thinking about external reality' (Svensson, 2006, p.165). This implies that knowledge is expected to vary, depending on the thinking which in turn is unique to the individual and their context. Knowledge is not absolute.

Epistemological assumptions in a research approach relate to the knowledge that the researcher aims to achieve through the research. The main assumption in phenomenography is the emphasis on 'description' due to its focus on similarities and differences in meaning. Svensson (2006, p.171) identified the following assumptions characteristic of phenomenography:

- knowledge has a relational and holistic nature
- conceptions are the central form of knowledge
- scientific knowledge about conceptions is uncertain
- descriptions are fundamental to scientific knowledge about conceptions
- scientific knowledge about conceptions is based on exploration of delimitations and holistic meanings of objects as conceptualised
- scientific knowledge about conceptions is based on differentiation, abstraction, reduction and comparison of meaning.

Phenomenography seeks to describe knowledge in relation to an individual's understanding, placing knowledge and meaning in a social and cultural and therefore subjective context. This places phenomenography in sharp contrast to the traditional positivist and objectivist

views and has resulted in some of the tensions and criticism of the explorative and interpretive nature of the data collection and analysis.

Another distinctive feature of phenomenography is variation. The work by John Bowden (Bowden and Walsh, 1994; Bowden and Marton, 1998; Bowden and Walsh, 2000) and other phenomenographic researchers (Dall’Alba and Hasselgen, 1996; Marton and Booth, 1997) has subsequently taken forward the proposed Variation Theory of learning and awareness (Marton and Tsui, 2004; Marton, 2014). Phenomenography is based on the assumption that an individual’s experience of the world is different from any other individual as experience is always partial (Åkerlind, 2008). At any one point in time people will experience the same phenomenon differently as much as they will discern different aspects of it. Consequently, a phenomenon is understood in terms of which aspects of it are discerned in an individual’s awareness of it (Marton and Booth, 1997). This gives rise to the potential for variation in each aspect discerned. At the same time, each way of experiencing particular aspects of a phenomenon can be understood as a collective sum or part of a whole, resulting from shared discernment of the same aspects of the phenomenon (Marton and Booth, 1997). This explains the collective understanding characteristic of the phenomenographic approach. Consequently, the different ways of experiencing a phenomenon that emerge from phenomenographic data analysis are not presented independently but in relation to each other and inclusively as categories of description (Marton and Booth, 1997). The researcher seeks to collect a set of meanings that form an inclusively logical structure; the ‘outcome space’. This way a phenomenon, perceived differently by different individuals can be examined collectively. The outcome space represents ‘the full range of possible ways of experiencing the phenomenon in question, at this particular point in time, for the population represented by the sample group’ collectively (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 323). This is the main appeal of phenomenography in researching processes like teaching and learning.

For the present research, the outcome space was essential in order to address the question of variation in the conceptions of work based learning. The next section defines the categories of description, from which the variation in the participants’ experiences can be examined.

### **Categories of description**

Categories of description represent the different ways of experiencing a phenomenon that emerge from phenomenographic data analysis. Participant descriptions from the interviews are sorted into groups according to meaning. Each group of meanings forms its own

category although in the analysis the categories are presented inclusively in the outcome space (Marton and Booth, 1997). This way a phenomenon, in this case, university work based learning, perceived differently by different learners can be examined collectively. The aim of a phenomenographic analysis is collective understanding rather than an individual perspective. The researcher must therefore be aware that even a single expression in a transcript may contain more than one way of understanding the phenomenon (Marton and Booth, 1997, p.114). In order to extract the categories of description the researcher must:

- Look for similarities and differences between expressions
- Concentrate on meaning/sense rather than word level/terms
- Look for complementarity in expression-different expressions may represent different parts of a single conception, for example the 'what' and the 'how' aspect of the phenomenon (Marton et al.,1993).

The most defining as well as challenging feature of phenomenographic research is the data analysis. The analysis results in the formation of categories of description from which conceptions of the phenomenon are determined. The conceptions are arranged in an inclusive or 'nested' hierarchical structure (Marton, 1994; Marton and Booth, 1997). Akerlind (2012) observed that for novice phenomenographic researchers the formation of this structure can be challenging as the process is not well articulated in the literature. A number of guiding principles have been presented by various researchers. Cope and Prosser (2005) suggested that the categories that are higher in the hierarchy:

- represent increasing focal awareness;
- include more aspects related to understanding the target phenomenon
- are more advanced, more complex or more sophisticated
- better describe links between the different aspects of the phenomenon
- demonstrate a deeper conceptualization of a singular aspect of the phenomenon

In comparison, the categories that are lower in the hierarchy are:

- less advanced
- less complex
- less sophisticated ways of seeing the phenomenon

Marton et al. (1993) described the higher conceptions as building upon the lower ones but not the other way round. The higher conceptions should therefore hold some features of the lower ones, making them more complex and sophisticated. Akerlind (2004, 2005) reiterated that some conceptions can be regarded more complete and more complex than others but cautioned that steps should be taken to ensure that inclusiveness is confirmed by the original data, not imposed by the researcher. To this end Bowden (2005) recommended repeatedly going back to the original data to minimise the researcher's own perspective. This also ensures the reliability of the findings, according to Green (2005).

Phenomenographic data analysis is consequently characterised by repetitive readings and looking for focus and where the emphasis fell when participants described the phenomenon. Close attention should be paid to what the participants related to the phenomenon, what they associated it with and what they attributed to it. It is important that whole scripts are used in the analysis to increase accuracy in interpreting the responses. It is also typical that once all the data has been collected and analysed, the findings of the research are presented in a hierarchical but inclusive structure. The next section discusses how this was done in this research.

### **The Hierarchical but inclusive nature of the outcome space**

The main challenge with formulating this structure is deciding what counts as increased focal awareness. Marton et al. (1993) described the higher categories as building upon the lower ones but not the other way round. The higher categories should therefore hold some aspects of the lower ones, making them more complex and sophisticated. Marton and Booth (1997) suggested that since phenomenography is concerned with a limited number of qualitatively different ways of experiencing a phenomenon, the more the aspects discerned simultaneously the more advanced the awareness. It is upon this assumption that the different conceptions are ranked in the hierarchical relationship. It should be noted, nonetheless, that the ranking still bears with it some value judgement by the researcher as to what counts as better than other ways of discerning. It is therefore the researcher's job to ensure that the categories are examined closely to determine how the conceptions are ordered in the hierarchy.

### **Criticism of phenomenography**

Phenomenography has gained popularity in the past 30 years, particularly in education (Marton, 1981, 1986). Although it has been criticised (Francis, 1996; Webb, 1997), partly due



to the scarcity of literature describing the phenomenographic research process, it has provided the choice not to describe knowledge in terms of right or wrong but in terms of the individuals' understanding of their experiences (Svensson, 2006).

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) observed that the process of phenomenographic research has not been explored as much as other research approaches, emphasizing that 'the process by which research is conducted is of key importance in terms of determining whether the outcomes are ontologically defensible and epistemologically valid' (p. 296). Akerlind (2012) agreed with this view, adding that the relative scarcity of published discussions on the complex phenomenographic analysis has led to misunderstandings of the approach. Bowden and Green (2009) urged phenomenographers to go into more detail in describing key processes of their research to provide a basis on which phenomenography can gain credibility as a research approach.

## **Data Collection**

### **Research design**

The above section has discussed the theoretical underpinnings of phenomenography and their influence on how the research is conducted in order to answer the questions and meet the intended aims. This section will describe the research, providing details of how the participants were recruited, the ethical issues considered and the data collected. The main focus of this chapter is the use of interviews as a method to access the participants' ways of experiencing work based learning (Marton, 1981). Extracts of interview responses will be cited as examples and to support the credibility of the interpretation of the participants' articulations. For purposes of anonymity the extracts will be tagged P1 to P7 to represent each of the participants.

### **Ethical considerations**

Ethical guidelines for all human subject research generally fall under the three principles; respect for human dignity, beneficence, and justice (Beauchamp and Childress, 1994; Department of Health, 2001). The present research was also guided by the BERA code of ethics defined by the UK Research Integrity Office Code of Practice for research (2009) and the Northumbria University Research Ethics Governance (2011/12). The Faculty of Health and Life Sciences guidance for Insider Researchers places emphasis on coercion, confidentiality, sources and methods of data collection and dissemination of findings (Robson, 2002; Fox et al., 2007; Costley et al., 2010).

Costley et al. (2010), drawing upon the work of Vygotsky (1962) and Lave and Wenger (1991) examined the role played by the researcher, their position and context in work based projects. They proposed that research conducted in the workplace is likely to be shaped by the culture and structure of the researcher's work situation as well as the shared understandings developed within work communities. While this could raise the question of bias (Åkerlind, 2006), Costley et al. (2010) argued that it could also put the researcher in a vantage position to deal with the complexity of work situations from an informed perspective. My own position in the research could therefore benefit from the insider knowledge arising from my role as tutor and programme leader on the programme, which has given me the insider knowledge on university work based learning which goes beyond what I would have gained from literature. Working with external partners has also given me an even wider experience in how different organisations work in support of their staff. Overall, the role has given me a good understanding of where university work based learning sits as a form of higher education provision. I can also claim first-hand experience of partnership working and the impact of this kind of provision on individuals and the organisations that have supported them. It is within this context that my position as insider researcher is located; as Costley et al. (2010, p.1) put it,

‘When researchers are insiders, they draw upon the shared understandings and trust of their immediate and more removed colleagues with whom normal social interactions of working communities have been developed.’

My role on the programme gave me that special knowledge and understanding. It can also be argued that the concerns I had with the Early Years practitioners' engagement on the programme arose partly as a result of my involvement with other groups and being in a position to compare and contrast engagement and progress.

This position influenced the research in terms of access to the participants, interpretation of the participants' responses and putting them in context. Also, my own understanding of work based learning and the programme under consideration could have had an influence on the design of the questions and what counted as relevant data to collect to meet the outcomes of the research. The main ethical risk associated with this was the possibility of bias and presuppositions impacting on judgement and the choices made in the design and implementation of the research.

Consequently, there were additional ethical considerations to me made, including issues of coercion. To address this it was made very clear during the recruitment that participation was voluntary so that the learners did not feel pressured to participate (Brody et al., 1997;

MacDonald, 2002). The learners were also assured that non-participation or withdrawal from participation would not result in any form of penalty or discrimination (Polit and Hungler, 1999) or affect their relationship with me in any way (Beauchamp and Childress, 1994). This was achieved through the initial visits to the cohorts and the information sheets and consent documents that formed a major part of the invitation to participate (Appendix 2 and 3). Another essential part of this process was that the initial visits to recruit participants were arranged at the start of the cohorts' normal university sessions so that another member of the lecturing team was present. Arrangements were also made to fit in with the marking and moderation procedures so that the assignments of those who chose to participate would be marked by other members of the team. This would not disadvantage the learner groups as it is normal practice that any member of the team can first mark or moderate any student's work.

It was reiterated that withdrawal from participation would be open and any data collected up to that point in the research would be discarded. Participants were reassured that transcripts of interviews and any extracts cited in the thesis would be anonymised and all data treated with full data protection guidelines. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2011) suggested that potential for harm to participants may arise from the use of interviews. To maintain confidentiality the recorded interviews and transcripts were stored in the U-drive and participants' data was anonymised by the use of codes in the place of names. After the data had been analysed concerns regarding identification of individuals were significantly reduced as phenomenographic outcomes are typically a collection of group responses arranged into outcome spaces. This further reduces the risk of linking individuals to any specific interview responses and the risk of identification. Care still needs to be taken with the extracts used as examples in the report.

Health and safety and the well-being of the participants were other areas to consider. Brody et al. (1997) advised weighing the benefits of the research against any potential harm to the participants. The perceived benefits were the possibility of developing support programmes for undergraduate students, informing teaching and learning and contribution to knowledge about work based learning as an important mode of teaching and learning in higher education, particularly for those already in work.

Although the subject of learning itself is not a particularly sensitive one, it was deemed that there was still a possibility that unpleasant prior learning experiences could still distress an individual during the interview. Brody et al. (1997) reported that more than 40% of students evaluated their experiences as research subjects as too intrusive, especially when the

researchers were also responsible for teaching or assessing them. In the event of this happening, arrangements were made for any affected participant to be referred to Student Support and Wellbeing as appropriate.

To ensure that the interviews were conducted in an 'appropriate, non-stressful, non-threatening manner' (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011, p.443) the participants were free to have the interview at the university or their own work place. The early years' settings already had a mutually trusting relationship with the programme team and the majority of setting leaders and managers had attained their own degrees through the programme.

There were no researcher safety concerns with this group of participants. Some of the work places had been visited before during student observations and work based presentations. However, all the participants in the main study preferred to have the interviews conducted at the university. The pilot study participants preferred to have the interviews at their places of work. Privacy was maintained at all the venues.

## **Recruitment of participants**

In developmental phenomenography research participants are particularly important as the outcomes of the research have implications for future practice. Bowden and Green (2009) emphasised that research outcomes reflect the nature of the sampling process. They recommended the use of purposeful sampling and referred to Patton (2002) for maximum variation, a strategy that identifies a sample that addresses the research question while also providing maximum variation. With the focus on variation, this approach is very effective in developmental phenomenography. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) stress that

‘the selection of participants should avoid presuppositions about the nature of the phenomenon or the nature of the conceptions held by particular ‘types’ of individual while observing common-sense precautions about maintaining variety of experience’.

In the present study, there was a possibility that my insider researcher position could influence the choice of participants. However, the already diverse roles of the participants and the diverse nature of Early Years provision discussed in Chapter 1 addressed this issue. There was also, diversity in the participants' prior learning experiences and the diverse work positions they held in an already very diverse sector. The learners also varied in age, types of qualifications held as well as the nature and level of support offered by the workplace. The literature discussed in Chapter 2 on the professional development of Early Years practitioners suggested that these variations and related factors could have an impact on the

learners' conceptions of learning (Kendall et al., 2012; Payler & Georgeson, 2013; Cotton 2013). It was within the remit of the study to explore how much the variations and other factors influenced the learners' conceptions of work based learning.

The other area to consider was to keep the focus on undergraduate level to limit the scope of the experience of work based learning to the group within which the issue to be addressed was identified. (Green and Bowden, 2009) suggested that in order for the findings of the research to be applicable to an educational problem, the participant sample should match, as close as possible, the population within which the problem was identified. The educational issues had been observed in the Early Years practitioners' groups over a period of four years working on the programme.

The recruitment process started with visits to different cohorts to explain the purpose of the study and to invite learners to volunteer their participation. During these visits information sheets were distributed to allow volunteers to make informed decisions to participate (See information sheet, Appendix 1). Learners were not asked to volunteer during these initial visits. They were afforded time and space to read the information sheets, consider all facts and make informed decisions. They were advised that a follow up email would be sent to individuals with an invitation to participate (Appendix 3), together with electronic copies of the information sheets (Appendix 2). This would minimise coercion and ensure informed consent as, according to MacDonald (2002) and Brody et al. (1997), students may experience pressure to participate.

## **The research participants**

This section will provide a general profile of the research participants while maintaining confidentiality by ensuring that the identity of the participants is not compromised. Overall, the participants worked in a diverse range of settings including nurseries, day care settings, playgroups, private and government provisions. They held different work roles and responsibilities from nursery nurse, senior nursery nurse to management positions.

