

The Pioneers of the Hybridised World of Vocational Education and GCSE retake

What is the experience of individual vocational education learners who are mandated to retake GCSE English during post-sixteen study?

Doctorate in Education

Institute of Education

Kate Lloyd

Declaration of original authorship

Declaration: I confirm that this is my own work and the use of all material from other sources has been properly and fully acknowledged.

Kate Lloyd

Abstract

Since 2015, educational policy has required post-sixteen learners in England to resit GCSE English if they had marginally failed to gain Grade 4 (C). Nationally, results for post-sixteen GCSE resits have been poor, with less than a quarter of learners reaching the required standard at GCSE English each year, and vocational education (VE) learners have had the poorest results. The aim of this research was to examine the experience of VE learners subject to this policy.

Dominant policy and institutional discourses have positioned GCSE as a benchmark of attainment, a determiner for future success and a lever for economic productivity. However, the findings did not uncover morose participants, disenfranchised because of their failure to pass GCSE. Using the construct of Figured Worlds, analysis revealed that the confluence of VE and GCSE retake created a hybridised learning experience. Using the theoretical framework of Figured Worlds, the findings reveal that this hybridised experience created agentic learner identities through learner discourses that positioned the GCSE as meaningless assessment compared with the experience of tangible, relevant and progressive learning in VE. The findings suggest that the experience of VE and GCSE retake has accidentally created the conditions for a positive learner identity and indicates implications of this finding for future practice and policy in VE.

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Glossary of Terms

AoC	Association of Colleges. A membership association for further education colleges.
A-Levels	The A Level (Advanced Level) is a subject-based qualification conferred as part of the General Certificate of Education, as well as a school leaving qualification offered by the educational bodies in the UK
Apprenticeships	A funded programme providing training for apprentices in employment. An apprenticeship is a combination of practical, hands-on training in a job and a course of study.
Condition of Funding	The requirement for an educational institution to mandate all 16-18 learners to continue to study English and/or maths if they have not reached Grade 4 (C), and to retake GCSE if they have achieved Grade 3 (D). If learners do not comply, the institution is penalised through loss of the entire funding for the learner's programme
DfE	Department for Education
Education and Skills Funding Agency	A part of the DfE that administers the funding of maintained schools, academies, colleges, apprenticeships, adult and community provision and private training providers.
FE	Further Education: the post-sixteen and adult education sector in England, consisting of General Further Education Colleges, Sixth Form Colleges, private training providers and Adult and Community providers.
Functional Skills (FS)	Basic skills qualifications in English, maths and IT delivered in post-sixteen settings. Available at entry level to level 2. Level 2 is not the equivalent to GCSE.
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education. GCSE examinations are taken by most pupils at the end of compulsory school education (year 11) in England, Wales and Northern Ireland
GCSE English	Post 16 learners meet the condition of funding for English if they have passed (9 to 4) in English Language, English Literature or English language and Literature. However, if they have not passed, they can only continue to study English Language. For the purposes of this thesis, the term GCSE English refers to GCSE English Language in a post-16 context.
GCSE Grading	GCSE grades changed in 2017 from alphabetical (A*-E) to numerical (9-1). The Government has said that grade 4 (equivalent low grade C) is a 'standard pass'. Grade 5 is a 'strong pass' and equivalent to a high C and low B on the old grading system. Grade 4 remains the level that

students must achieve without needing to resit English and maths post-16

GFE	General Further Education Colleges: incorporated legal entities providing tertiary and adult education.
Key Stage 4 (KS4)	The two years of school education which incorporate GCSEs, and other examinations, in maintained schools in England normally known as Year 10 and Year 11, when pupils are aged between 14 and 15 by August 31st.
Levels of Education	<p>There are nine levels of education in England. This thesis mainly refers to levels 1, 2 and 3. (see below). Levels 4-6 pertain to undergraduate study with level 6 being degree level. Levels 7-9 are post-graduate.</p> <p>Level 1 qualifications include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•GCSE - grades 3, 2, 1 or grades D, E, F, G•level 1 award, certificate, diploma, functional skills <p>Level 2 qualifications include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•GCSE - grades 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4 or grades A*, A, B, C•level 2 award, certificate, diploma, functional skills <p>Level 3 qualifications include:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">•A level, level 3 award, certificate, diploma
Ofsted	Office for Standards in Education, Children's Services and Skills. They inspect services providing education and skills for learners of all ages
RPA	Raising of the Participation Age. The Education and Skills Act 2008 required all young people to continue in education or training to the age of seventeen from 2013 and to the age of eighteen from 2015
Study programme	A term applied to the whole of a post-sixteen learner's programme of education, including English and maths and their main subjects.
T-Levels	'Technical levels': New (starting implementation in 2020) two-year level 3 VE programmes delivered in fifteen occupational pathways, incorporating technical learning, a significant work placement and maths and English. T-Levels are intended to have parity with three A Levels.
T-Level Transition Year	A year long programme at level 2 intended to prepare learners for progression onto T-Levels
VE	Vocational Education. The definition of VE used here is vocational education that provides training for jobs that are based in manual or practical sectors, traditionally non-academic and 'totally related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation' (Davies & Ryan, 2011, p. 32).

1.0 Introduction

1.1 The GCSE English Retake- May 2016



Figure 1.1 Photograph Taken on the Morning of the GCSE English Examination 2016

It was a sunny, bright morning in May 2016. College was chaotic, bordering on hysterical and feverish. Hundreds of young people and adults were about to retake their GCSE English exam at 9.30am. Despite our best efforts, some students had forgotten which exam room they had to report to; teachers were running around ensuring every room had papers, pens and a working clock; a student projectile vomited in a corridor; and months of work and preparation came down to one written examination.

I stood outside the College helping to encourage late arrivals into the building. I approached a young man who was sat, smoking a cigarette. He was probably around seventeen, but looked older. I asked him to hurry up, and he told me to f**k off. I tried again and he told me that if he was not allowed to finish his cigarette I would cause him to fail. In that moment, I realised that he was terrified. He was pale; his fingers were shaking; his aggression was an emotional outburst. If he had been younger, he would have been crying.

1.2 Introduction to the Research

GCSEs have been positioned as a benchmark of academic performance at key stage four (age sixteen), and a clear indicator of an individual's future economic success by policy makers (Wolf, 2011). This policy, societal and institutional position has been inscribed onto the consciousness of post-sixteen learners as, since 2013, young people who had not reached the desired standard in either English language or Literature GCSE were compelled by policy to continue to study English and, from 2015, those who had marginally failed to reach the required standard were mandated to retake the English Language GCSE. The research explores the experience of vocational post-sixteen learners retaking English. In particular, the research was focused on the experience of young people (most of whom had achieved a Grade D or 4) who, because of the tightening of policy in 2015, had to retake the GCSE English Language qualification, often more than once throughout their post-sixteen study (Porter, 2015; Roy, 2019).

1.3 Context of the Study-The Further Education Sector

The research was located in a General Further Education (GFE) College in the south-east of England. Within and without the education system in England, schools and universities are generally well understood. However, Further Education (FE) tends to have a much lower profile in mainstream media and politics (Hodgson et al., 2015). In part this is because FE is complex and in continual flux; tied to changes in the employment market and government policy (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Finlay et al., 2007; Jones, 2015). FE serves young people, adults, and apprentices, part-time and full-time learners at all levels from entry level to degree level. The sector delivers qualifications including A-levels, general vocational qualifications such as BTECs, basic skills for adults, recreational courses, and vocational qualifications that certify occupational competency in trades such as plumbing (Stanton et al., 2015). The FE sector also encompasses a variety of institutions including General Further Education Colleges (GFE), adult and community education providers, private training providers and

sixth form colleges (Hodgson, 2015). In summary, it can be difficult to define FE because it provides so many different types of education.