All the participants were female practitioners employed in Early Years settings local to the university. Gender was predetermined by the fact that no male Early Years practitioners had been on the programme since its inception. The length of time working with young children varied from 4 to 30 years. 2 participants had been in the sector for 4 years, one had 11 years

experience. Two had 15 years and the last 2 had been working with children for 17 and 30 years respectively.

The experience with children had been gained from different contexts with 4 of the participants having started off as childminders, one with babysitting, one as a nursery nurse and one had started with work experience from school. The roles held at the time of the research were two deputy managers, one outreach worker, one supporting families in accessing services, one teaching assistant, one playgroup leader and one nursery nurse.

Prior learning and qualifications included Level 2 training, Level 3 Childcare qualifications, sector- related CPD, GCSE/O Levels, A Levels and two had some university certificates. This diversity boded well for the maximum variation desired in developmental phenomenographic outcomes.

### **Pilot study**

In order to ascertain the suitability of the chosen research approach and the feasibility of various aspects of the study like the design, timing and questions, a pilot study was conducted with a sample of three recent graduates of the programme. The pilot involved the complete phenomenographic process up to the data analysis, thereby providing invaluable experience for the main study. It resulted in the redesign of the interview questions and modification of some aspects of the interview schedule (Appendix 5) and enabled a better understanding of the phenomenographic data analysis process. Ashworth and Lucas (2000) emphasised the need for the researcher's interviewing skills to be subject to ongoing review and changes to practice if necessary. The pilot study presented this opportunity. It also enabled the generation of the initial categories of description.

On the other hand, other advocates of piloting (Prescott and Soeken, 1989; Peat et al., 2002) identified one of the common limitations to pilot studies as the possibility of making inaccurate assumptions for the main research based on the pilot study. They also noted that contamination problems could arise from including data from the pilot in the main study. This can happen when participants from the pilot are included in the main study even when new data is collected. Nevertheless, the benefits of a pilot were deemed to outweigh the constraints. In order for the pilot study to meet its objective of enhancing the main study without compromising its validity it was essential not to use main study participants but to recruit a sample that was as close as possible to the target group. The alumni who had just graduated from the programme were a perfect sample for this as discussed in the earlier sections.

Eight conceptions of work based learning were identified from the data collected from the pilot study:

1. Training
2. Learning as a group
3. Learning through reflection on practice
4. Gaining confidence at work
5. Changing as a person
6. Study that is complementary to practice
7. Application of theory to practice
8. Development of a clearer understanding of concepts

Following the pilot study a shorter interview schedule was devised from the questions that had generated data relevant to the main research questions and aims.

The pilot study had met its intended aim as a trial run for the main study. As a researcher I was more familiar with the phenomenographic research process and the potential pitfalls. However, I was also conscious that the main study would still be a relatively new experience. The next section provides a detailed account of how the main study was conducted.

## **The Main Study**

This section will provide a detailed description of the data collection process followed in the main study. Following a rigorous review of literature on phenomenography and drawing upon the pilot study, a flow chart was devised as a guide to the phenomenographic data collection and analysis (Figure 6). The interview protocol is discussed, followed by a discussion of how the interview was designed. Seven early years practitioners studying on the programme participated in the research.

This study was different from other phenomenographic studies in that the focus was on learning from two different environments, the university and the practitioners' work places where neither location had precedence over the other. Work Based Learning itself as a phenomenon is about 'learning' within a defined 'context' which combines university study and learning from work in more or less equal measures. The object of the research was the learner's experience of learning in a specific situation where university learning is unavoidably tied to work activity. The study thus sought to examine the phenomenon of learning as it is revealed in work activity as 'the situation in which the phenomenon of learning is embedded' (Marton and Booth, 1997, p. 83). This was especially relevant as most

of the research conducted about higher education learning so far has been within the traditional university contexts.

Although conceptions can be accessed through the use of various data collection methods like essays, artefacts and drawings, Marton (1986) advised that they are more easily accessed through language. Proponents of interviews (Bruce, 1997; Kvale, 1983) also advocate the use of interviews to get as close as possible to an individual's understanding of a phenomenon. Ashworth and Lucas, (2010) added their support of these observations, insisting that interviews were the most appropriate means of obtaining accounts as they allow maximum freedom for the research participants to describe their experience.

In phenomenography interviews are seen as productive interactions in which the data is constituted as the interviewer and interviewee negotiate to reach a shared meaning. This is characteristic of semi structured interviews which leave room for this negotiated meaning. It should be noted, nevertheless, that this 'transformative process' is most appreciated when the interviews are transcribed and analysed by the interviewer. In phenomenography this can constitute a continuous revalidation of the data as the interviewer reviews and checks that there are no other possible meanings to the utterances. Once the interviews have been audio recorded and transcribed verbatim, the transcripts become the focus of the analysis from which descriptions of the phenomenon are extracted into groups according to meaning. The analysis is a very rigorous process to ensure the researcher presents as close a picture as possible of the participants' expressions of their experiences of the phenomenon. Dortins (2002) places much value on transcription, seeing it as a transformative process between the interview and the analysis where the data and the researcher are 're-orientated towards the process of analytical reading' (p.207). Figure 6 below summarise the guidance from literature on the phenomenographic process.



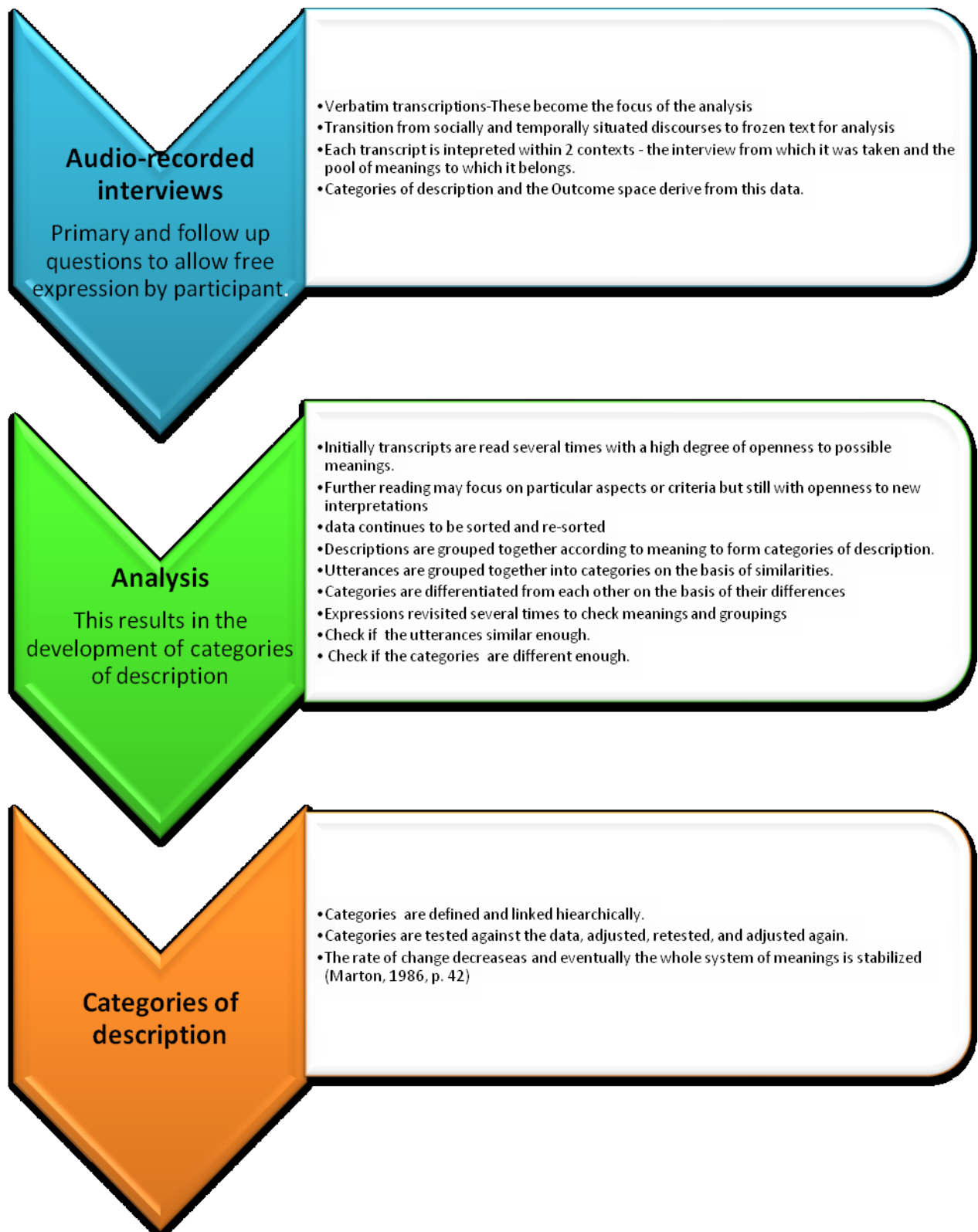


Figure 6: Conducting phenomenographic research: a summary guide from literature

## **How the data was collected in this study**

Ashworth and Lucas (2000) highlighted the three important pre-requisites to the data collection process as the tentative identification of the broad objectives of the study, the phenomenon under investigation and the realisation that the participants' understanding of the area may be different. As such they advise that the most appropriate means of obtaining an account should allow maximum freedom for the research participant to describe their experience. Interviews have been used effectively in research where such a level of freedom has been desired.

Other data collection methods like written essays (Paakkari, Tynjälä and Kannas, 2011) surveys and questionnaires have also been employed successfully in phenomenographic research, with some of them combining more than one method (Paakkari et al., 2011) depending on the research questions, aims and the desired outcomes. Marton,(1986) discussed the role played by interviewing in phenomenography, stressing that it is not only about what questions are asked but also how they are asked. He also suggested that although a set of questions may be prepared to focus the interview, it is important that the researcher allows the interviewee to express as freely as possible the way in which they understand and relate to the phenomenon under consideration. This can be achieved through open ended questions in semi-structured interviews, with the researcher asking set questions and follow-up questions, giving the participant an opportunity to reflect on their response and to clarify or extend where needed. Bowden (2000), however, cautioned against going beyond what has already been introduced in the response as there is a risk of introducing the researcher's own views about the phenomenon.

These ideas, as well as the phenomenographic research principles introduced by Meyer (1995) and developed by Meyer and Bolton-Lewis (1999) were adopted in the data collection. The principles propose an examination of the knowledge of learning; the experience of learning; influences on learning and conceptions of learning. The four elements formed the basis for the data collection and the questions asked during the interviews. Semi-structured interviews were conducted, each lasting between thirty minutes and one hour. The interviews were audio recorded and later transcribed verbatim. The interview themes sought an understanding of the following:

- a) Knowledge and learning: how students know that they have learned something
- b) Experience of learning: how students feel when they are learning

- c) Influences on learning: factors that have caused students' learning to develop the way it has
- d) Conceptions of learning: student's beliefs about learning in general (Meyer and Boulton- Lewis, 1999, p. 292):

The interviews, thus, explored definitions of learning, how learning was identified and what learning was considered to have resulted from the learners' engagement in the programme. Participants were encouraged to give examples of this learning and identify the links between their learning and development and their study on the programme.

### **How the interview was designed**

Drawing upon principles of phenomenographic research by Ashworth and Lucas (2000) the interview was designed from the broad objectives of the study and, as they advised, the focus was on giving the participants the opportunity to reflect. Care was also taken not to make any presumptions about the participants or the phenomenon so that the participants' experiences were genuinely drawn from their responses.

Great consideration was given to the participants in this process to ensure that, not only were they still comfortable to have the interview audio-recorded, but also that they still wanted to be part of the study. Kvale (1996) urges researchers to ensure the participants are at ease at the start of the interview so that they can express their views freely. This can be achieved in several ways, depending on the participant group or individual. To this end the approach used was starting with the familiar, asking a question that was easy for the participant to answer without fear of getting the answer wrong. This was important, considering that the students could have felt they were being tested by the tutor. The first question moved the focus from work based learning to their area of expertise, Early Years practice. They were asked how long they had worked with children. Where the information had not been volunteered, participants were also asked what had made them go into this field of work in the first place. To maintain the focus, the follow up questions were determined by the response to the first question although the focus remained on establishing the distinction between what learning was perceived as arising exclusively from work and what was attributed to the university programme. The following Interview Protocol was followed (Kvale, 1996)

Interview Protocol
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>The briefing</u></li> </ul> <p>Before the interview started the purpose of the interview outlined in the information sheets provided earlier to the participants was reiterated.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <u>Debriefing</u></li> </ol> <p>At the end of the interview the participant was asked if there was anything else they wished to say to allow them to address any outstanding issues.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>2. <u>Interview outline</u></li> </ol> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Primary questions</li> <li>• Follow-up questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Can you give me an example?</li> <li>– What do you mean by that?</li> <li>– Please can you explain that further?</li> </ul> </li> </ul>

**Figure 7: Interview protocol (Adapted from Kvale (1996))**

In the design of the interview, the purpose of the study was kept in mind. In phenomenographic interviewing, two types of questions are usually formulated to allow a comprehensive examination of issues; the ‘problem questions’ and the ‘what is X?’ questions (Bowden, 2000,p.8). The problem questions, which are usually open-ended allow the interviewee the freedom to choose what aspect of the question they respond to and how much they offer in the way of an answer. The researcher can use this to probe further and to build up a picture of the interviewee’s position in relation to the issue under consideration. In the analysis these answers will also indicate what the participant considered important on the issues raised, thereby contributing overall to the conceptions constituted from the group. The ‘what is X?’ questions are seen as limiting to this process (Bowden, 2000, p. 8) although this also depends on the purpose and context of the research. For the purpose of this study, these questions were not utilised.

## **How the questions were designed**

A set of questions was formulated to cover five areas: learning from work as an Early Years practitioner, how they utilised newly gained skills, how they related learning from work to learning from university, prior learning experiences and the impact of Early Years practice on how learning is conceptualised (Interview schedule, Appendix 4). Ashworth and Lucas (2010, p.300) advised that ‘the questions posed should not be based on researcher presumptions about the phenomenon or the participant, but should emerge out of the interest to make clear their experience.’ This guideline, coupled with the desire to put the

interviewee at ease (Kvale, 1996) influenced the design of the questions which sought to examine the aspects of the practitioners' relation to work based learning.

Questions were also designed to examine the participants' experience of learning from work and the university at the same time. There was also a focus on the modules on the programme and how they had impacted on learning and development at the university and at work.

## **Data analysis**

This section provides a detailed description of how the data was analysed. Following an intensive literature review on the subject of interview analysis in general and phenomenographic data analysis in particular, this activity started with the transcription of the audio recorded interviews. The process of meaning-making is discussed with reference to literature and supported by examples of utterances from the transcripts. The chapter describes the initial grouping of utterances into categories of description and the reduction and streamlining of the categories of description into conceptions of work based learning. Considering that one of the criticisms of phenomenographic research is the lack of detail in the data analysis process, diagrammatic presentations of the process are provided. The chapter concludes with the identification of six categories of description from which six conceptions of university work based learning were identified.

## **Searching for meaning**

The data analysis started with the transcriptions, ensuring the full value of this process was appreciated as discussed by Dortins (2012). Ashworth and Lucas (2000) suggested that the transcription, as part of the data analysis, should aim at accurately reflecting the emotions and emphases of the participant. Listening to the recordings contributed immensely to the initial understanding of what the participants' expressions meant. This was particularly the case from those aspects of the utterances that could not be fully captured in the frozen text, like the pauses, the laughter and other emotions revealed by body language and facial expressions, without which the meanings would have been more open to interpretation. The understanding arising from this stage of the data analysis later contributed to the grouping of the utterances into categories of description and separating the structural from the referential aspects of the utterances. Ashworth and Lucas, (2000, p.302) emphasized the importance of 'empathetic listening to hear the meanings, interpretations and understandings' of the statements made by the interviewee.

After this stage, the transcripts from the interviews then became the focus of the analysis. The categories of the meanings attached to the experience of university work based learning as a phenomenon were allowed to emerge from the data rather than pre-determined (Åkerlind, 2007). The aim of the data analysis was to determine the qualitatively different conceptions or ways of experiencing university work based learning as a phenomenon at the collective level (Marton and Booth, 1997). The data analysis process had to be very thorough. Phenomenography has been criticised for lack of detail in the empirical execution (Åkerlind, 2005) mainly from those critics who have not fully embraced the accepted variation in phenomenographic outcomes (Francis, 1996; Webb, 1997). It was essential that the process justified the outcomes and accounted for this variation.

In order to ensure the quality of the outcome space resulting from the analysis, three primary criteria presented by Marton and Booth (1997) were adhered to:

1. That each category in the outcome space reveals something distinctive about a way of understanding the phenomenon
2. That the categories are logically related, typically as a hierarchy of structurally inclusive relationships; and
3. That the outcomes are parsimonious (Åkerlind, 2005, p. 323)

The interview transcripts were read as a whole several times until a focus was determined, to increase accuracy in interpretation (Åkerlind, Bowden and Green, 2005). Similarities and differences between terms of description were identified to form a draft set of descriptive categories. Single conceptions expressed in different ways were grouped together (Marton et al., 1993). The analysis involved repeatedly going back to the original data to confirm the results in order to minimise researcher influence or perspectives on the outcomes (Bowden, 2005) and increase the reliability of the findings (Green, 2005). In this way themes were allowed to emerge from the data and not imposed. A rigorous process was followed to ensure as close a representation of the views of the participant group as possible.

The first reading of the transcripts was to identify all the utterances that articulated the participants' understanding of work based learning. In the search for meaning from each interview transcript, the audio recorded interview and the context of the live interview including the body language and facial expression were kept in mind. Instead of taking them out of the main transcript, the relevant utterances were highlighted in different colours so that

further analysis and re-checking could still take place within the main body of the transcript. This way the responses could still be linked to the questions and the rest of the interview, thus helping with the correct interpretation of the utterances (Ashworth and Lucas, 2000) and further strengthening the referential aspects.

When all the utterances had been identified, further analysis showed that some of the utterances referred to the knowledge and skills that were gained purely from practice. The next stage was to separate those expressions from the ones which were associated with the participants' engagement in the university programme. For example, the following extracts referred specifically to learning from work and related activities, mainly before the participants embarked on their university study. When participants were asked about their learning as practitioners, some of the responses were:

*.... from practice and from attending training provided by the local authority.....and studying in my own time, sort of looking at books and using the internet (P1)*

*..... challenges are very different in that role and I think you have to think more on your feet...and use what previous knowledge and experience you got... (P1)*

*I think, talking to the lead, having meetings erm,.. being kept up to date any new legislation that comes in, reading it, asking questions, discussing it in the office (P2)*

These expressions helped in establishing the distinction between learning exclusively as a practitioner and the learning that they engaged with after they enrolled on to the programme. The first section of the interview schedule addressed this aspect. However, since the aim of the study was to determine conceptions of work based learning, care was taken in the analysis not to include these in the categories of description.

The analysis focused only on the expressions that related to learning linked to the university programme. This was a very lengthy interpretive procedure which resulted in several changes in the outcome space before it reached any semblance of stability (Marton, 1986). All expressions of learning were gathered in batches. Care was taken to extract them in the context of the questions in order to keep the interpretation of the utterances as accurate as possible. Constant review and adjustment allowed the categories to emerge freely as a set from all the transcripts. The exercise was repeated several times and each transcript re-read in full after each break away from it until all the expressions relating to learning through the programme had been exhausted (Åkerlind, 2005).

The similar utterances grouped together in batches formed the categories of description. The same categories were separated from each other by the differences in the utterances (Åkerlind, 2012). At the end of the analysis these similarities and differences ensured the stability of the outcome space (Figures 8 to 13). Reading through each batch of utterances several times gave insight into the participants' collective meaning. It was from these meanings that the final conceptions of university work based learning would emerge. The initial sorting resulted in 20 categories of description. Draft titles were devised to describe what was understood about university work based learning under each category. The statements in table 6 are a summary of what was understood to be the participants' experience of university work based learning at the initial stage of analysis.

The titles were deliberately long and incorporated multiple ideas in order to include all aspects of the description. These were to be refined at a later stage. Further reduction was initiated, starting with a closer scrutiny of the utterances in the categories to ensure they were distinct enough from each other.

Titles of the categories were then compared to see if they shared any common qualities which would justify merging them. The colour coded list in table 6 shows the titles that were found to have enough in common to warrant merging. To ensure this was the case, the interview extracts under each of the titles colour coded the same were read again several times to determine any similarities and differences. As categories were merged extracts were moved around to ensure they were in the right batches. In some cases second or third readings led to a better understanding of the expressions in relation to the questions and some utterances were discarded from the categories altogether, for example (14). Where similarities were identified the interview extracts were scrutinised again and the utterances moved as appropriate. Most of the draft statements merged directly although in some cases some further rearrangements were made, for example (5 and 19). The colour coding in the statements indicate categories that were matched and merged. For purposes of managing the vast amounts of data from the transcripts, in the reduction process summary statements were used to integrate all expressions. The final conceptions revert back to the participants' voice and in figures 8 to 13 in Chapter 4, examples of the participants' expressions for each conception show how the final conceptions were derived from the data.



Stage 1 of the analysis: Initial grouping of the utterances into categories of description
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Taking up the university opportunity to build up your qualifications and get a better job. Progressing in work role/moving forward</li> <li>2. Inspire and share good practice at work</li> <li>3. Independent study /research</li> <li>4. Mixture of personal and professional development/benefit</li> <li>5. Putting theory into practice. Use of previous knowledge and experience</li> <li>6. Keep up to date with changes in practice</li> <li>7. Sharing experiences with other students/ practitioners/professionals</li> <li>8. A drive/motivation to implement change at work</li> <li>9. Learning a lot about self</li> <li>10. Reviewing your achievements and experiences, setting yourself goals in order to achieve what you want</li> <li>11. Reflecting on practice</li> <li>12. Opening up a lot of other opportunities for learning and provision in the workplace</li> <li>13. Taking university knowledge and experience back and applying it to your own work.</li> <li>14. Learning as you do things. Trial and error.</li> <li>15. Building your confidence</li> <li>16. Complementary. Work things could be used as evidence in university work and university work could support work. (Work based projects)</li> <li>17. Flexible</li> <li>18. Relaxed/friendly</li> <li>19. Discovering/gaining an awareness/ realisation of how much you know</li> <li>20. Growing in knowledge and research skills/inspiration/motivation to look for more knowledge</li> </ol>

**Table 3: Stage 1 of the analysis: Initial grouping of the utterances into categories of description**

Further reduction was initiated, following the same process, starting with merging the titles followed by reviewing the utterances to ensure they confirmed the merging. As before, to facilitate thorough scrutiny and a clear audit trail, the extracts were presented in their original colour codes into the new categories for further scrutiny and comparison. This meant that

border line cases could be moved around until a suitable category was found for them. After several visits to the data followed by several breaks from it, meaning stabilised for the bulk of the utterances, resulting in 10 categories of description presented in table 4.

Stage 2 of the analysis. Reduction and stream lining of the Categories of description	
1.	An opportunity for career progression, a better job (1, 4 and 6)
2.	Sharing and inspiring good practice with colleagues at work (2 and 8)
3.	Wider research to gain new knowledge to inform practice (3 and 20)
4.	Learning as a community of practice. Sharing experiences and knowledge with other professionals. (7 and 18)
5.	Flexible learning (17)
6.	Enhancing practice through reflection. Reviewing skills and knowledge in order to set new goals and achieve. (10 and 11)
7.	Application of theory to practice (13 and 16)
8.	Learning that is pertinent to the learner and the needs of their organisation. (5 and 12)
9.	Learning that recognises knowledge and skills gained through practice ( 5 and 19)
10.	Changing as a person/personal and professional development (9,15,19)

**Table 4: Stage 2 of the analysis. Reduction and stream lining of the Categories of description**

At this stage the final groupings and further scrutiny of the titles resulted in the newly constituted titles which formed the final conceptions of university work based learning as presented in table 6.

Conception	Titles from stage 2 constituting the conception
An opportunity for career progression and professional recognition.	An opportunity for career progression, a better job. Flexible learning
Learning together as a group with support from university peers and work colleagues.	Learning as a community/as a group. Sharing experiences and knowledge with peers and other professionals. Sharing and inspiring good practice with colleagues at work.
Learning that is pertinent to your work.	Learning that is pertinent to the learner and the needs of their organisation. Application of theory to practice
Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge leading to an inquiring mind.	Wider research to gain new knowledge to inform practice
Learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice	Enhancing practice through reflection. Reviewing skills and knowledge in order to set new goals and achieve.
Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.	Learning that recognises knowledge and skills gained through practice Changing as a person/personal and professional development

**Table 5. Final Stage of the analysis: Conceptions arising from the categories of description**

While the original transcripts were kept intact and separate from each other throughout the analysis for reference purposes, at this stage utterances that carried the same meaning were extracted from their original transcripts and grouped together to achieve the phenomenographic characteristic of collective meaning. It was from these groups of expressions in the outcome space that the collective conceptions of work based learning emerged. It was important to keep in mind that for any group of participants there is a limited number of ways in which a phenomenon can be experienced and that once an interview has been recorded the number of references to the phenomenon is limited, regardless of the different meanings that can be ascribed to each expression (Marton and Booth, 1997).

Once all the expressions had been grouped according to meaning, it was possible to start working on the draft conceptions of work based learning, which had already been emerging as the meanings were reviewed and cross matched with the questions and against each other. The process became easier as the categories became more concrete. The relationship between the different categories also became apparent during the sorting process as some expressions initially appeared to fit into more than one category. A closer scrutiny then determined the most suitable category for the utterance while maintaining the relationship with the other, resulting in borderline cases and initiating the links between the final conceptions. The meanings assigned to the utterances represented the qualitative variation in the learners' experiences of work based learning and created the logical structure between the categories of description (Ashwin, Abbas and McLean, 2014).

The final stage of the data analysis was to define and name the different conceptions in terms that would best represent how the participants described their experience of work based learning. The result was six conceptions as shown in table 6 below.

<b>Early Years Practitioners' Conceptions of University Work Based Learning</b>	
1.	An opportunity for career progression and professional recognition.
2.	Learning as a group with support from work colleagues and university peers.
3.	Learning that is pertinent to your work.
4.	Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge leading to an inquiring mind.
5.	Learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice.
6.	Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.

**Table 6. Final Conceptions of University Work Based Learning**

These results are presented diagrammatically, in the form of an outcome space in (Figures 8 to 13) in Chapter 4. This chapter has described and illustrated the research processes that were followed to identify the variation in Early Years practitioners' conceptions of university work based learning which the study set out to determine. The detailed results, including examples of extracts from the interview transcripts are discussed and presented in the next chapter.

## Chapter 4

### Results

This chapter presents the research results in the form of an outcome space and discusses the qualitative variation in the ways in which the practitioners described their experiences of university work based learning. Variation, as the main focus of phenomenographic research (Ashwin, Abbas and McLean, 2014) has a significant role to play in the examination of how a phenomenon is conceptualised by a group of people. Yates (2015) also emphasised the value of exploring variation. It is understood, however, that the outcome space itself is a product of the participants' descriptions of their experiences and what meaning the researcher assigns to them. The data analysis discussed in Chapter 3 ensured that the outcome space represents, as closely as possible, the views of the research participants. In this chapter examples of quotes from the transcripts will be used to back up the categories created from the participants' descriptions. Figures 8 to 13 show the categories of description in the outcome space with examples of interview extracts from which each category was formed. The process of selection, streamlining and reduction described in detail in Chapter 3 is still evident in the interview extracts grouped under each category.

In an examination of students' transcripts in which the main object was an understanding of the variation in ways that groups of students understand the disciplines they are studying in higher education, van Rossum and Hamer (2010) suggested that variation can generally be divided into three phases; the basic, middle and inclusive phase. The basic phase focuses on the immediately visible aspects, the middle moves to personal meaning and in the final stage they see the discipline within a wider context. Drawing upon this concept and a review of studies in various disciplines, Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2014) proposed two main structures of variation based on different configurations of the discipline, the world and the student. They suggested one structure that moves from the particular, to a system of meanings and finally to a focus on the student's place in the system of meaning. The second structure moves from the very general to interacting systems and finally to the relation between these interacting systems and the world. It was evident from their review that variation is very much dependent on the discipline and the setting of the programme. This suggests that the variation for the present study could be influenced, to some degree, by the context of work based learning and the programme under consideration. Conversely, we can learn something about work based learning as a discipline from the variation in the way the

practitioners described their experiences of the programme. The following sections will examine this relationship.

From the data collected for the present study, the participants described their understanding of work based learning in 6 different ways. Work based learning was described as;

1. An opportunity for career progression and professional recognition.
2. Learning as a group with support from work colleagues and university peers.
3. Learning that is pertinent to your work.
4. Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge leading to an inquiring mind.
5. Learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice.
6. Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.

While these results evidence variation in the way work based learning is perceived, a progression can also be seen from conception 1 to 6. In the first two conceptions the participants' descriptions are mainly personal, starting from individual concerns to sharing experiences and supporting each other. The focus then shifts quite significantly in category 3 from the personal to a conceptual level, linking study and work; theory to practice. In categories 4 and 5 this thinking is extended to a level where work based learning is seen as construction of knowledge between university and work, with a clear impact on practice. Conception 6 could be seen as the ultimate outcome of all the experiences through which the participants have progressed from conception 1. Some parallels can be drawn between this analysis and the variation phases suggested by van Rossum and Hammer (2010) with categories 1 and 2 at the basic level, 3, 4 and 5 in the middle and category 6 as the inclusive level. However, the participants' descriptions in these categories indicate that this progression is not entirely consistent with van Rossum and Hamer (2010) although their basic phase is reflected in category 1 where the practitioners are preoccupied with certificates, qualifications, career progression and professional recognition, 'the immediately visible aspects' (van Rossum and Hammer, 2010, p.221) .