GFEs vary in size and tradition across the country (Hodgson et al., 2015). Most evolved from technical colleges in the early twentieth century (Bailey & Unwin, 2014), but many also offer adult education for basic skills or recreation (Hodgson et al., 2015). GFEs were consolidated as identifiable legal entities in the early 1990's through incorporation when they became autonomous, self-governing entities (Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Jones, 2015). However, most remain dependent on public funding for course delivery, and therefore, remain beholden to government policy and oversight. According to the Association of Colleges (AoC) in 2018/19, there were 157 GFE colleges in England.

It seems the case that the FE sector's teaching and learning and learners attract much less scholarly attention than the schools' and universities' sectors (Fooks, 1994; Norton, 2012b). It has been remarked that FE tends to have less exposure in political and academic circles because it is associated with vocational education (VE) (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Billett, 2014; Davies & Ryan, 2011; Hodgson, 2015). In summary, scholars and politicians may be less interested in FE compared with other education sectors firstly because of the sector's complexity; because VE is perceived as 'not proper education' (Hodgson, 2015, p. xv) and also because of preconceptions around social class as VE is associated, by some, with occupations of a lower social standing (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Richardson, 2007; Smith & Polesel, 2010; Winch, 2012b) and therefore 'for other people's children' (Galley, 2014).

Yet, collectively, in 2018/19 the wider FE sector served over three million learners and spent over £10 billion of public funding across the UK (AoC, 2019). In the same year, GFEs, part of the wider FE sector, trained and educated over 2.2 million people, including 685,000 sixteen to eighteen year olds on study programmes (AoC, 2019). This was 35% of young people aged between sixteen and

eighteen in education and training, compared with 23% who were at a state funded school that year (AoC, 2019). If the FE sector is comparatively neglected in educational research, the experience of this majority of young people might be overlooked or little understood. The FE sector does not just cater for 'other people's children' (Galley, 2014); it serves many people, and many people's children.

1.4 Context of the Research- Policy

The Education and Skills Act 2008 required all young people to continue in education or training to the age of seventeen from 2013 and to the age of eighteen from 2015 (Woodin et al., 2013). This raising of the participation age (RPA) represented a historic extension of compulsory education. The introduction of RPA also coincided with the significant publication of the Wolf Report in 2011. This report was concerned with the future of vocational education for the fourteen to nineteen age group. It was in favour of a broad general education for young people to prepare them for adult life and work and criticised narrow vocational education for young people, particularly at lower levels. It placed a particular emphasis on the importance of good grades in General Certificate of Education (GCSE) English and mathematics and therefore considered that these should continue to be a component of study after Key Stage 4 (age sixteen) (Wolf, 2011).

The Wolf Report (2011) considered that young people's future success or prospects reflected the curriculum, available to them. Its author rejected what it perceived as narrow vocational education and the report, in line with Professor Wolf's other works (Wolf, 2004, 2015), emphasised the value of a broader education. Accordingly, the government legislated that from September 2013, all of those young people who had not achieved a Grade C (Grade 4) in maths and English GCSE had to continue studying those subjects post-sixteen until they achieved that grade (Porter, 2015). The purpose of the policy was to increase the proportion of people who have functional English and maths skills in order to address skills-based employment gaps and improve economic productivity

(Porter, 2015), but also to create a broader based curriculum offer for young people on vocational courses (Wolf, 2011).

This policy meant that, from 2013, post-sixteen learners were enrolled on either functional skills qualifications or GCSEs in addition to their main programme if they had not reached the required standard in either maths and/or English. In 2014/15, the policy was refined and it became compulsory for sixteen to eighteen year olds who had marginally failed to gain the required standard in English Language or English Literature and had achieved a grade D (or 3), to attend GCSE classes and retake GCSE English Language (Porter, 2015). These learners were no longer able to study functional skills qualifications.

The policy was reinforced with the introduction of the condition of funding; in other words, students without English (or maths) GCSE at point of entry to post sixteen study had to attend these classes or the institution lost the funding for that individual's whole programme of study. Students meet the condition of funding when they have already achieved GCSE grade 9 to 4 or A* to C in English language, English literature, or English language and literature. However, if they have not achieved a grade 4 or better in any of these subjects, they must study towards and take (or retake) GCSE English Language.

'The maths and English condition of funding ensures that all sixteen to nineteen year olds have the best chance of achieving this standard, and get the necessary support to do so' (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019).

Accordingly, the numbers of young people retaking GCSE English at age seventeen rose in 2014/15 by 23% to 97,163 (AoC, 2014). This retake policy, despite being seldom remarked upon in mainstream policy debate, affected and continues to affect large numbers of young people.

Moreover, the policy has resulted in learner dissatisfaction and poor qualification outcomes (Belgutay, 2018; Burke, 2016; Grix, 2014; Ireland, 2019; Offord, 2015; Porter, 2015; Rodeiro, 2018; Sezen, 2018).

In 2018/19 around 80% of students in England who were mandated to continue to study English and maths, did so at a GFE college (AoC, 2019). This was a similar proportion in most years since the introduction of the GCSE retake policy. Therefore, the policy to require young people without good grades at GCSE to continue to study maths and English has had significant financial and logistical impacts on GFE Colleges. These impacts have attracted sustained and significant criticism from sector leaders (Belgutay, 2018; Burke, 2016; Grix, 2014; Offord, 2015; Sezen, 2018; Taylor, 2016) and Ofsted in 2017.

‘This is a well-intentioned policy, but in its current form we can see that it is causing significant problems’ (Offord, 2015)

The intention of the GCSE retake policy was to improve young people’s attainment by age eighteen and therefore improve their work and life outcomes (Wolf, 2011). However, in implementation, the success of the policy has been considered to be limited (Offord, 2015). The national pass rate A*-C (4-9) in 2017/18 and in 2018/19 for post sixteen year olds was only 28% (Belgutay, 2018; DfE, 2019a). This means that almost three-quarters of these post-sixteen learners failed to reach the required standard, and therefore had to continue studying and retaking GCSE English if they were continuing in full time education until they were nineteen years old.

In particular, outcomes from vocational students studying in GFE colleges have demonstrated the least attainment and progress (Belgutay, 2018) and in the context of retaking English GCSE,

outcomes for vocational students are worse than those studying core subjects that are more traditionally academic. In 2018/19, the lowest pass rates, and the lowest progress scores, for the third year running were for students following vocational study programmes such as Hair and Beauty and Construction (Department of Education, 2019).

This research was conducted in 2018/19, at a time of a number of other heralded policy changes for VE following the publication of the Sainsbury Review (Department of Education, 2016) and the Post-Sixteen Skills Plan (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, 2016) which set out ambitions for a high quality vocational education system. Following this, in 2020, the Government have begun to introduce the new T-level qualifications (Foster & Powell, 2019; Shreeve, 2019) which are intended to reform VE and provide high quality vocational education routes.

1.5 Local Context of the Research- College A

The context of this research study is a GFE college (College A) in 2018/19. I am the Group Principal and CEO of College A, and had been in this role since 2010. College A is a multi-sited institution located in the South East of England. The research occurred in the academic year of 2018/19 and focused on the campus (Campus B) which primarily delivers vocational qualifications because this is the campus with the largest volume of GCSE English retakes and the largest volume of vocational students. Overall, College A had over 8,000 students including adults, sixteen to eighteen year olds (young people), apprentices and higher education students. In 2018/19 there were 2,985 full time sixteen to eighteen year old students of which 1,618 students were mandated to study English (either functional skills or GCSE) and, of these, 646 were mandated to retake GCSE English because their previous grade was a 3 (or D).

Campus B is located in an ethnically diverse, urban town. In 2018/19 there were 1,135 full time young people studying at the campus. 43% of these were from black or minority ethnic backgrounds and 70% of the cohort were studying qualifications below level three. At Campus B, due to their previous attainment at GCSE, 957 learners were required to study functional skills in English, and 389 were required to re-sit GCSE English. The full time curriculum offer at Campus B is vocational and included: construction trades, engineering, motor vehicle, hair and beauty, sport, information technology, health and social care, child care, hospitality and catering, and travel. In 2018/19, the GCSE English timetable was arranged to aid financial efficiency. Accordingly, learners from different vocational areas were timetabled together into GCSE classes to ensure group sizes were maximised.