*I think acknowledgement is the big thing...I've that piece of paper...it's that professional acknowledgement (P6)*

*....because there's such competition for jobs ...I think if you've got a higher qualification and more experience then, surely it must put you in better stead (P1)*

While in van Rossum and Hammer's (2010) progression personal meaning is the middle phase, in the present study personal meaning, expressed in category 2, seems to fall within

the basic level as the practitioners focus is on the sharing of experiences and getting support from peers and colleagues.

*I can get support from work so if there's anything I'm struggling on, I can say to somebody at work, 'can you just explain this again'...I'm not doing it on my own...(P2)*

*It makes you realise that you are not alone there with so many problems (P5)*

What the practitioners are articulating in categories 1 and 2 are the immediate, visible aspects of work based learning. On the other hand, parallels can be drawn between category 6 and the final, inclusive stage of van Rossum and Hammer's progression where the participants see the discipline within a wider context. In this category the practitioners attribute their whole personal and professional development to their engagement with activities that encompass reading, research, conferences, presentations, the modules they study, and so on. These attributes are expressed in all the earlier categories, thus defining the inclusive nature of category 6.

*I'm more confident.....to support other students, .. other people within my workplace. ... I feel confident now when I talk to professionals within my job role..... I can see a big difference in meself (P3)*

*.. I've learnt a lot about myself.... how much experience I have got ... sometimes I lack confidence in how much I know. So, being able to put it down on paper ....., I think it's given us the confidence to move forward, think I can do this.... (P6)*

*Just through the different modules, sort of do presentations and learning new skills; .. even just little things like learning to use...explore the internet, trying to use computer databases, things like that ... contribute to discussions. They are all things that I didn't feel that confident in ..probably it's the confidence thing... sort of building your confidence..erm, learning about yourself (P1)*

Since van Rossum and Hammer (2010) do not seem to account for categories 3,4 and 5, a more convenient way of looking at this progression would be through the first of the two structures proposed by Ashwin, Abbas and McLean (2014) which moves from the particular to a system of meanings, culminating in the student's place in the system of meanings. Within this structure the focus of the participants' descriptions of their experience of work based learning in categories 1 and 2 is quite individual and specific as seen in the examples of quotes cited earlier. Categories 3, 4 and 5 bring together a diverse range of factors that are perceived as characteristic of work based learning like linking study and work, theory to practice , inquiry, reflection and critical evaluation.

*You can look more closely at the work that you're doing at the workplace, ... gain the knowledge and take it back again...and it's a cycle isn't it?... of ensuring that you improve the benefits (P6)*

*I think probably the Learning Contract, because you reflect on what you've achieved and then you set yourself goals. So if there's anything that you're really not confident in, you can set yourself that goal and that target, and achieve it (P1).*

In this way the variation in the participants' experiences of work based learning can be examined from different frameworks.

Keeping in mind that the categories of description are a result of the researcher's understanding of the participants' expressions across all the transcripts (Marton and Booth, 1997), it should be noted that this progression metaphor is a way of making sense of the outcome space as a whole and the implications of the variation on the way the phenomenon is perceived. In the case of higher education studies like the present study it is a useful way of examining the way in which the data has been understood in relation to the discipline and curriculum area in which the research was conducted.

The following section will take a closer look at each conception and the variation in the way the practitioners expressed their experience of work based learning in the programme under investigation.

#### 1. An opportunity for career progression and professional recognition.

In this conception participants expressed their perceptions of work based learning on entry on to the programme. Participants saw the flexibility of work based learning as presenting them with the opportunity to gain qualifications to further their careers and gain professional recognition. The concept of '*opportunity*' seen from various perspectives is seen as a second chance to address current and previous drawbacks like not having been able to follow the traditional route from A Level to university or having other commitments that made it difficult to study full time. The programme was seen as a stepping stone to gaining qualifications that might open doors to a better career and life.

*I'd wrote myself off... I thought I'd never go to uni, I'm never gonna get to do that and I kind of accepted that (P7)*

*....cost's always been an issue with training.... so I think that kind of opened up doors and opportunities (P1)*

*...eventually I'd like to move out of private day care....maybe into a school and I think to be able do that you've got to have a higher qualification. There's not many jobs out there....(P1)*



These quotes are mainly associated with the motivation to go back into formal education. The work based learning programme was preferred because it provided them with the opportunity to study part time and still work full time. The extent of the opportunities offered by the programme in relation to family and work commitments can be seen in the programme structure in Figure 1, Chapter 1, particularly where the learners can step off the programme and come back on at a time convenient to them.

*I can access it, I can still work...yes it's going to be hard because I've got to fit the studying also now, but it was much more the flexible way...(P6)*

For people who are in work this flexibility is essential as not everyone can afford to leave work in order to study full time.

*...it seemed the right...the correct route for ....it allowed for that balance. I've still been able to work. I couldn't afford to give up my job in order to be a full time student...(P6)*

Also of significant value was the APEL process which is offered at the entry point of the programme. The credits gained this way, in essence, recognise and give value to the knowledge gained in their long years of practice. In addition to reducing the number of years of study APEL claim was seen as validating their practice.

*....and I thought well I think this is the best route for me, you know, if I can APEL and let people see what stage I'm at, I feel I've, at least gained some benefit of all the knowledge I've had over the last few years of my career .....I wanted to have some recognition of the skills and knowledge of Early Years practitioners (P6)*

These portrayals of work based learning reflect the practical aspects of engaging in university study as an adult with responsibilities and other commitments outside of study. At this level the focus is on the qualifications and the certificate is perceived as proof of professional competency and the right to be acknowledged as such.

*I think acknowledgement is the big thing...I've that piece of paper...it's that professional acknowledgement that education starts at birth, it's so important, so respect people who are willing to work with those children (P6)*

The certificate is also seen as a passport to enhanced career prospects.

*.....because there's such competition for jobs ...I think if you've got a higher qualification and more experience then, surely it must put you in better stead (P1)*

The views expressed in this category reflect the learners' concern with their own career, although there is also some expression of the desire to credit the workforce as a whole where P6 calls for respect for people who work with children.

*...so respect people who are willing to work with those children (P6)*

2. Learning as a group with support from work colleagues and university peers.

In category 2 there is a shift in how work based learning is viewed as the participants begin to define work based learning in relation to their university peers and work colleagues. In this category the descriptions do not reflect individuals competing for jobs out there. Learners see themselves as part of a group, learning together, supporting each other as peers and enjoying support from their respective work colleagues.

*It's learning, not only from work and the university... it's learning from a group and one of the best, it's the group...(P4)*

Work based learning is perceived as a reciprocal engagement with others, belonging to a group of like-minded people for mutual benefit.

*It makes you realise that you are not alone there with so many problems.....everyone wants to be there and everyone allows others' opinions and there's more respect there than there was when I was younger trying to study (P5)*

There is a clear appreciation of each other's skills and knowledge arising from the diverse work roles they hold.

*All the people that I've met, be all from different backgrounds...and with networking with other students, you learn from them and you get ideas. So just through gathering a little bit of knowledge from people it enhances my life and enhances my learning (P3).*

Work based learning is therefore seen as a collaborative venture for mutual benefit in this category, a shift from category 1 where individual benefit is core. Support and interdependence are seen as an essential part of learning, motivation to learn and progress, even when faced with challenges.

*... in this environment you are sort of, you know, go further and you are boosted up and you are given motivation and I think motivation is so important ....yeah, because when you get stressed you think it's so much easier just not to do it. ....it's really important to have that stimulation and to have that motivation to keep you going( P4).*

*I've got a good network and I think that's a massive part of it. It keeps you motivated (P7)*

Although there is a marked distinction between these two categories the common ground is that work based learning is seen as addressing a personal need in the learner. The collaboration in category 2 is still focussed on how the individual is supported to attain the qualifications which are the main motivation for coming on to the programme.

### 3. Learning that is pertinent to your work.

In category 3 there is a marked shift from this perception as the participants begin to make links between study and work. The practitioners demonstrate the ability to make value judgements on what can be taken from university learning into work and what aspects of work can be used as part of university study. This perception sees work based learning as pertinent to work, the two areas as complementing each other, serving the interests of all stakeholders.

*What I'm learning I'm using every day and I'm seeing the benefits of it every day so, you know, it's really pertinent (P7)*

Here P7 is expressing appreciation for learning that has a purpose. The sentiment is taken up in the following extract where P6 provides a more elaborate description of the purpose served by the appropriate learning.

*I think, if I'm looking for a better quality of life then so are the staff, and they are wanting to improve the children's lives because...I feel I've got a lot to give to adults as well as the children, so that it's not just erm...your personal development or greed. I am actually being able to...whatever I gain and learn .....I'm also looking at the organisation and however it's going to benefit and not just benefit myself (P6)*

This observation is in direct contrast to category 1 where the participants' focus was individual benefit and competing in the world out there. P6 expresses the desire not to benefit just herself.

In linking work to study in this category there is reference to the curriculum area and how the various modules promote the participants' development and support their practice. Work based projects are used to effect change at the workplace. Work based learning is now about influencing positive change in families and the wider community.

*.... through coming to university and basically with this course that I'm doing and doing the work based project...I've been able to take something new into work....introduce something new in my workplace and my colleagues again all like learning from me and...fetching all our ideas together (P3)*

From this quote we can see that the concept of sharing ideas, mostly prevalent in category 2 is still evident. The work based project is seen as the means by which change can be driven.

*.. it's opened up a lot of other things ....we build partnership with parents, we communicate with them.....we become better key workers because you're finding out more about the children's interests, about the family..... (P1)*

The impact is also seen as potentially extending beyond the period of study as reflected in the quote from P7 where she expresses hope that her influence will last beyond her time at the setting.

*But also now I'm making a massive difference to the setting I'm in now and I'm hopefully inspiring my staff to get on board with that and make changes and... you know help the children and families that will access the setting for years to come because hopefully, the things I'm doing will become part of the ethos of the setting (P7)*

On the other hand, the value of work activity in university study is acknowledged, demonstrating the reciprocal relationship between the two.

*So anything I'm studying, anything I'm learning, I can use straightaway. And I think that crossover works really well. Plus it meant that I could use what I was using at work, things I was doing at work I could use as evidence for portfolios... things like that (P2).*

In this category the relationship between theory and practice is clearly articulated, reflecting the notion of praxis.

*Yes what I gain at work is practice... What I gain from the university is theory and...they are both related but at the same time when you learn it at university you go to work and that's helping you to look for it...how that theory that you learnt, to put it into practice...while before, you just go to work you don't really think about it (P4)*

So, the distinction between category 3 and the earlier categories is very clearly defined.

4. Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge resulting in an inquiring mind.

Keeping up the idea of a progression in variation, category 4 can be seen as moving the perception of work based learning to an engagement that recognises that while work activity provides learning opportunities every day, this learning can be restricted if the learning is not actively extended. Work based learning is seen as extending those opportunities as it gives access to a wide range of sources of knowledge and develops an inquiring mind.

*...work based learning means having the access and the availability to gain that knowledge from reading, research, lectures....over a wide range of areas.....in order to feel that you can professionally carry out that job role (P6)*

*'... I think you get to a certain stage of learning at work and you can't go any further because the people at work don't have the knowledge to give you and being at university shows you where to look for that next stage of learning and inspires you to look for more' (P5)*

*....for me it helps me to think 'I'm not just doing it...I'm not just going to work and doing a job and coming home again.. I think mhh...I'm really interested in that or, oh I wonder why that happens....or a study about..... well.... what actually happens? What's the outcome because we've done this at work I wonder what's gonna happen (P2)*

In this category the link between work and university is not lost. However, the descriptions seem to be suggesting that more can be gained from work if university and all it offers are brought in. The relationship between the two recognises university as informing work more than work informs study. Nonetheless, work still remains the basis of university learning as the learner becomes more curious and critical of their practice and embarks on a cycle of knowledge-building that goes from theory to practice and back again. The exposure to all the resources outside of work stimulates curiosity about what they do and why they do it. What is learnt at university gives the practitioners new knowledge about what they have always done in practice without question. They now have the knowledge and confidence to interrogate their own and their organisations' practice.

5. Learning that makes you reflect on and review how you do things in practice.

In conception 5 work based learning is perceived as reflection and reviewing your practice. The descriptions in this category move the perception of work based learning to a level where it provides the tools for conceptual development through the requirements of the modules on the programme. This category contains some aspects of category 3 and 4 where there is a realisation of the relationship between work and university. However, the participants here are demonstrating a more advanced understanding of how the curriculum is developing the skills and knowledge through which their professional development can be realised.

*I think probably the Learning Contract, because you reflect on what you've achieved and then you set yourself goals. So if there's anything that you're really not confident in, you can set yourself that goal and that target, and achieve it (P1)*

This extract reflects a deep understanding of the purpose of the Learning Contract module, which underpins autonomous learning.

*...makes you reflect on the practice, what you are doing and how you can improve it....and I think that a Critical Incident...when we were told that a critical incident doesn't have to always be negative ehm, it made me look at some of the more positive points and when something's gone really well and to actually think.. 'I did good today,' and praise yourself (P5)*

The Critical Incident, which can be adopted as a tool to identify learning from occurrences at work is a strategy used in the Managing Own Learning module whose purpose is also to nurture personal and professional development.

*I'd always reflected on myself but I'd never reflected on an experience of a training course or a professional discussion and the main thing I took from the CPD was the fact that, you*

*know yes you can critically analyse yourself but you can analyse an experience as well. That was in my conclusion. That was the main thing I learnt from that (P7).*

*..it makes me think more on a day to day basis of what I'm doing...why am I doing this? And how can I improve on what I am doing and to also realise that sometimes your practice might not be quite what you think it is and by reviewing that you can improve on that (P5).*

Reflection is not limited to an incident or a learning activity. It is used as part of reviewing practice and changing it where needed. In this category the main focus is improving practice, developing a culture of looking for opportunities to learn within practice.

*..you reflect on what you've done in that last year, see how far you have come, and if there's anything that you need to review again, you can set yourself another target for that; and it keeps you going.....I think I'm always looking to what I can do next. How can we make it better? Even if something's working well it's like, alright, how can we extend this further? (P1)*

6. Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.

In this category the learners' expressions of work based learning suggest an awakening to their own knowledge and development through their study. The views expressed here give a strong picture of how they perceive the change to have come about.

*.. I've learnt a lot about myself.... how much experience I have got ... sometimes I lack confidence in how much I know. So, being able to put it down on paper ....., I think it's given us the confidence to move forward, think I can do this.... (P6)*

*...if you've looked at theories and the theories back up what you're doing in the workplace you have more confidence in what you are doing..... ..it's erm...confidence building (P5)*

The idea of putting it down on paper is a reference to the modules identified in category 5 and the other activities engaged in as part of their study, including the APEL process which can also be linked to category 1 where it afforded the much desired academic and professional acknowledgement.

*The first time was when I did my APEL module and I was amazed at how much I did know and how much I put in... I was impressed with myself....I think sometimes.... you never realise how much you know until somebody else brings it out (P2)*

This theme is integral to this category where the change is attributed to gaining confidence, which in turn leads to further development as they engage more conceptually in whatever they do.

*I've learnt a lot about meself.....I'm more confident. (P3)*

*....because it's just unbelievable.... to stand in front of a group of people and talk,. I would never be able to do it, I don't think, if I had never been to university or this programme (P4)*

As the most inclusive category, there is evidence of some aspect of all the other categories of description, including Conception 4 where the participant sees themselves as a scholar who has fully embraced the role of university as a source of knowledge and inspiration for further learning.

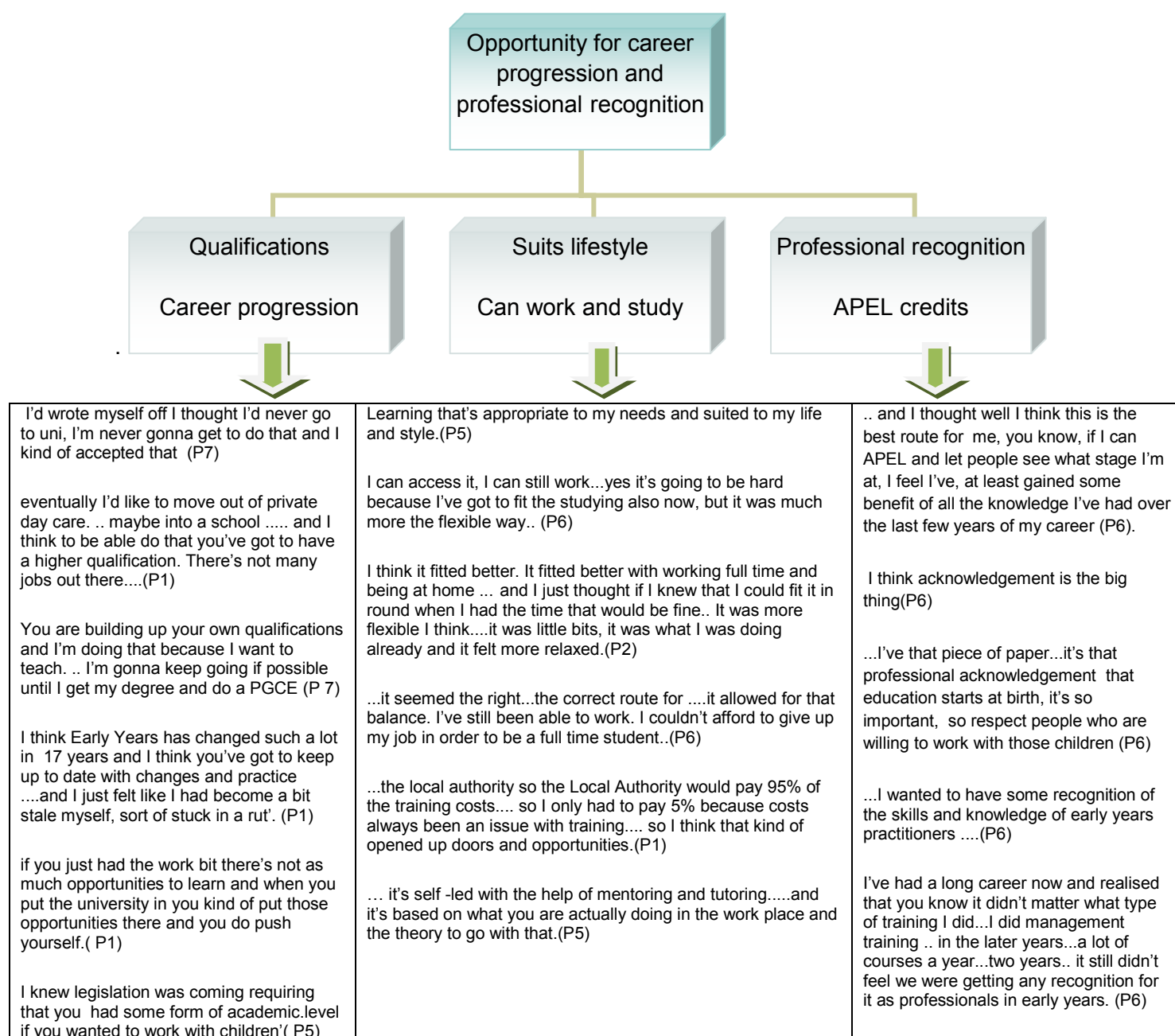
*So definitely for me, erm, personally for my confidence and my self- esteem but also professionally I do feel like I'm an established Early Years professional (P7)*

The above sections have examined the categories of description and how they represent the variation in the way work based learning was conceptualised by the practitioners who took part in this research.

The rest of this chapter presents the outcome space showing categories of description with examples of extracts from the transcripts.

## The outcome space

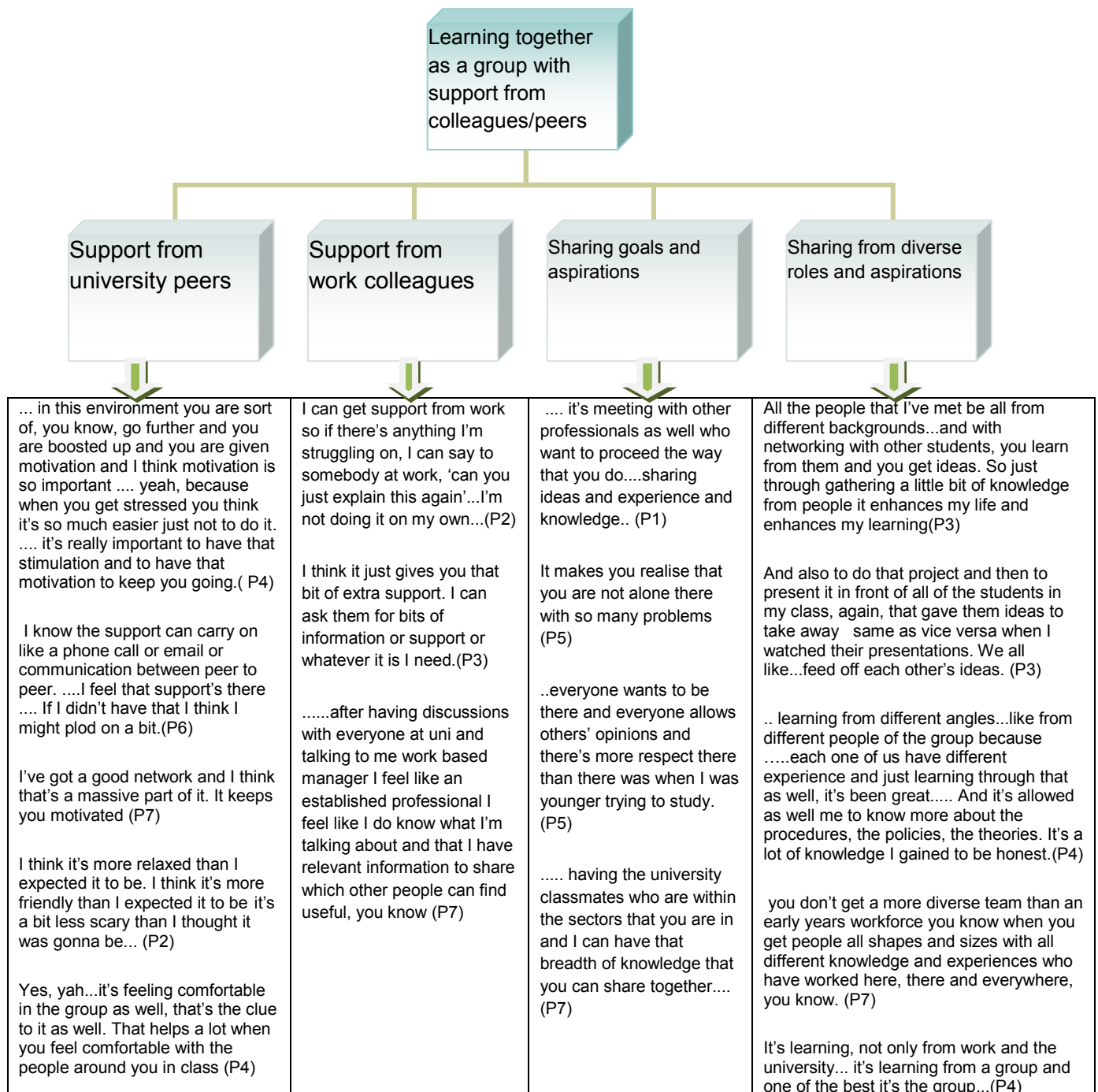
### 1. Opportunity for career progression and professional recognition



**Figure 8. Opportunity**

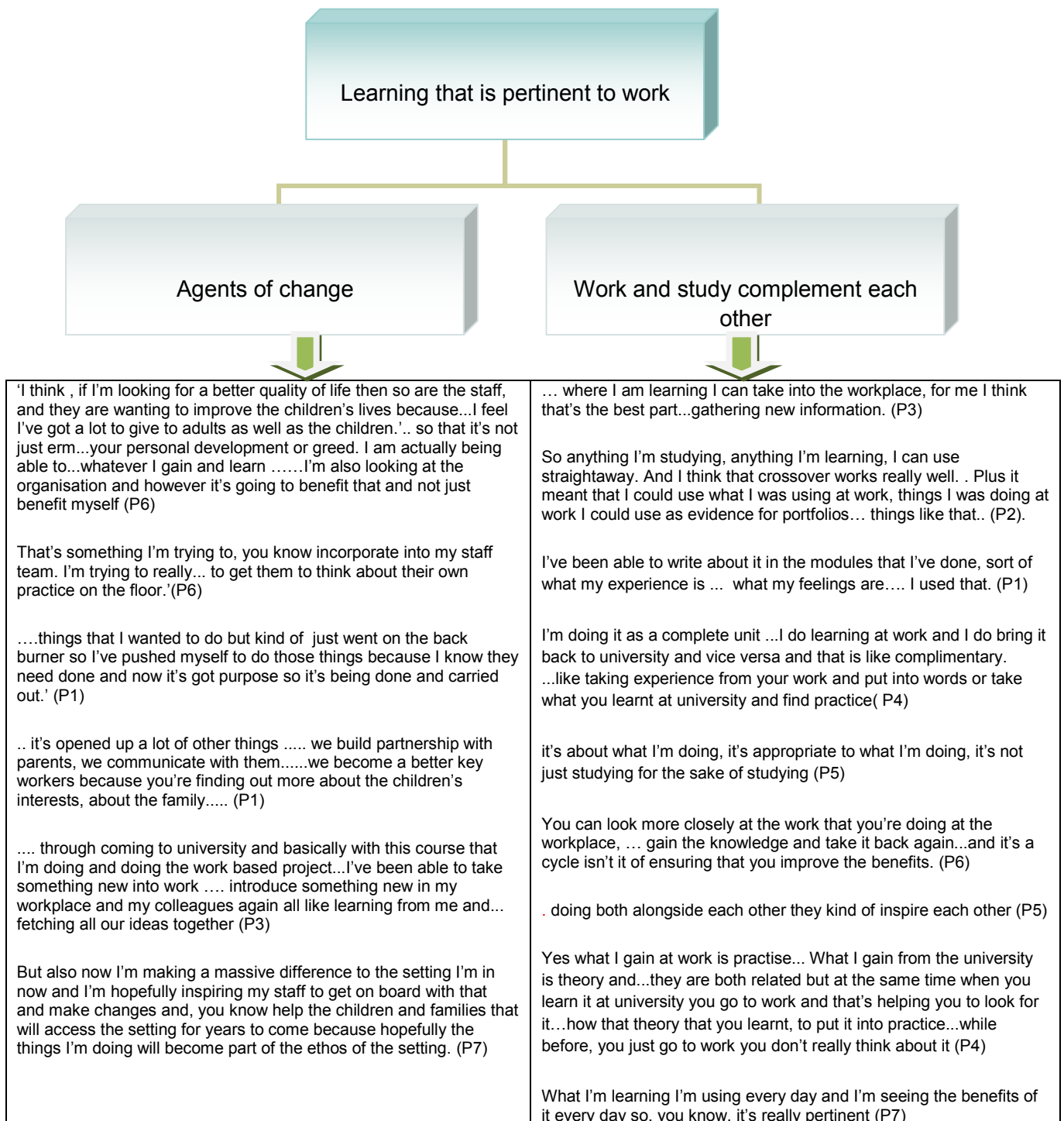


## 2. Learning together as a group with support from work colleagues and university peers.



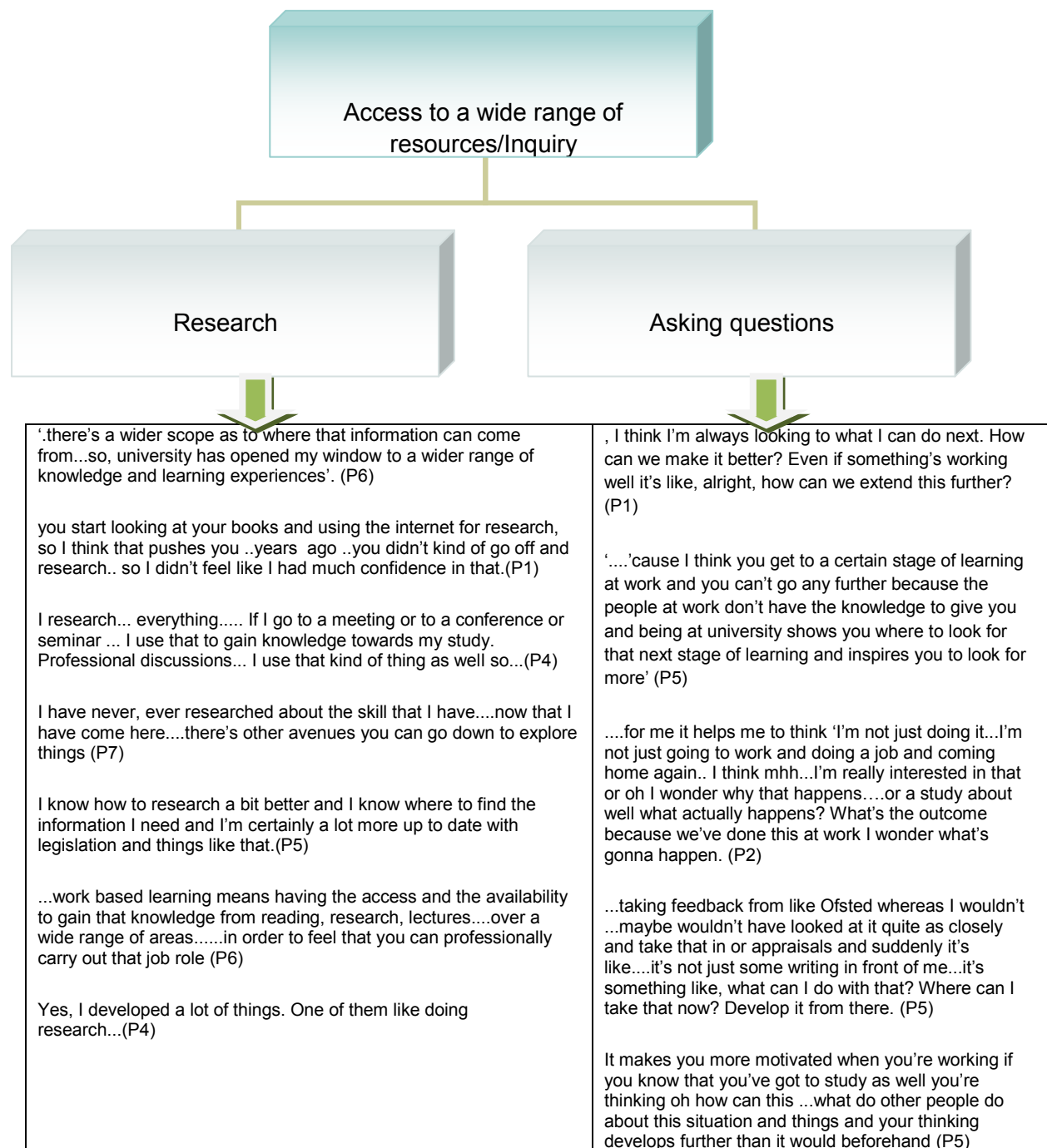
**Figure 9 : Learning together as a group**