In 2018/19, the pass rate at grade 4 or better for GCSE English retake at College A was 34%, marginally better than the national performance at post-sixteen and the average performance of General Further Education Colleges (GFE) (DfE, 2019a). This performance is illustrated in Figure 1.2.

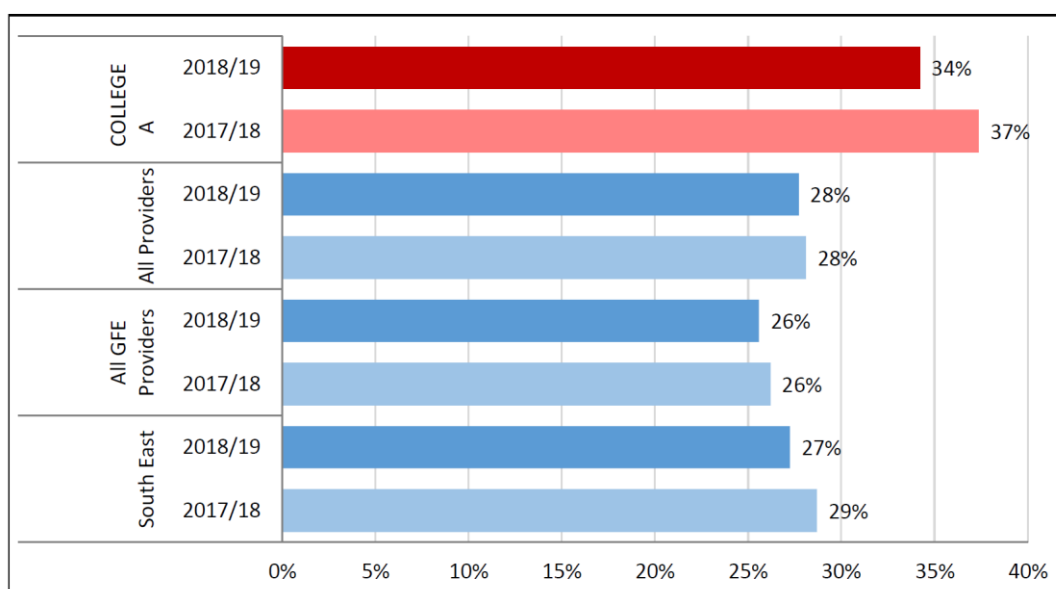


Figure 1.2 GCSE English Pass Rates at College A Compared with National Averages

Data source: National Achievement Rate Tables (DfE, 2019a)

However, these pass rates demonstrated that around two thirds of students at the college subject to the retake policy were retaking and still failing to achieve the desired grade. In addition, attendance to GCSE English classes in 2018/19 was 72%, significantly lower than learner attendance to vocational classes which was 94%. This attendance trend was similar to previous years and, although no national data on student attendance in the sector is published, anecdotal evidence suggested that learner attendance to retake classes was also lower in other colleges (Taylor, 2016).

1.6 Personal and Professional Background

I am the Group Principal and Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the GFE College that provided the location for this research and, in 2018/19, I had worked within the FE sector for over twenty-five years as both a lecturer and a leader. I had been the CEO of College A for over ten years. I had become increasingly concerned that there was a paucity of scholarly research regarding the FE sector in England, and GFEs in particular, in comparison with the school and university sectors. In my view, the FE sector acutely needs more academic consideration and a robust evidence base of its methods and impacts, especially as the sector is subject to significant and continuing changes in funding policy and strategy and structural reform. Instead, in the field of academic research, FE seemed to be a relatively invisible sector (Hodgson et al., 2015)

1.7 Gap in the Research

In my experience, as well as my reading during doctoral study, I was struck by the seeming lack of research that dealt with the FE learner experience, including the sixteen to eighteen year old learner undertaking vocational education (VE). Instead, much research focused either on institutional or

policy matters (Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Browne, 2005; Finlay et al., 2007; Grubb, 2005; Hodgson, 2015; Tickle, 2015), or workforce (Briggs, 2005; Jupp, 2015; Page, 2013). In light of the fact that the FE sector served so many people, this relative gap in the research risked overlooking the experiences of millions of people and missing opportunities to positively influence policy and practice.

I was keenly aware that the comparative lack of academic research might compound the notion that FE was not 'proper education' (Hodgson et al., 2015), but a lesser alternative to the more recognised route of staying at school and moving to university. For example, in conversation, a fellow post-graduate student joked that she could always fall back on *'level 2 hair and beauty'*. This, for me, was anecdotal evidence that vocational education is seen at the bottom of an educational hierarchy by some, and therefore may be less worthy of academic scrutiny and examination. Of further concern is that the lack of current, full, rich and diverse research considering the many aspects of the FE learner experience, might suggest that FE learners do not matter. For example, much policy concerning FE focuses on the purpose of the sector in improving economic output (Hodgson, 2015; Jones, 2015; Winch, 2004, 2012b; Wolf, 2004). In this context, FE learners may become conflated with outcomes and outputs, rather than being the subject of interest for themselves. This approach risks creating the notion of the FE learners as a mass, represented by achievement statistics and economic performance, rather than as individuals with distinct and different experiences and identities.

The retake policy in 2013 (and its subsequent refinement in 2015 that required those with a Grade D (3) to retake GCSE) was an example of a significant policy change that not only had profound implications for the FE sector but had profoundly impacted on FE learners. I was interested in this policy in relation to GCSE English (rather than mathematics) as I had been an English and communications lecturer. Throughout my practice I had witnessed changing policies and qualifications in the arena of teaching English to vocational students. The tightening of the GCSE

retake policy in 2015 was the first time in my experience that policy and funding rules dictated that learners must study and retake the GCSE qualification, as opposed to other qualifications designed with vocational education contexts in mind. Therefore, it was important for me, as an education professional working in the sector, to understand more about this phenomenon so I could consider how to improve its implementation, or influence how policy and practice evolved into the future.

In accordance with my role as Group Principal and CEO, I was responsible for implementing the mandated policy of retaking GCSE English otherwise the organisation I work for would have lost much needed funding. For example, more than one in ten (13%) of GFE Colleges lost funding in 2018/19 because of the English and maths condition of funding due to learners not attending classes (Linford, 2019). The mandated GCSE retake policy has had a significant impact on College A, along with all other GFE's, both financially and logistically. However, this study was prompted by my personal observations of disengaged students, who seemed to be having poor experiences.

The anecdote at the start of this study, when I encountered one young learner who was unwilling to attend his GCSE examination, was just one incident amongst many over the years since the implementation of the policy. I was also acutely aware of the evidence of poor engagement (such as attendance and pass rates) and the fact that these results and metrics at College A seemed to be indicative of a sector wide issue. Despite this, at the time of writing in 2020, the policy has remained, colleges have continued to be at risk financially from the funding rules of conditionality, and, most crucially, many learners have seemed, in my personal observations, to be unhappy with the requirement to continue studying English. My professional and personal disquiet regarding the impact of the GCSE retake policy led to the objectives of this study which focus on individual experience and identity. My motivations were to try to better understand the experience of the VE learner retaking GCSE English in order to consider future policy, pedagogy and practice in my own

institution, but also to add insights regarding the individual FE learner experience to an evidence base for national policy and strategy.

However, the identified gap in the research is not just important to my individual professional needs; this gap needs addressing for everyone involved in FE from policy makers to practitioners. As indicated above, there is, comparatively, less academic research available regarding the English FE learner experience than research that is concerned with school or higher education (Hodgson, 2015). In line with this, despite the real impact of the GCSE retake policy on significant numbers of young people, there is very little literature on either the impact of this policy or the experience of young people who are subject to it.