### 3. Learning that is pertinent to work



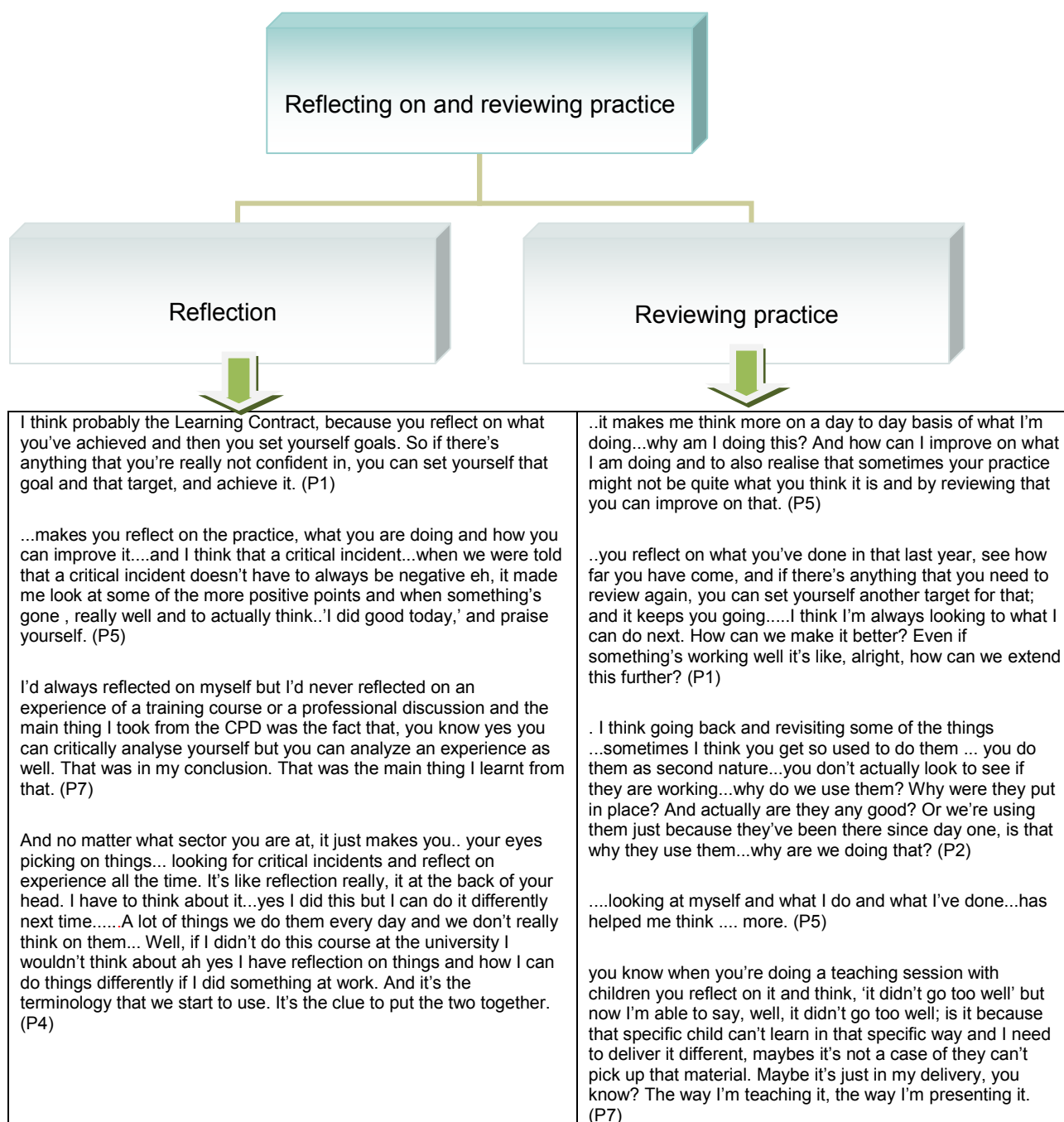
**Figure 10: Learning as pertinent to work**

#### 4. Access to a wide range of sources of knowledge resulting in an inquiring mind.



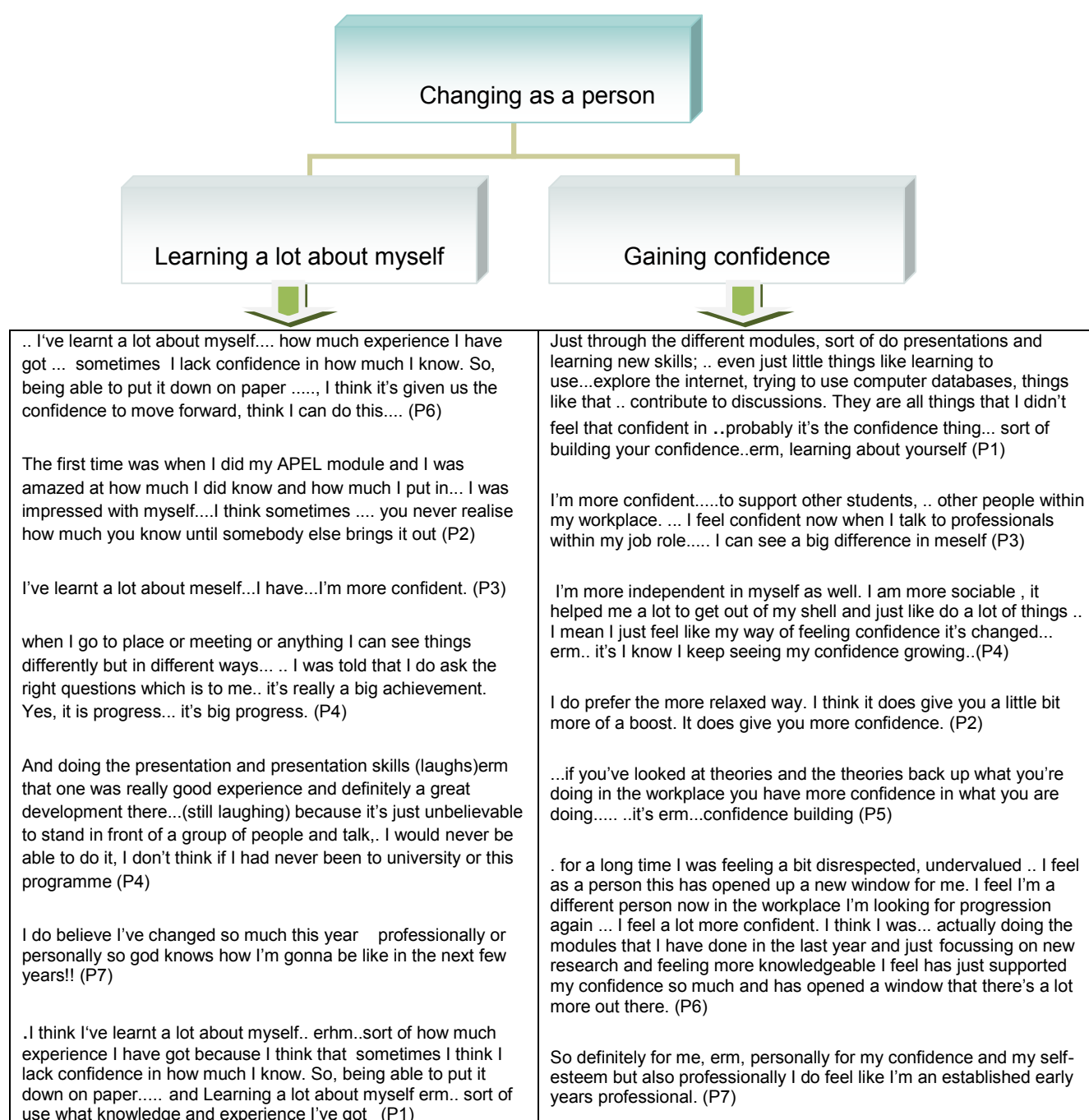
**Figure 11: Access to a wide range of resources**

## 5. Learning that makes you reflect on and review your practice.



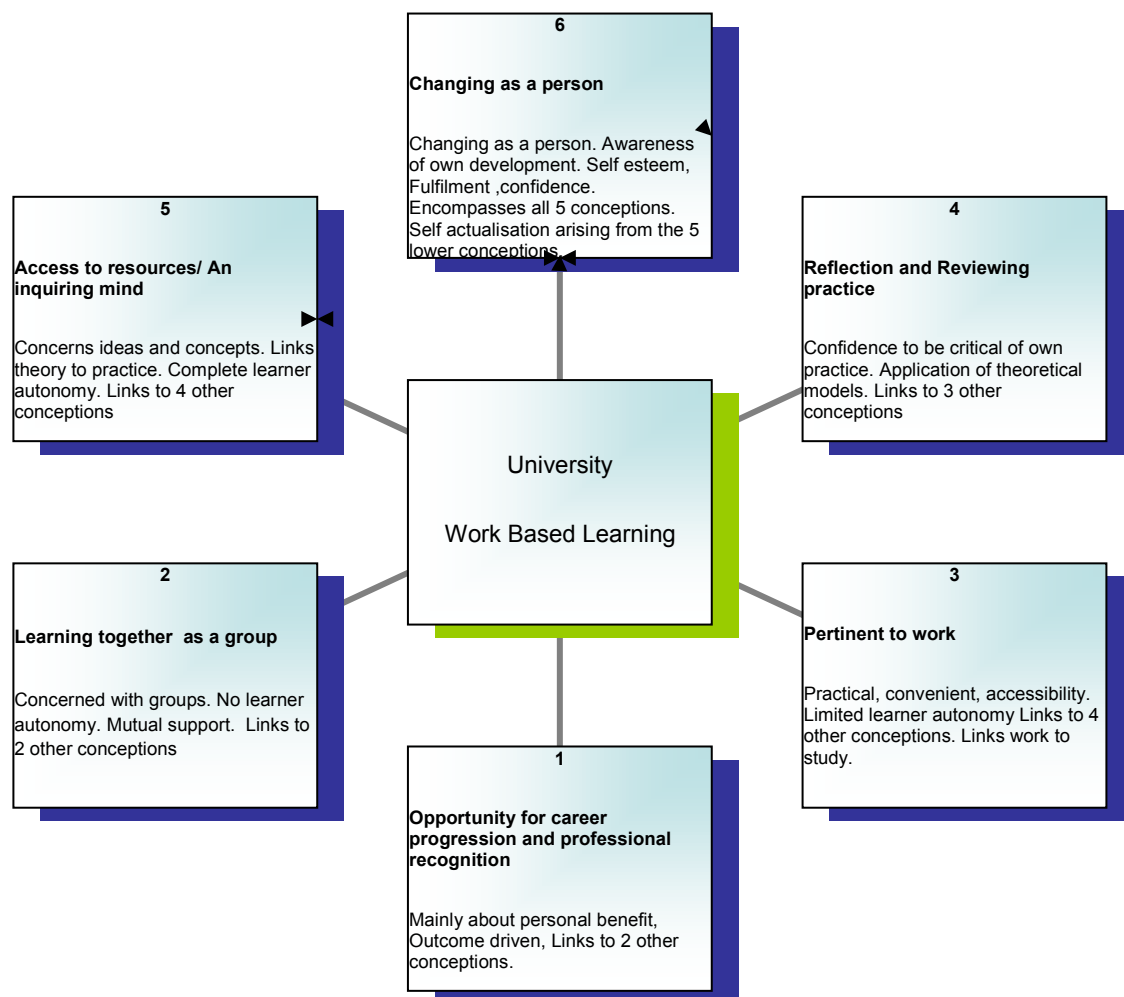
**Figure 12: Learning as Reflection and Review of practice**

## 6. Changing as a person as you gain knowledge and confidence.



**Figure 13: Changing as a person**

In the phenomenographic tradition, the above results, the outcome space reflects the collective nature of how a phenomenon can be discerned by a group of people within a particular context. It also represents variation in the way a phenomenon, in this case work based learning, can be discerned by different people. In the phenomenographic tradition, the outcome space should be presented in an inclusive hierarchy (Marton and Booth, 1997). Figure 14 represents this hierarchical relationship between the conceptions as discussed in the Methodology, Chapter 3.



**Figure 14 Inclusive and hierarchical presentation of Early Years practitioners' conceptions of university WBL**

## Chapter 5

### Discussion

This chapter will provide an analysis of what has been understood from the findings of this research and the significance of the variation in the conceptions. It will close with consideration of how the findings from the research can contribute to the practice of work based learning and the use of phenomenographic research in higher education.

The literature review in Chapter 2 concentrated on three subject areas; work based learning, early years practice and phenomenography. While the main purpose of this review was to underpin the research itself, it was also anticipated that it would form a context within which the research findings could be scrutinised. The discussion of the findings will draw upon this literature in this way.

According to Yates (2015, p.226) 'approaches to important phenomena are founded on the understanding of the vast differences that may exist between people.' In education, variation in the conceptualisation of a particular phenomenon can reflect educationally critical points of difference (Marton and Booth, 1997). Paying attention to such differences can enable educators to engage with students in different ways. It can also provide a starting point in the design and delivery of higher education programmes. There is therefore a lot to be learned from the outcome space, which comprises the varying categories of description emerging from a phenomenographic study. In the outcome space of the present research, significant themes emerged from which insights into university work based learning can be gained.

Starting with the progression from the most basic to the most inclusive of the categories of description, the pattern that emerges seems to agree with the findings by Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons (2014) whose research investigated the self-concept of Early Years practitioners studying on foundation degrees. The conclusion from the study was that the practitioners' 'practical identity' could have developed into the 'educated early years practitioner identity' (Sims-Schouten and Stittrich-Lyons, 2014, p. 39) as a result of engaging in higher education study. The transition was attributed to the perceived overlap between self-efficacy and self-esteem, accounting for the enhanced professional identity. These perspectives are evident in the practitioners' expressions of their self-concept in category 1 where they express the desire to better themselves and in category 6 where they acknowledge their own worth and the confidence they have developed through their engagement on the programme. Categories 2 to 5 represent the activities from which the

practitioners' enhanced professional identity could have developed, reflecting a number of work based learning principles identified in literature like 'the role played by reflection in recognising and evaluating learning experiences and opportunities as they occur' (Dalrymple, Kemp and Patrick-Smith, 2012, p.76).