Since the introduction of the policy there has been a small amount of published work on the effectiveness of pedagogical and institutional strategies in implementing the policy on the ground (Porter, 2015; Rodeiro, 2018) which aim to offer advice to practitioners and leaders, and a number of newspaper and sector organisation articles critiquing the financial and logistical impacts on institutions (Sezen, 2018) (Bellamy, 2017; Grix, 2014; Taylor, 2016) (Burke, 2016). There is very little literature available that is fully applicable to the phenomenon of mandated GCSE English retake since 2015 in England, particularly with a focus on VE learners; and what is available either focuses on pedagogy or teaching methods rather than learner identity (Hume et al., 2018; Ireland, 2019; Maughan et al., 2016); focuses on maths rather than English (Bellamy, 2017) or considers other qualifications such as functional skills (Naphray, 2014; Parkinson & Mackay, 2016). This study therefore fills a gap in available literature through the examination of the specific experience of VE learners who had been mandated to retake GCSE English since 2015.

1.8 Research Questions and Objectives

The aim of this research was to examine the experience of these learners through participative visual methods and Discourse Analysis (DA) (Gee, 2004) of data, including transcripts and images collated through workshops, group interviews and three individual interviews. The images were generated using an internet search engine by the participants in the workshops, who were asked to source images that represented their feelings regarding GCSE English retakes. The images were then used as elicitation material in the group and individual interviews.

The research questions address the identified gap in the research through an exploration of the discourses used by the participants to construct and articulate their experience of VE and GCSE English retake.

The research questions were:

- 1. How are post-sixteen GCSE English retake discourses socially constructed by learners?**
- 2. How are these discourses used to enact and depict the socially constructed identities of learners?**
- 3. How do the learners' socially constructed identities impact on their attitude to learning?**

The research objectives were:

- 1. To explore the learning identities of post-sixteen VE students retaking GCSE English through visual methods and interview.**
- 2. To apply the construct of Figured Worlds to the discourses of post-sixteen VE students retaking GCSE English.**
- 3. To theorise the phenomenon of post-sixteen vocational learners retaking GCSE English using the construct of Figured Worlds.**

2.0 Literature Review

This chapter sets the theoretical framework which is centred on the concept of Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 2001) to help address the identified gap in research and inform understanding of how post-sixteen VE learners construct their learning identities in relation to retaking GCSE English. The chapter also sets out a brief examination of the GCSE retake policy and the context of vocational education (VE) in England and perceptions around VE's lesser status compared to academic routes. This context sets the scene for the research that examines a specific phenomenon- the discourses, agency and learner identity of post-sixteen VE learners who were mandated to continue to study GCSE English in the academic year of 2018/19.

The theoretical framework is a key factor in the epistemological and ontological stance taken that the social world is constructed, subjective, connected, contextualised and pluralistic (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Holland et al., 2001). This sociocultural perspective proposes that the identity of the learner forms and changes through participation in these Figured Worlds (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Holland et al., 2001; Urrieta, 2007). The chapter's internal structure sets out the theoretical framework of Figured Worlds first because this is the lens through which the specific contexts of policy and VE are viewed. Figured Worlds are also the frame through which the identity of the VE learner is examined. The context of FE, including social, historical and political, is therefore presented and discussed in light of the framework of Figured World, as an influence on the Figured Worlds of the participants.

The concept of Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 2001) is useful for understanding the way that meaning and identity is constructed in peculiar and particular contexts, such as the particular context of the young vocational learner being required to retake GCSE English. Whilst incorporating the idea that Figured Worlds are a social construction in part formed by power relationships, they

are also places that incorporate individual agency, innovation and improvisation (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Gee, 2000).

2.1 Conceptual Framework

The key concepts in this study are cultural artefacts, discourses, identity (including learner identity) and learner agency. These are discussed using the theoretical framework of Figured Worlds and within the specific contexts of vocational education (VE) and GCSE retake. At the centre of this chapter is a theorisation of the phenomenon of young VE learners retaking GCSE English and the perceived dissonance between these two types of education and qualifications; in other words, VE versus the academic GCSE. The conceptual framework adopts a sociocultural perspective on learning which proposes that the nature of learning is moulded by systems, processes and individual agency. This approach is adopted from Holland et al (2001) who, in turn, assimilated work from Vygotsky (1987), Bakhtin (2010) and Bourdieu (1973, 1990a, 1990b).

These situated and sociocultural theories of learning consider that learners do not just learn knowledge and skills during education, but that education is an interactive process through which learners define the world and their places within it (Francis, 2012; Holland et al., 2001; Levinson & Holland, 1996; Rubin, 2007; Wenger, 1999). If the phenomenon of learning is constructed through participation in a social world (Lave, 1991) then the specifics of that social world are influential in the construction of the learner's identity (Rubin, 2007). The identity of the learner changes and develops through participation in these worlds; and, in response, the Figured Worlds form and reform during this participation (Lave & Wenger, 1999a; Rubin, 2007; Vågan, 2011; Wenger, 1999). Therefore, as with any other process or activity, learning is a vehicle for identity construction, (Castells, 2011; Guenther, 2010; Rubin, 2007) and that construction of self-authoring (Holland et al., 2001) takes place in cultural and social spaces, using cultural artefacts (Scanlan, 2010), and creating discourses

through the processes of personal and social interactions and practice (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Holland et al., 2001).

2.2 Figured Worlds

The concept of Figured Worlds was introduced by Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, and Cain (2001).

“A socially and culturally constructed realm of interpretation in which particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and a particular set of outcomes are valued over others. Each is a simplified world populated by a set of agents who engage in a limited range of meaningful acts or changes of state as moved by a specific set of forces.” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 52)

As such, Figured Worlds are typical stories (Gee, 2004). However, Figured Worlds are not monoliths because what is typical or normal changes according to context.

Holland et al. (2001) proposed the idea of Figured Worlds as part of a sociocultural theory that is concerned with self and identity and how people ‘figure’ who they are, through the ‘worlds’ that they operate in (Urrieta, 2007). This thesis adopts this approach and focuses on Figured Worlds as both a place of individual agency as well as an arena for social construction (Collinson & Penketh, 2013; Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007). The concept of Figured Worlds is an appropriate tool to consider individual experience and identity as it accepts the individual’s agency and ability to improvise, and challenges the over emphasis of cultural determinism. Holland et al. (2001) characterised Figured Worlds as socially produced, culturally constituted activities where people cognitively and procedurally perform new self-understandings. Therefore, for this thesis, Figured Worlds were an important and useful concept to help examine the identity of VE learners experiencing the relatively new phenomenon of retaking GCSE English.

Different educational researchers have used Figured Worlds in differing ways. The flexibility and diversity of approaches have added to the usefulness of this concept in studying agency and identity in education (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Blackburn, 2003; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Urrieta, 2007; Urrieta et al., 2011). In considering this particular research on young vocational learners forced into continuing GCSE English because of previous failure, a number of previous studies were considered particularly useful and pertinent as they also focused on marginalised learner identity or remedial literacy education through the lens of Figured Worlds. Some of these studies are briefly described below with an explanation of how they related to this research and contributed to the conceptual framework.

A study of low-income, ethnic minority students in an American urban high school (Rubin, 2007) applied concepts of Figured Worlds to analyse why these students tended to poor academic achievement, and concluded that the discourse in this setting set students up for failure. The curriculum only offered rote learning with little relevance and meaning to their lives; a preoccupation with teaching to the test and repetition of content. Both compliance and non-compliance with the teaching and curriculum led to the same consequences: no or little learning or progression (Rubin, 2007). In another study, Hatt's (2007) research on the Figured World of 'smartness' demonstrated that young learners in an urban environment understood 'smartness' in two, distinct ways: they understood how it was constructed in schooling environments, but also understood that being smart was not just about having a certificate or other cultural artefacts, but also about the ability to survive and thrive in their everyday lives.

In a study of adults in Brazil, Bartlett (2007) utilised Figured Worlds to describe how people dismissed social positioning; therefore challenging the dominant hegemony of what literacy means. (Urrieta, 2007). Boaler and Greeno (2000), in their study of mathematics education also considered

learner agency as they examined the phenomenon that many students were reluctant to participate in mathematical dominant practices—such as the rote application of formulas—that they found to be ‘counter to their developing identification as responsible, thinking agents’ (Boaler & Greeno, 2000, p. 171). Luttrell and Parker (2001) utilised Figured Worlds to question definitions of literacy and argued that students used their literary practices to construct their identities, sometimes in direct opposition to the Figured World of school.

These studies suggested that there were complex relationships behind learners’ evolving identities in a learning setting in which they participated, constructed and were recruited to. These different studies and their applied concepts were instrumental in developing the conceptual framework used in this thesis. They helped to illuminate understanding of identity beyond the notion of the societal labelling bestowed through having to study GCSE English because of previous failure. The articles demonstrate the complex processes and constructions of the self in Figured Worlds in various contexts in education. These articles suggested an understanding of learner agency and ability to improvise, beyond a fixed idea of identity bestowed by social structures.

2.2.1 Social Structures, Power and Status in Figured Worlds

Figured Worlds are narrativised worlds (Holland, 2001). Gee (2004) referred to them as simplified, typical stories. However, these narratives, whilst abstracted, are not wholly divorced from social worlds. Figured Worlds are imagined by the individual, but are situated in particular social, cultural and historical contexts (Holland et al., 2001; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Urrieta, 2007; Vågan, 2011). So, Figured Worlds are also set within larger institutional structures- for example of policy. In order to encapsulate the notion of social or institutional structures, Holland et al. (2001) partially co-opt the Bourdeuian concept of field. Bourdieu defines field as a social world, separate and functioning relatively autonomously and refers to the field of power to describe aspects of hierarchical class

relationships (Bourdieu, 1990a, 1990b; Bourdieu & Passeron, 1990). However, Bourdieu related his field analysis to over-arching social structures of power and influence. The concept of Figured Worlds introduces a smaller, more personal flavour to field analysis. It is about the imagined everyday.

For example, an exclusively Bourdieuan field analysis of the GCSE English retake phenomenon might dwell on the perceived class differences between vocational education and more academic routes; or might focus on the symbolic capital bestowed upon the GCSE. If Figured Worlds are used as the mediating concept, an analysis opens up to considering the discourses that are used by the people involved- how they understand themselves and interpret their positions (Holland, 2001). There is a link between this and the concept of 'situated learning' in 'communities of practice' proposed by Lave and Wenger (1999a) which considers how people are inducted into social activities, and how their identities are created and informed by participation in these activities.

The concept of identity can also be understood as how people 'figure' who they are, through the 'worlds' that they operate in (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Urrieta, 2007). Holland et al. consider that some people may not gain access to some Figured Worlds based on societal position, therefore Figured Worlds are not always accessible to everyone. Whether people enter particular Figured Worlds depends on who they are. Therefore, the Figured World of the GCSE retake learner may only be accessible to the GCSE retake learner, or a participant that has failed to reach the required standard of GCSE English at school. They are the pioneers of this world.

However, Holland et al.'s perspective does not mean therefore that people in a certain context must always adopt and perform the same role. The importance of Figured Worlds is that they are recreated, again and again, are mutable and always in transit (Castells, 2011; Chang, 2014; Chang et

al., 2017; Holland et al., 2001; Lawy & Bloomer, 2003; Tett, 2016; Urrieta, 2007). Fundamentally, the concept is humanistic and dependent on improvisation, individual action, subjectivity, change and interaction (Holland et al., 2001). People are pioneers of their contexts and Figured Worlds, but it is up to them how they settle it. The intention of this study was to address a gap in the research and understanding regarding this particular context.

In summary, the concept of Figured Worlds has a relationship with the concepts of field(s) and communities of practice, but also conceptualises the ability of the individual to improvise and (re)create their world. Figured Worlds create meanings, fictionalisations, understandings. Whilst contextualised, the concept also recognises that Figured Worlds are created by people- through their acts and imaginings and whilst they operate in worlds that contain relative positions of power and status, they are also places in which people have agency to create a sense of self and identity (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Coffey & Street, 2008; Holland, 2001; Urrieta, 2007).

2.2.2 Cultural Artefacts within Figured Worlds

The conceptual framework of Figured Worlds highlights people's propensity to imagine and improvise (Bartlett, 2005). These imaginings take place within cultural worlds created by institutions (John-Steiner & Mahn, 1996). However, these imaginings, or Figured Worlds are figurative, abstracted from an objective reality and formed and reformed through interaction (Holland et al., 2001). Vygotsky (1987) theorised that children formed identities and developed through collectively imagined symbols. For example, a particular toy might act as a gateway to an imagined world. As the person develops, the fantastical aspects of figured or imagined worlds might diminish, but these imaginings are a form of practice in order to participate in a social or institutional world in which individuals have to position themselves.

Holland et al. (2001) consider the importance of cultural artefacts in Figured Worlds. Cultural artefacts are objects, stories or symbols made meaningful by collective understanding (Bartlett, 2005). Examples of cultural artefacts in the context of this study might include societal labelling of retake students as 'failures' as well as the narratives of retake students recounting their experience. According to Holland et al.' (2001) cultural artefacts are important to humans' abilities to control their internal worlds and behaviour and achieve a level of agency. For example, people can co-opt cultural artefacts to combat negative social positioning, using and developing them in communities of practice for their own means (Gee, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1999b). For Vygotsky (1987), these artefacts were pivotal- for example acting as a gateway or prompt to an imagined world. In other research, artefacts may have a material aspect but can also take on a collectively imagined symbolic resonance (Cole, 1985).

Cultural artefacts can be objects or people, stories or discourses (Bartlett, 2005; Holland, 2001; Urrieta, 2007). Discourses are artefacts also as they have an existence and can be imposed upon people, or can be assimilated and co-opted by people for their own purposes (Hill & Cole, 1995; Urrieta, 2007; Urrieta et al., 2011). Therefore the participant discourses regarding the GCSE English retake might co-opt and assign different meanings. One theorised example was a study of Alcoholics Anonymous in which the cultural artefacts of the life stories that attendees told produced and mediated new understandings and helped form the identity of an AA member: the identity of an alcoholic (Cain, 1991). These new meanings were not static- their meaning was produced through their use in practice, and therefore provided the basis for identity development or self-authoring' or in other words, creating a revised sense of self (Cain, 1991; Hill & Cole, 1995; Holland et al., 2001; Levinson & Holland, 1996). Cultural artefacts are also important in the concept of identity development or self-authoring as people can use artefacts in a self-aware or individualistic way

Vygotsky (1987). Often the concept of discourse is considered as the means by which dominant views are prescribed (Coulthard, 2014; Gee, 2004; Hill & Cole, 1995; Holland, 2001; Lei, 2003).

2.2.3 Identity within Figured Worlds

In the conceptualisation of Figured Worlds, identity is in part formed by social processes (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Castells, 2011; Holland et al., 2001; Rubin, 2007; Tett, 2016). As such, identity is a process of becoming, not a state of being (Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Cain, 1991; Holland et al., 2001). The concept of identity as a process in a dialectical relationship with society (Berger & Luckmann, 1991) brings together personal dimensions with cultural and societal dimensions (Holland, 2001). Therefore identity is a process of imagination by the individual within a social world, and in this process both the self and the world are constantly figured out and changed.

This does present a dichotomy and questions the hierarchical power of social structures versus the self. Berger and Luckmann (1991) view identity as a social phenomenon that emerges from the relationship between society and the individual, and the interaction between objective and subjective reality. As such they consider identities are also formed by temporal and socio-historical considerations as well as psychological considerations of the self. Holland et al. (2001) agree that identities are also psycho-historical, formed over a span of a life. However, identities and the Figured Worlds they operate in are considered to be subjective, are always in train and mediated by discourses (Bartlett, 2005; Billett & Somerville, 2004; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Collinson & Penketh, 2013; Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Scanlan, 2010; Wenger, 1999).