From a historical perspective, the participants' desire for professional recognition could be attributed to the status of Early Years practice compared to other professions like teaching. A similar conception of learning was identified in a study by Chin-Chung Tsai (2009) where it was assigned the label of 'Status'. In this study 'academic degrees' were seen as synonymous with 'better future jobs' (p.1096). What the practitioners expressed about work based learning in category 1 also reflects some of the core values of Andragogy where the motivation to learn is extrinsic, engagement is associated with personal pay-off and the readiness to learn arises from current life situations (Knowles et al., 2012). However, Dalrymple, Kemp and Patrick-Smith, (2012) acknowledged the opportunity presented by work based learning to individual learners as they become co-producers of knowledge through study linked to their practice. From their own students they observed increased motivation and a genuine thirst for knowledge. They commented,

Often they are genuinely surprised and even shocked by the intensity with which they apprehend and explore ideas and relate them to their professional practice, and by the outcomes engendered by some of the learning episodes and exchanges in which they take part (Dalrymple, Kemp and Patrick-Smith, 2012, p.81).

This echoes the Early Years practitioners' descriptions of their development on the programme in category 6 where they changed as they realised their own worth. The increased thirst for knowledge can be identified in category 4 where they described work based learning as access to a wide range of resources.

We can also see from the gap between conception 1 and 6 some aspects of the findings of the research into Early Years practitioners' professionalism which suggested that early years practitioners may have issues with confidence when studying at university level. It is not surprising therefore that in category 2 learning as a group is seen as an essential feature of work based learning, particularly with reference to mutual support and shared aspirations. It is interesting that the workplace is seen as part of this support network in this category, setting this form of learning apart from the more traditional routes and the conceptions of learning that arise from them. In category 6 the practitioners' articulations confirm the transformation through increased confidence. Also worth noting is that the increase in confidence comes from learning about themselves as much as it does from learning on the



programme. This seems to suggest that the practitioners become aware of the value of the skills and knowledge they already had before they studied on the programme. This could be attributed, in part, to the Accreditation of Prior Experiential Learning, a core value in work based learning. This is articulated very clearly in the practitioners' descriptions of their experiences, reflecting views held by Bailie (2000) who observed that the ability to build credit over time is enabling for many learners who would not be confident or have the time to commit to a full qualification initially. Stephenson and Saxton (2005) also agreed that learners welcome the ability to build a programme of learning around their own work. This view comes out strongest in category 3 where the learners demonstrate an understanding of the relationship between their study and their practice.

The theme of self-concept can also be seen from the perspective of policy that led to the introduction of work based learning in higher education. While initially work based learning was earmarked for the enhancement of the qualifications profile of the UK population, (Leitch, 2006), at individual learners' level it was also seen to have potential to address the issues of missed opportunities for people who had, for various reasons, not followed the route to a career in the professions through traditional university qualifications. The observations made in all the categories in the outcome space suggest that work based learning has the potential to meet this purpose. This is in keeping with a study conducted by Nixon et al. (2006) which identified four key elements of work based learning based on the motivations for embarking on university study. They found that work based learners were motivated by the desire to improve personal performance in securing new work, bringing knowledge and skills into the organisation, improving personal and professional performance in existing work and improving their organisation's performance and competitiveness (Nixon et al. 2006, p.38). Siebert and Walsh (2013) agreed with this, suggesting that the production of knowledge and practice through reflection in addition to the analysis and evaluation of one's professional practice requires consideration of the relationship between practice and organisational context. These factors are evident in the practitioners' descriptions in categories 1, 3, 4 and 5 (Figures 8, 10, 11 and 12). This bodes well for the Early Years sector as Brock (2012) observed that the ability to reflect on and evaluate one's professional role and its practical application must be the key to professionalism in the Early Years.

On the other hand, the focus on the individual in category 1 is in direct contrast to Caffarella and Merriam's (2000) theory that links learning to interaction and social contexts. Nonetheless, this social aspect of work based learning can be seen in category 2 where practitioners associated work based learning with learning together and sharing similar

aspirations. A note should be made here that the practitioners' views of work based learning are not confined to any particular categories of description, keeping in mind that an individual can demonstrate different ways of experiencing a phenomenon. Each participant could demonstrate an awareness of work based learning in all the categories of description at any given time.

The practitioners' appreciation for the flexibility of the programme expressed in category 1 could be associated with the barriers identified by Kendal et, al.(2012) who found that although Early Years practitioners were keen to access higher education, those who had embarked on the Foundation degrees found it difficult juggling family life, full time work and study.

In category 2 while there are still some remnants of the individual focus with the learner still focusing on themselves as the recipient of the support from their colleagues at work and their university peers, the sharing characteristic of the category brings out the learner as part of a learning partnership where a two way relationship is beginning to emerge. While the descriptions indicate that the practitioners have not lost sight of the qualifications as pay-off, there are indications that they are embracing the social and interactive process which involves mutual support and sharing(Caffarella and Merriam, 2000). Though learner autonomy is considered the strength of work based learning, given that the learners are the experts with all the inside knowledge, it can also be a challenge in the absence of the right support and guidance (Billett, 1999). Caffarella and Merriam, (2000) suggested that learner autonomy and responsibility can be developed with some guidance from the tutors. From this need for support arises one of the criticisms of university WBL, with the provision seen as labour intensive and time consuming. There was no evidence of this in the outcome space emerging from the present research as the discourse is dominated by peer and colleague support.

Graham et al. (2006) concurred with the significance of support in learning, adding that appropriate support can develop in the learners the capacity to take responsibility for their learning by identifying their needs and managing their learning through critical reflection. The practitioners appeared to endorse this in category 5 where they acknowledged the value of critical reflection. With the focus on peer and colleague support in category 2 there is a suggestion that tutor support is seen as secondary in value to peer support. Also notable from category 2 is that 'workplace support' is a factor in the learner's experience of work based learning. Collin and Valleala ( 2005) and Viskovic (2005) reiterated the value of building upon communities of practice that are already in place at the work place. Moore

(2007) echoed this view, advising that work-based learners should be supported in this process to make best use of the resources available in the workplace. Lave and Wenger (1991) also saw learning as a question of becoming a full participant of a community of practice with the underlying assumption that learning is situated and cannot take place in isolation from the social relations that shape legitimate participation. Wenger (1998, p.5) associated social theory of learning with the integration of four related components:

- Community (learning as belonging)
- Practice (learning as doing)
- Identity (learning as becoming)
- Meaning (learning as experience), learning that emerges from interpersonal relationships takes central position.

Coffield (2002) suggested that learning is located in social participation and dialogue, shifting the focus from individual cognitive processes to the social relationships and the construction of learner identities in a social and cultural environment. The knowledge and skills learned are context based. On the same subject, Felstead et al. (2005 p. 362) substituted 'learning as acquisition' with 'learning as participation'. Eraut et al. (2002), who investigated informal learning, proposed that it is highly situated and dependent on social relationships within the workplace. They identified two types of relationships:

- Within groups of employees at work
- With people from outside these work groups, like professional networks

They concluded that as well as being embedded in organisational activities, knowledge exists as a continuum within individuals, co-workers and specialists (Eraut et al., 2002). Integral to this theory is the observation that since individuals can belong to different communities of practice their learning can be influenced by all these contexts as the learning acquired in one context can be re-situated in a new context and then integrated with the knowledge gained in the new situation. This process is represented in the relationship between the workplace and the university in categories 2 and 3. These categories also bear in them the core principles of work based learning, according to Durrant, Rhodes and Young (2011) where the learners express their learning in relation to their university peers, tutors and work colleagues. Learning is seen as context bound and as a social process that goes beyond the individual (Wilson, 1993). The learners are involved in interactions with other people, tools, ideas and contexts within a learning situation (Hansman, 2001). How the

learners relate to the various groups and the roles they take in each situation will be determined by their self- concept.

In category 3 learning is described as pertinent to work. Here the learner's self- concept is clearly autonomous and self-directing and motivation arises from intrinsic value more than personal pay-off (Knowles, Holton and Swanson, 2012). The learners see themselves as agents for change and recognise the complementary relationship between work and study. Eraut et al.(1998) and Boud & Garrick,(1999) also recognised the role of work as a source of knowledge and practice as a source of content for practitioners' study. The views expressed in this category could be seen to underpin categories 4 and 5 where university provides the resources that facilitate the extension of skills and knowledge gained from work activity. This in turn encourages development through research and enquiry which lead to intellectual curiosity, reflection, reviewing practice and leading change in the workplace. This concedes the limitations of learning only from work and highlights the need to stretch learning beyond the confines of the work context. The views of work based learning expressed here can be perceived as contextualisation of knowledge (Costley, 2007), which is fundamental to work based learning. This perspective can also be seen as a demonstration of what Tynjälä et al. (2009) described as a firm connection between abstract thinking and practical activity between education and work. The implication is that university activity develops the participants both as learners and practitioners. There is evidence of full autonomy and increased confidence. The learner is a full participant in knowledge creation, with a desire to link theory to practice and develop theory informed practice. They express confidence in the knowledge that the information they share has come from research, books, lectures, leading to effective practice (Hansman, 2001).

In category 5 work based learning was described as reflection and reviewing practice where the participants expressed active engagement with activities that presented them with learning opportunities in the workplace. This could be associated with constructivism, a philosophy of learning founded on the premise that each individual's reflection on their experiences leads to the construction of their own understanding of the world. Learning is seen as an active process where the learner actively constructs their own understanding of reality by linking new information to prior knowledge (Vygotsky 1896-1934), Piaget (1896-1980), Dewey (1859-1952). Each individual then generates their own models and rules which are used to make sense of their experiences. The adjustment of these models to accommodate new experiences defines the process of learning. In agreement with these observations Graham et al. (2006) added that learners need to be supported to develop as

active, motivated learners who can identify their needs and manage their own learning. This is not a straightforward process, however, as the identification of one's needs within a workplace context can be directly linked to reflection and critical evaluation, an experience which, as Graham and Rhodes (2007) pointed out, some learners find unsettling. Rhodes and Shiel (2007) recommended supporting learners in the application of academic skills to their practice, particularly when implementing change in the workplace. Earlier, in a similar view Boud (1998) had proposed that the ability of individuals to reflect will be influenced by the social and cultural context in which they occur. For the present research it would seem the context has been conducive to the development of these skills as evidenced by the learners' application of the various components of the curriculum to their learning and practice. Boud (1998) placed much value in reflection as a tool for learning in the workplace while acknowledging the challenges involved and the need for structure if best outcomes are to be realized from it. In agreement with this, Chisholm et al. (2007) saw reflection as the process through which everyday work experiences are transformed into active learning opportunities. Siebert & Walsh (2013) also agreed that it is through the process of reflection on practice that workplace experience is transformed into learning, enhancing individual performance in the workplace. However, they also explored claims that reflection disadvantages individuals while benefiting organisations, arguing that reflection can be used to empower individuals. In the present study, the participants' expressions of their experience of work based learning indicate empowerment of the learner to the benefit of both the learner and the organisation.

On the other hand, Costley et, al. (2008) caution that reflection in work-based learning should not be just about competence and effective working. They suggest that it should lead to deeper understanding and judgement. While these qualities are not easy to measure, they can, to a certain extent be linked to the ability to measure one's development, evaluate their strengths, identify their development needs and plan future development.

Participants in the present research cited examples of reflection in their practice and how the curriculum of the programme under consideration had engendered this form of engagement. The participants' understanding of the relationship between reflection and their personal and professional development can be seen in category 6 where the practitioners express an awareness of the changes they have undergone and the confidence and empowerment they have brought. The learners' confidence to be critically analytical about their own practice can be seen in the light of transformational learning and critical reflection (Mezirowe,1991). The learners' awareness to their own development increases their confidence which, in turn

enables them to articulate their personal and professional transformation in category 6, considered the most inclusive in the hierarchy. This category encompasses all the others where the participants drew upon the modules in the curriculum to develop as learners and practitioners. Costley et al. (2008) identified experiential learning, learning contracts, work based projects and reflective practice as the generic concepts that characterise work based learning. In category 6 the practitioners attributed their personal and professional development mainly to reviewing prior learning and setting new goals for future development, learning a lot about themselves, thereby building confidence. Merzirowe (2000) proposed that the highest goal of adult education is to foster learning that assists learners to realize their potential for becoming more liberated, socially responsible and autonomous learners. In the outcome space this can be seen in the learners' development from reviewing prior learning, identifying strengths and weaknesses and setting new goals for future development, thereby building confidence, self -esteem, and seeing things differently. This, mapped against Maslow's hierarchy of needs could represent some level of 'self-actualization' (Maslow, 1970, p.150).

This section of the chapter has examined the outcome space and what can be understood from the variation in the category of descriptions emerging from this research. The findings discussed above have revealed some views that can contribute to the understanding of work based learning as a higher education provision. Firstly, the results indicate that learners develop personally and professionally from engaging in university study on a part time basis while they work full time. The development from viewing work based learning from the basic to the most complex or inclusive conception of work based learning is consistent with the practitioners awareness of their worth as practitioners, which in turn supports their development as learners.

Looking at the conceptions identified in this research some features are common to other conceptions relating to learning in various contexts. The conception of learning as changing as a person was identified by Marton et al.(1993) in their own research. It was also identified by Marshall et al. (1988). On the other hand a research of conceptions of learning by Saljo (1979) conducted with people from different education backgrounds, resulted in five different conceptions of learning which did not share any commonality with the conceptions identified in the present study. The conception of learning as application, also identified in the conceptions of learning by Saljo( 1979), Eklund Myrskog(1998) and Marshal et al. (1999) could be compared to the conception of work based learning as 'pertinent' in the present research.

These few examples have demonstrated some common conceptions and differences between the studies. Marshall et al. (1999) attributed the different conceptions of learning to variation in context. Dahlin and Regmi (1997) argued that cultural context may determine which aspects of the learning experience are emphasized and which ones are subdued. So, although phenomenographic studies can produce similar conceptions of students' learning, the categories of description from which they are constituted may differ according to cultural or educational contexts. The findings from this study concur with these views.

## **Contribution to knowledge**

### **University work based learning**

A lot of learning arises from the findings of this research. The overarching contribution is that it has generated empirical evidence of the relationship between university and work from the very people engaged in university work based learning. Although the data was generated from a specific context, that of Early Years practice, the findings from the study could be used to compare experiences within other work contexts in future studies. The findings have also tested some of the main notional views, principles of work based learning as well as theories relating to learning in general and adult learning in particular. As such, the research has contributed views that could lead to a deeper understanding of work based learning adding to a growing body of knowledge by providing empirical evidence of how it is perceived by the learners. The research has also provided empirical evidence for research informed practice in work based learning with implications for programme development and delivery. It also addresses a gap in phenomenographic activity in higher education. So far, phenomenographic research into work based learning has been very limited, with research into conceptions of university work based learning non-existent. This study has changed this, instigating an academic dialogue based upon an examination of the work based learner's experience of learning within the context of work and the university concurrently.

From the perspective of educational provision each of the conceptions identified has significance and implications for learning and teaching. Starting from the desire to upskill, the research data showed that the practitioners engaged more with the learning activities on the programme as their confidence increased. The research explored the factors influencing the learners' confidence in their study, suggesting some links to the historical factors of working within the Early Years sector. In teaching and learning situations it is not always possible to identify these underlying factors. Barriers to learning are usually addressed from the immediate contexts like learning outcomes or academic skills and competencies of the

learners as pre-requisites and co-requisites. This realisation has opened another channel to addressing students' learning challenges.