Therefore, identity is a concept to understand the multiple connections between the private and public realms of practice in society (Holland et al., 2001). It is a space in which self-authoring takes place through this interactivity and these connections (Bakhtin, 2010; Gee, 2000; Williams et al.,

2009); a process that was named by Hall (1996) as 'suturing'. The concept of identity is one that is co-created through individual agency or improvisation in the personal realm and these practices are played out in the social realm. Identity is formed through practice (Holland et al., 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1999b; Wenger, 2009; Wojecki, 2007).

Practiced identities (Holland et al., 2001) are enacted within the context of Figured Worlds and are interpreted within this context. These worlds are socially identified (Bakhtin, 2010), and any practice or activity within them is also imbued with meaning. For example, any practice such as speaking is a type of social and cultural work. These practices also position people in terms of, for example, power and status. These statuses are often considered as enduring constructs such as class, ethnicity (Hall, 1996). However, people do not lay claim to just one identity and do not live in just one Figured World. The final context of identity in practice is self-authoring (Bakhtin, 2010; Bathmaker & Harnett, 2010; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Hatt, 2007).

'The world must be answered- authorship is not a choice- but the form of answer is not pre-determined' (Holland et al., 2001, p. 272)

Therefore, self-authorship is critical in understanding, using and (re)creating the social practices and discourses that people have available to them (Bakhtin, 2010). This viewpoint emphasises the importance of human agency and resourcefulness (Holland et al., 2001; Jarvis, 2004).

Bakhtin (2010) described how people figure and change the conditions of their circumstances and lives, and shows how people gain control through evoking positions. The idea of voice is important: 'it positions persons as it provides them with the tools to recreate their positions' (Holland et al., 2001, p. 45). Therefore, Figured Worlds can become spaces in which people can self-author. Cultural artefacts are part of the 'toolkit' of self-authoring (Rubin, 2007; Shepel, 1995). However, the

conceptualisation of Figured Worlds emphasises that people are at the centre of the process of meaning and identity formation. The process of self-authoring is 'unstable' (Holland, 2001), able to multiply and always in transit (Hill & Cole, 1995). Therefore, the expectation is that each individual may have a different experience, co-opt the cultural artefacts in a different way and create a different Figured World. This may mean that the particular and specific conditions of the GCSE retake in a VE context offers possibilities for self-authoring that might not otherwise have existed.

2.2.4 Learner Identity in Figured Worlds

Learner identity is defined as how people understand themselves and figure out their position within and without learning institutions (Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007). This definition encompasses the ideas of positional identities and Figured Worlds to examine how people develop a sense of themselves as learners within institutional practices. Schools, colleges- the education system as a whole- are important and influential forces that shape social and cultural understandings (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Although the formation of identity is also created within social structures such as socio-historical contexts and socio-economic hierarchies, this definition of learning identity is centred on the impact of the systems within which students learn, and how these systems are a constitutive process through which students define, create and understand their world (Rubin, 2007; Wenger, 1999). As such, although the influence of power structures outside the learning system are obviously present, these influences might be diverse and contradictory- people's identities formed by feelings of success or failure for instance (Levinson & Holland, 1996).

Education is a site of cultural production and reproduction (Levinson & Holland, 1996) but there are a variety of actors in play which can form both positive or less positive learner identities. A dominant educational discourse and practice may produce inequalities for people who differ from the norm (Fine, 1991; Kitsuse & Cicourel, 1963; Schultz & Erickson, 1982). The building of identity is influenced through dominant institutions such as schools which legitimise certain identities. For example, a school system can define legitimate knowledge- such as a dominant perception of success (Castells, 2011; Levinson & Holland, 1996). However, students are also able to respond in an agentic manner- accommodating, resisting or adapting the practices (Mehan et al., 1986). There is a connection with this and the concepts explored by Lave and Wenger (1999b) who were interested in communities of practice and situated learning. They considered the notion of apprentices or newcomers that were inducted into learning through forming communities. This means that learning is always in a state of change in ongoing systems of activity, involving people who are different and who have different and situated improvised responses (Wenger, 2009).

A peculiar factor that might influence the learning identity of the GCSE retake learner is the fact that the qualification is mandated. Bounded communities (Wilson et al., 2004) are communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999a) brought together with restrictive boundaries or covenants such as the compulsory nature of the GCSE retake. This restriction is one factor that may affect the nature of Figured World that may or may not take form.

In Figured Worlds, the self is not wholly subjugated by social forces beyond their control. Holland et al. recognise both the changeability of the self, and the changeability of the Figured World. They recognise that identities change according to temporal, social or cultural context, but that identity is also a foundation from which new activities and worlds can be created. Identities are both pliable and malleable, but also generative as people are capable of improvisation when met with 'a

particular combination of circumstances and contradictions for which we have no set response.”
(Holland et al., 2001, p.17-18).

2.2.5 Hybrid Figured Worlds of Cultural Uncertainty

It can be argued that the participants in this research study found themselves in a *‘particular combination of circumstances and contradictions’*. As vocational learners, they had chosen courses of study that favoured practical work and occupationally specific skills. However, because of their academic record, they were thrust back into the GCSE English classroom, often unwillingly. These peculiar set of circumstances could then be expected to have a profound impact on their self-authoring and their identities (Rubin, 2007).

For example, vocational education does not have the same prestige as an academic university education in mainstream thinking and dominant institutional discourses (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Billett, 2014). Therefore, it might be argued that vocational learners, when positioned in this way, may not actively participate in self-production, but may be limited to agreeing, rejecting or negotiating the imposed identities. However, Holland et al. (2001) utilised the concept of dialogism (Bakhtin, 2010) to conceptualise people having simultaneous, multiple, contradictory internal conversations. Therefore it could be considered that people can accept or reject or negotiate, but also can self-author, make choices and can respond (Bartlett, 2005; Urrieta et al., 2011; Wojecki, 2007). From this perspective, a non-response is a valid response.

Self-authorship is always present, but the form of response is not predetermined (Holland et al., 2001). For example, in a study of the Figured World of ‘smartness’, Hatt (2007) theorised that when young people are defined as failures in an academic setting, they adopt other angles or perspectives to refigure success or failure, and find some sense of agency. This echoes Holland et al’s (2001)

assertions around improvisation. In her study, Hatt also suggests that the learners improvise a powerful definition of 'smartness' not by rejecting the school definition, but by blending the cultural knowledge of 'street smarts' with the academic knowledge of school. Therefore, she suggests education practices should reframe institutional definitions of 'smartness' and be more co-constructed. If they do not, and instead perpetuate institutionalised ideas of 'smartness' many disadvantaged learners will disengage as they figure out that, regardless of their real ability, they will never be labelled as 'smart' within the Figured World of school.

According to Holland et al. (2001) Figured Worlds consist of four characteristics: they are a cultural phenomenon; they have contexts of meaning within which social encounters have significance and people's positions matter; they are socially reproduced and organised, and that, finally, they relate people to landscapes of action and therefore create individual sense of self. However, a feature of the Figured World of GCSE English retake is the phenomenon that was created by the policy- the fact that these learners were compelled to attend lessons and retake the examination could be characterised as a hybridised experience. In a study of a youth offender programme in prison, Urrieta, Martin and Robinson (2011) theorised that the programme had a high level of success because it offered participants a hybrid identity. Rather than positioning them as prisoners, the programme deliberately disrupted this positioning by creating - 'a hybrid space of cultural uncertainty- not prison, not college, a type of world making, where a new self-authoring was possible.' (Urrieta et al., 2011, p. 124).

2.2.7 Discourses in Figured Worlds

The chosen method of analysis in this study (discussed in the next chapter) is Discourse Analysis (DA). The definition of discourse is a particular, recognisable way of saying, doing or being (Coulthard, 2014; Paltridge, 2012). Gee (2004) considers the concept of Figured Worlds as important

in DA as they encompass the micro of social interactions and the macro of institutions (Gee, 2004, p. 95). Figured Worlds emphasise the ways in which people construct images and concepts of the world and the way that people hold their discourses or stories 'in their heads' (Gee, 2004, p.89).

There are three aspects of considering Figured Worlds and how they interact with discourse: espoused Figured Worlds (what we say and think we believe); evaluative worlds (how we judge ourselves and others) and worlds-in-(inter)action- our ways of looking at the world that guide our actual actions, regardless of what we think we believe (Strauss, 1992). Gee (2004) considers that Figured Worlds are stories that people hold in their head- they are 'typical stories' (Gee, 2004, p. 89). As such, this conception of Figured Worlds focuses on interpretation of a world that is socially and culturally constructed, but emphasises that their situated meanings are ultimately dependent on context of time, space and situation, and are therefore constantly fluctuating. In particular, a context that is hybridised may create opportunities to recreate or create new and alternate identities within a backdrop of cultural uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011).

2.2.8 Learner Agency in Figured Worlds

In order to create new or alternate identities within that hybrid space, participants in Figured Worlds have agency- the ability to improvise (Tett, 2016). Agency as a concept in theory is complex with differing definitions (Mercer, 2011, 2012). One conception is sociocultural, considering agency as a mediated capacity to act (Ahearn, 2010; Van Lier, 2008). Holland et al. (2001) see agency as socioculturally mediated, but also understand agency in terms of a personal capacity to act. The definition used in this study is predicated on Holland et al.'s (2001) concept of agency. This consists of two primary aspects which are entwined and cannot be meaningfully taken apart (Mercer, 2011,2012) Firstly, there is a learner's sense of agency, which relates to how powerless or powerful

a learner feels- their thoughts and beliefs. Secondly, there is a learner's behaviour in which an individual utilises their agency through action, or through deliberate non-action (Mercer, 2012).

A significant factor in this hybrid, culturally uncertain space of GCSE English retake is the sense of agency and agentic behaviours that learners possess. GCSE learners are reactive to circumstance, but as they figure out their worlds, how they engage and make sense can also influence and change the context (Bandura, 1989). As such, this study reflects on the complex nature of multiple contexts including macro-level contexts (such as policy) but also the micro-level of the individual as the individual's sense of agency, and agentic behaviour is always in play.

“Human agency may be frail especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely and it deserves our attention” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 5)

2.3 A Hybridised Figured World of Cultural Uncertainty: GCSE English Retakes in Post-Sixteen Vocational Education (VE)

The context for the phenomenon that is under investigation is a particular hybridised combination of circumstance and contradiction (Holland, 2001), as young vocational learners are thrust back into a qualification (GCSE English) they have already undertaken at school. There is also an inherent contradiction between perceptions of the academic pathway and perceptions of VE; namely that VE is a less valued route (Winch, 2012b). Specifically, the research context is situated in a further education college campus that primarily offers vocational education in areas such as construction, health and care, engineering, motor vehicle, technology, hair and beauty. The definition of VE used here is vocational education that provides training for jobs that are based in manual or practical sectors, traditionally non-academic and ‘totally related to a specific trade, occupation or vocation’

(Davies & Ryan, 2011, p. 32). The following sections explore the two key contexts of this study: GCSE English retakes and VE.

2.3.1 The GCSE English Retake Policy

The GCSE retake policy was introduced in order to improve work skills and economic outcomes (Education and Skills Funding Agency, 2019; Wolf, 2011). However, the policy has resulted in learner dissatisfaction and poor qualification outcomes (Burke, 2016, Grix, 2014, Sezen, 2018). In the context of retaking English GCSE, outcomes for VE students are worse than those studying subjects that are more academic. In 2018/19 the lowest pass rates, and the lowest progress scores, for the third year running were for students following vocational study programmes.

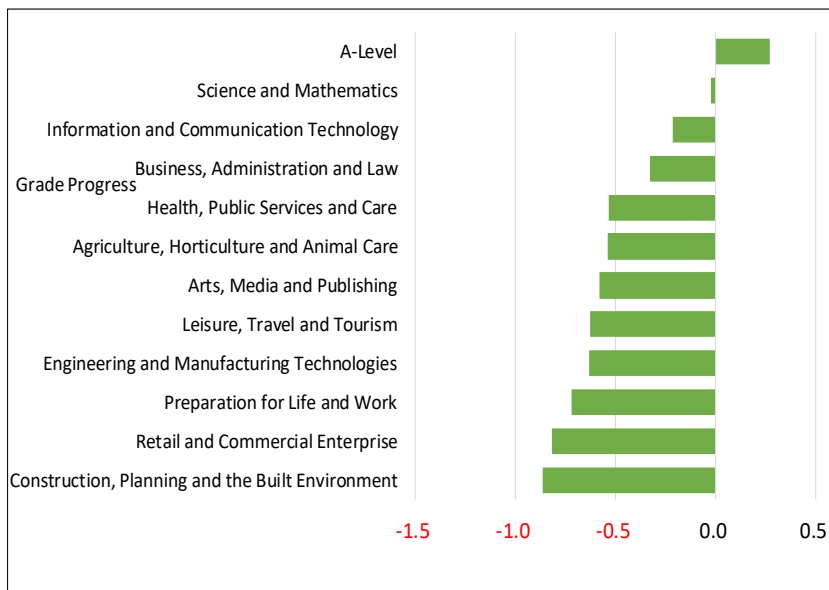


Figure 2.1 National Progress of Students retaking GCSE English by Programme Area

Derived from latest available National Data 2018/19 (DfE, 2019)

Figure 2.1 demonstrates that of all students retaking GCSE English during post-sixteen study, only A-Level students made positive progress on average (improving on their previous grade). Students on

vocational programmes such as Construction and Hair and Beauty (Retail and Commercial Enterprise) made the worst progress; on average gaining retake scores that were almost one grade lower than their first attempt.

From one perspective, these results seem to support the policy intention to improve skills (Wolf, 2011), as they seem to demonstrate that vocational learners have poorer attainment, and therefore a greater need for more English teaching and learning. If vocational education is defined by its narrow adherence to an occupational sector (Davies & Ryan, 2011), with its success measured by productivity and impact on the economy rather than the person (Crouch et al., 2001), then remedial English skills in the vocational context might also be defined as having a narrow purpose of employability. In 2018, the Chief Inspector of Ofsted, whilst criticising the policy of GCSE retakes, confirmed that English and maths were key skills, but she still reinforced their importance through an assertion that these were the skills employers demanded (Ryan, 2018). This is a view also found in government policy (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, 2016) in which the acquisition of good language skills is seen as an essential tool for employment and productivity.

2.3.2 The GCSE Reform Policy

The retake policy coincided with a significant GCSE reform programme. In 2013, Michael Gove, the Secretary of State for Education in the coalition government announced an educational reform that radically altered schooling in England and Wales (Stock, 2017). These changes transformed the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSE) assessment and curriculum strategies, notably in GCSE English (Isaacs, 2014; Marshall, 2017). The ensuing policy and implementation documents were numerous (Brennan, 2013; Stock, 2017) and included the abolition of controlled assessment in

favour of closed book examinations and a shift from the well-known A*to G grading system to 9 to 1. The policy was intended to create 'rigorous and robust' qualifications (Ofqual, 2013).

The purpose of the reform was to create new qualifications with the purpose of providing evidence of pupils' achievement against demanding criteria, providing a strong foundation for further study (Isaacs, 2014). In doing so, policy-makers established the specific criteria and determined the standards for evaluation of the skill of English (Stock, 2017). Marshall (2003) commented that trying to constrain the English curriculum to technical knowledge and adherence to grammatical rules or conventions was problematic.

'Analysing the work of others cannot be seen as simply reading an instruction test of a flat pack from IKEA' (Marshall, 2003, pg. 92).

She argued that this approach prioritises the measurement of progression, but also that this approach will fail because it constrains the knowledge represented by the English curriculum to technical accuracy, and ignores the 'fuzziness' (Marshall, 2003, pg. 93) of creative thought and self-development.

An extract of the reformed specifications and subject content for GCSE English Language is included in Appendix 21 (p. 310). The extract suggests that the designers of the specification have placed great emphasis on value judgements- texts that are considered worthy are 'high quality' and 'extended' and are delineated by the difficulty and challenge. This follows the policy intent outline by the Secretary of State in 2010.

'the great tradition of our literature – Dryden, Pope, Swift, Byron, Keats, Shelley, Austen, Dickens and Hardy – should be at the heart of school life. Our literature is the best in the world – it is every child's birthright and we should be proud to teach it in every school' (Gove, 2010).

The government wanted to prioritise both technical accuracy and traditional literature as the most important and valued aspects of English teaching, but also as the most important method of measuring and assessing achievement in English (Marshall, 2017). In the specification there is a clear distinction between these and texts that are not worthy, such as those that are 'transient'. The word, 'transient' means impermanent, but it connotes unimportant. Dismissing transient texts as not worthy of study sends a message that most people's form of communication is low quality. It is interesting to note that many communicative artefacts that most people encounter as part of day-to-day life, such as news, texts and social media would be excluded by these definitions. Therefore, 'high quality' as a term might also be read as 'rarefied', 'elite' or 'out of the ordinary'.

In the specification there is also prioritisation of 'rules', and deploying these 'correctly' and 'accurately'. Again, this implies that everyday communication, which is not necessarily grammatically compliant and accurate, but instead adaptive and flexible, is considered not worthy of study or note. Although the specification also suggests that the texts studied must be wide ranging, the other criteria clearly imply that the definition of wide is only within a range of texts that have already been selected for their quality, and that quality has been judged on notions and criteria of permanence, adherence to grammatical convention, difficulty and length.

There is a social aspect and judgement in labelling the value of skills and knowledge (Gaskell, 1992; Steiger, 1993). Morby (2014) focused on the removal of world literature from the GCSE English syllabus. He took a sociocultural approach to argue that the DfE's intentions were to create a syllabus that focused on the cultural value or exchange value of educational capital that could facilitate social mobility and strongly suggested the changes to the English GCSE syllabus content would have a detrimental effect on those students with less experience of and access to exchangeable literary and linguistic cultural capital.

The review of the GCSE specification extract and policy suggests that the worth of the specification is formulated with an academic frame of reference governed by notions of quality and convention. Moreover, the definition of quality is closely linked with notions and value judgements regarding 'good' literature that are loaded with cultural connotations. For example, the use of Standard English represents authority and formality (Alsagoff, 2010; Sundkvist, 2011), rather than the diverse communications that might be needed in the social world and the world of work. For example, evidence from employer surveys tends to indicate that employers require communication skills that are diverse and flexible (Fischer & Friedman, 2015; Mar Molinero & Xie, 2007; McMurray et al., 2016). This definition does not necessarily correlate with the criteria for quality in the reformed GCSE specification. For example, the percentage of modern texts included in the syllabus shrank dramatically after the implementation of the reform in order to increase the focus on Shakespearean and nineteenth century texts (Morby, 2014). Therefore, in order to make the GCSE more 'rigorous', there might be the possibility that the new GCSE was even more divergent from the requirements, needs and motivations of VE learners.

As referenced in the introduction, vocational learners in England had been less likely to be entered for GCSE retake prior to the new legislation coming into force in 2015 and, at first sight, the aspirational nature of the new subject content might be seen as a welcome addition to a skills based vocational programme that is criticised for being too narrow (Fisher & Simmons, 2012). It might be argued that the introduction of the GCSE retake policy has countered criticism that vocational education is too vocational, and not educational enough.

However, whether or not this is right, the evidence suggests that the policy is not working, and the desire to give young people access to qualifications that match and exceed the highest performing is not happening as so many post-sixteen learners do not pass the qualification or disengage entirely

(Belgutay, 2018). There may be a disconnect between the reform policy that has focused on more traditional concepts of what constitutes English skill and knowledge, and the GCSE retake policy which has positioned the GCSE as a gateway to better employment. The evidence of qualification achievement suggests that the policy is not working for most post-sixteen learners (DfE, 2019a).

For example, the ministerial announcement of the GCSE Reforms does not refer to the purpose of the qualifications in post-sixteen study, and there is no mention of why a young person might be more likely to pass this qualification after one year in college if they did not so after two years' study in school at key stage 4. The desire to give young people access to qualifications that match and exceed the highest performing is not happening after the age of sixteen because so many post-sixteen learners do not pass the qualification or disengage entirely (Porter, 2015). This presents policy problems that seem intractable. The GCSE English retakes have, so far, delivered poor outcomes, but policy-makers consider they are needed to create better outcomes. GCSE English is intended to be an enabler of future success in work and life, but its assessment can also be a barrier that impedes progress.

2.3.3 Assessment in GCSE English

A significant aspect of the GCSE reform programme was an overhaul of the assessment regime, in part because of fears that controlled assessments and coursework were inflating grades (Marshall, 2017). Accordingly, the GCSE reform programme introduced examinations as the only form of assessment (Marshall, 2017). This significant shift may have contributed to a teaching and learning culture in which the examination is the dominating factor, and , although the policy intent was to create a broader English curriculum, in reality, the learning experience may have narrowed to focus on the skills required to pass the examination (Marshall & Gibbons, 2018). If the pressure of high stakes examinations dominate, the risk may be that teachers may tend to teach to the test (Benton,

2000; Marsh, 2017) and learners may have an unsatisfactory learning experience as the skills prioritised become about short term memory and recall, rather than meaningful learning (Marshall, 2003, 2017; Stacey, 2015). Therefore, the curriculum might become constrained and reduced by the dominance of the assessment method (Marshall & Gibbons, 2018).

The other significant change in assessment was the change from A*-G to 9-1 grades. This also ushered in the use of the phrase a 'good pass'. Ofqual's release (Ofqual, 2015) of the new grading system highlighted this phrase in bold lettering, and it has become common parlance in policy documentation to refer to a grade 5 or above (Stock, 2017). Stock (2017) considered that this new delineation implied that 'passing' meant something has been moved past, and implicitly something has been left behind in that past. He argued that society celebrates the people who pass, and the ones that fail 'must dwell in the past resitting the exams until they, of course, pass'. (Stock, 2017, pg.150) Although Stock (2017) did not explicitly refer to the retake policy for post-sixteen learners, he used the metaphor of the *Ferryman* and the *Drowning* to illustrate that the emphasis on passing the examination portrays those who pass as ferrymen, moving on to greater things, and those who fail as drowning, in need of help and remediation. The definition of a 'good pass' has made it even harder for individuals to pass and become ferrymen.

In summary, a brief review of the GCSE English reform suggests that the new curriculum and assessment methodology might act as a barrier to some learners: the content might be exclusionary, the pedagogy and learning experience might be detrimentally affected by the dominance of the examination. Despite the policy intention to position GCSE English as a key enabler of future economic success; the GCSE reform may have created content that is perceived to be removed from the skills that employers require. In addition, the GCSE reform and retake policies have positioned the GCSE (particularly English and maths) as more than a watershed moment for a sixteen year old.

By linking it as a mandatory element of post-sixteen study, the GCSE English has become the tool of the ferryman for all stages of life. The implication is that, without it, you cannot pass, you cannot move forward, you cannot be the ferryman who can paddle towards better opportunities (Stock, 2017). However, this metaphor ignores the possibility that learners who move onto VE may become ferrymen in other ways.

2.4 Vocational Education (VE)

It is therefore important, for the