Also revealed in the data was the value of qualifications, which would normally be seen to be applicable to all forms of university learning. However, the way this was articulated by the participants, linking qualifications to practice could be attributed to the context of contemporaneous work and study. Against the other conceptions of work based learning, the notion of qualifications and the aspiration to reach certain levels of professionalism is the debatably the most influenced by work role and organisational key drivers. The learners' personal development and enhanced practice appear inextricably linked once they gain the confidence to draw upon their practice and other activities in the workplace like work based projects and collaborative working. This fits in well with the concept of partnership working between the university and the learners' organisations. This could be used in the enhancement of work based learning programmes, particularly since the learners suggested support from peers and colleagues kept them motivated and focused. Facilitators of work based learning programmes could consider involving the learners and partner organisations in the development of programmes in order to identify common areas of interest and the resources available in each organisation to support the development of knowledge and skills that would be of benefit to both the learner and the organisation. Since it has been proposed in literature that work based learning facilitators need to develop their practice, this would be a good opportunity to be creative and to allow the learners more autonomy in their learning. This could also address the issues of confidence and self-esteem which have been seen to hold back the learners' progress on entry on to the programme considered in the present research.

Another point of interest is the value of learning as a group. This aspect of work based learning has connotations of belonging and being part of a bigger process. The participants made strong and clear expressions of sharing and mutual benefit, which are seen as a safety net for trying ideas, making mistakes and learning from them. This can be related to the development of knowledge that leads to the confidence which seems to support autonomous learning within the security of the peer group. In a teaching and learning situation this can be used to facilitate quicker engagement with the programme.

Familiarisation activities could be built into the programme or preparation activities could be designed prior to the formal start of the programme. The participants' descriptions of how they gained confidence do, to a great extent, endorse those activities that are already part of the curriculum. This includes work based projects, CPD activities, reflecting upon learning



and practice, presenting to peers and work colleagues. However, this could be a starting point to develop more creative ways of fostering autonomous learning through the identification of strengths and development areas by the learners in collaboration with their peers, colleagues, tutors and wider networks. Currently the learners' use of Learning Contracts involves the learner and their work based advisor. The Learning Contract Module, the CPD and the Work Based Project module could be used more creatively to incorporate more collaboration with wider groups. This could involve formative processes that allow learners to give each other feedback and feed forward. This would resonate with the learners' apparent preference for peer support. The research participants indicated that they valued the feedback from their colleagues for their work based project presentations. This ties in well with their appreciation for collaboration with the various groups they identify with in the workplace and wider networks.

The participants' motivation to read more and question their daily practice in order to enhance future practice provides a good foundation for empowering the learners to develop their own practice and that of their colleagues. This is the main outcome for work based learning and adult learning, where the purpose of engaging in learning is associated with outcomes which extend beyond personal payoff. Synergies can be seen here between the motivation to engage in study by the learners at the start of the programme and the development in awareness of the opportunities presented by study in relation to professional and personal development. From this realisation the learners are empowered to explore their abilities, skills and knowledge further, engaging in a typical cycle of learning to learn; a desirable quality in the workplace. It is partly due to this that the highest conception identified in the study entails the realisation by the learners of the transformation they have undergone on the programme. While these findings from the research suggest that the programme under consideration goes some way in meeting the purpose for which work based learning programmes were introduced in higher education, they also indicate the possibility of bigger opportunities to develop the programmes to empower the learners to take more control of their learning and professional development, opening the way for greater impact in their organisations.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusion**

This chapter will draw conclusions from the research and the issues discussed in the above chapters. Firstly, it can be concluded that phenomenography and the examination of variation in conceptions of learning were an effective approach to a deeper understanding of aspects of work based learning. It was the appropriate methodology to identify the variation in the conceptions of university work based learning.

Another conclusion to be reached is that work based learning is an effective mode of higher education learning, enabling people who are already in work to gain higher qualifications and impact positively on their organisations and the clientele they look after. This means that work based learning meets the agenda set by the government as the approach for the United Kingdom to address the deficit in higher education participation and qualifications identified by the OECD. The study has also suggested that university work based learning outcomes are consistent with other forms of higher education in meeting the purposes of higher education, including the opportunity for learners to transform themselves personally and professionally. In terms of the context of learning, work based learning has been seen to be a legitimate higher education learning context, endorsing the workplace as an equal partner to the university as a place for professional learning.

In terms of the professionalization of the Early Years workforce, it can be concluded that the practitioners' conceptions of work based learning were influenced by the historical qualifications status of the workforce. The study also suggested that the views from other research about the practitioners' lack of confidence to engage in higher education could be true. What the study also revealed was that with support, this confidence can be developed, enabling the practitioners to draw upon the expansive repertoire of experience and expertise gained from practice to enrich their learning at the university.

### **Limitations of the study**

The main limitation of the study was the limited number of participants. However, due to the rigorous nature of phenomenographic data collection and analysis, it is advisable to limit the number of participants to a minimum, particularly for a single researcher. The impact of the small sample cannot be measured with certainty but comparison with the pilot does suggest that the impact was not too adverse as the conceptions from the sample of three pilot study

participants is consistent with the findings from the main study. Also due to the phenomenographic data collection and analysis, the large amount of data that can be collected can provide a significant variation in the ways of experiencing a phenomenon to yield defensible outcomes.

Another limitation of phenomenography as a research approach arises from what is paradoxically its appeal in educational research; the collective nature of the conceptions of a phenomenon. This limits the analysis of individual experiences or the predominance of specific experiences within the group.

## **Recommendations**

The recommendations for practice in work based learning arise mainly from the variation in the conceptions of work based learning. The focus is on the promotion of the development of the learners to attain the outcomes of work based learning that are seen to be of benefit and to overcome those tendencies that are limiting to their development. The participants in the present study did not explicitly express any negative conceptions of work based learning. However, from looking at the outcome space the progression in confidence, self-concept and self-esteem from category 1 to 6 suggests that the learners' lack of confidence was a major factor in restricting their development. The results showed that engagement on the programme led to enhanced self-esteem in the learners, leading to better outcomes for them, their organisations and the children in their care. From the categories of description the participants make it clear how they gained this confidence. This presents work based learning tutors with the basic understanding to use in the design and delivery of programmes to enhance learning. From the participants' expressions it would suggest that the focus should be on the following:

- Providing as much flexibility as possible for the work based learners to be able to attend when they can and step on and off the programme as needed
- Using the APEL process innovatively to give value to their prior learning from practice.
- To use group learning and collaborative activity creatively as early as is feasible on the programme.
- To consider designing on- line preparation activities to facilitate group bonding and familiarisation of skills like reflection, critical evaluation and literature searching.
- Incorporate more peer feedback and sharing of good practice into the modules.

- Involve learners in event organisation and disseminating of their scholarly outputs and projects.
- Tutors should conduct more research into work based learning to increase their understanding of the epistemology of practice and how they can best work with their students and partner organisations.
- Tutors to conduct research with their students as partners to initiate co-construction of knowledge within the context of university work based learning.

### **For partner organisations**

- To support their staff and allow them autonomy in order to realise the full benefits for their organisations, their whole staff teams and the children in their care.
- To consider ways of disseminating the good work their staff are implementing in their work based projects beyond the confines of their immediate communities in order to share good practice in the sector.

### **For Higher Education Institutions running work based learning programmes**

- To be innovative and forward looking about developing support programmes that allow work based learners to collaborate and support each other in safe and relaxed learning communities. This will ensure that the learners who have been out of education for some time can regain their confidence and discover their own strengths within non-threatening environments as university is usually perceived as intimidating by such learners.

Implementation of these recommendations would contribute to the development and delivery of work based learning programmes from the learners' perspectives and evidence from research. This would set a precedence in university work based learning practice as recommended in other research referenced earlier in the thesis which suggested that an enhanced epistemology of practice in work based learning facilitators would benefit the field.

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## Appendix 1



### CONSENT FORM: Version 1

**Research Title:** Learning, Credits and the Workplace: A phenomenographic study of Early Years' practitioners' conceptions of learning through accredited work based learning.

**Research:** This research will investigate what work based learners understand about learning on a programme based on their practice. It will also seek to understand how the learners know they have learnt something. Interviews will be used to allow the learners to talk about their learning and describe their learning experiences from both work and university.

**Researcher:** Lucy Currie

	Yes (please tick)	No (please tick)
I have read and understand the Participants Information Sheet (Version 1)		
I have had the opportunity to ask questions which have been answered to my satisfaction.		
I understand that I do not have to take part and that non participation or withdrawal from the study will not affect my marks or any other aspect of my study on the PPA		
I agree to take part in a recorded 1 to 1 interview.		
I understand that the transcripts and results from the study will be anonymised and my name and details will not appear in any printed documents.		
I agree to take part in this study		
I agree to take part in a shorter pilot study		
I would like to receive a summary of the results of the study		

_____	_____	_____
<b>Name of Participant</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>

_____	_____	_____
<b>Name of Researcher</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Signature</b>

**If you have any concerns about any aspects of this research project and your involvement in it please contact:**

Dr. Nicola Reimann

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Northumberland Road

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## **Appendix 2**

### **Information Sheet for Participants: Version 1**

I would like to invite you to take part in my doctoral research examining learning as conceived by early years' practitioners studying on an accredited work based learning programme.

The details of what the study will involve are outlined below. Please read this information carefully and make a note of anything you would like to be clarified. After this visit I will send an email asking whether you would like to participate in my study or not. If you decide to participate, I will ask you to give your consent by signing the consent form.

#### **What is the study about?**

This study will investigate what early years' practitioners' understand about their own learning through the Professional Practice Awards, a credit bearing work based learning programme.

Since work based learning is new in higher education, this study will help me and other educators involved in such programmes to design and deliver courses in a way that suits the students' learning. Currently research about work based learning, particularly in the early years area is limited. The findings from this study will be made available to all participants. Some elements may also be disseminated through conference papers and articles.

#### **Why have I been asked to take part in the research?**

Because you are a student on the Professional Practice Awards, a credit bearing work based learning programme at Northumbria University. You will get the opportunity to reflect on your learning and how it relates to your own development in your chosen area of work. You will also be able to think about how your knowledge of early learning has supported your study towards your degree. You might find it interesting to see how your views relate to your colleagues and peers' perspectives. Your views will contribute to a growing knowledge base for work based learning in higher education.

What is involved and what am I being asked to do?



If you decide to take part you will be asked to take part in a 45 to 60 minute long interview which will be digitally recorded. The interview will take place at your work setting or at the university, at your convenience. If you choose to participate in the study I will not be involved in the marking of your work on the programme.

**What happens if I do not want to participate?**

Participation is on a voluntary basis. The decision to participate or not will not affect your marks, your study on the programme or your relationship with me or any other member of the lecturing team.

**What would happen if I agree and then change my mind?**

If you decide to participate you are free to change your mind and withdraw at any time without giving a reason. If any data has been collected from you at that point it will be destroyed and not included in the study. Your withdrawal will not affect any aspect of your study on the programme.

**Will my participation in the research be kept confidential?**

Your participation will be kept confidential. The interview will be conducted at a mutually convenient venue. Your work place or local authority will not be identified in any research documents.

**What will happen to the information gathered?**

The information collected will be kept confidential and stored securely. The interview will be transcribed with all identifiable information removed. I will be the only one with access to the information. All quotations used in the final report will be anonymised. You will not be named on any documents or your work setting identified. The information will be stored in a password protected file in my university drive. The transcripts will be analysed and used to draw conclusions and recommendations in the final doctoral thesis. The findings and the knowledge gained from this

study will be shared with the PPA team and other work based learning colleagues at the university as part of developing a shared understanding of learning in and through work. Transcripts will be destroyed after the completion of the study. Thank you for taking your time to read this.

**If you have any concerns about any aspects of this research project and your involvement in it please contact**

Dr. Nicola Reimann

Room 026, Sutherland Building

Northumberland Road

Newcastle Upon Tyne NE1 8ST

Tel. 0191 243 7098

**Email: [Nicola.Reimann@northumbria.ac.uk](mailto:Nicola.Reimann@northumbria.ac.uk)**

### Appendix 3

#### Invitation email

**From:** Lucy Currie  
**Sent:** 04 December 2012 12:26  
**To:** XXXXXX  
**Cc:** XXXXX  
**Subject:** Doctoral research

Dear XXXXX,

I hope you are keeping well and on track with your preparations for Christmas.

Following my visit to your cohort on the 14<sup>th</sup> of November, I would like to invite you to participate in my research. As a reminder of the research I have attached the information sheet and consent form. I would like to reiterate that participation is free and voluntary.

Kind regards,

Lucy

## Appendix 4

### Interview schedule

Questions per section.

#### **Section 1**

The background and work context to gain an understanding of what the participants have learnt from working in the early years context.

How long have you worked in the early years?

Can you describe how your skills and knowledge developed during that time?

How did the work you do contribute to this development?

#### **Section 2**

Examining how the learners know they have learnt something and how they utilise newly gained skills and knowledge.

Can you give examples of when you have realised that you have gained a new skill or knowledge?

What do you do about this skill or knowledge?

Can you give examples of when you have proactively sought new knowledge or skills?

#### **Section 3**

Examining the relationship between knowledge and skills gained at the university and those gained at work.

Why did you embark on University study?

What did you expect university study to be like when you first started?

What was the reality like in comparison?

Did you find your work experience/ knowledge and skills useful in your studies?

In turn, did you find your study on the PPA useful in your practice?

As far as you can tell, how have you benefitted from each of the PPA modules?

So, overall can you give a brief account of what you have learnt from work?

And a summary of what you have learnt from the university?

How do you think you have benefitted from being exposed to both at the same time?

What challenges have you faced as a result?

From your own experience how would you describe work based learning?

#### **Section 4**

An exploration of factors that may influence work based learners conceptions of learning

From your overall experience of education from school to now, what is the best way for you to learn?

Can you give examples of what you considered your best learning experiences?

Work based learning aims at developing you as an independent learner. Can you describe your experience of this element of the PPA?

#### **Section 5**

An exploration of any relationship between early years practice and the learners' conceptions of learning.

Do you think children and adults learn in the same way?

Has your understanding of how children learn influenced how you go about your own studies at the university?

Is there anything else you would like to add?



## Project Amendment Form

<b>Project Name:</b> Learning, Credits and the Workplace: A phenomenographic study of Early Years practitioners' conceptions of learning through accredited work based learning.	<b>Date original ethical approval received:</b> 19/10/12
Principal Investigator: Lucy Currie	Project ref:
Date: 03/12/12	

<p>Description of Amendment/Change:</p> <p>I would like to invite 2 to 3 of the students who have just completed their study on the PPA to participate in the pilot study. This would be instead of the students who are still on the programme who are the anticipated main study participants.</p>	
<p>Reasons for Amendment/Change:</p> <p>Due to a big drop in the size of the cohorts recruitment is slow and I would like to reserve all the volunteers for the main study. This would also allow me to conduct the pilot study while recruitment for the main study continues.</p>	
<p>Anticipated Implications:</p> <p>This change would not affect the purpose of the pilot study since I will still be able to determine the appropriateness of the interview schedule for the research objectives, refine my interview skills and practice the phenomenographic analysis process.</p>	
Acceptance/Rejection	Signature:
Date:	

Follow-up action passed to:
Reason for Rejection: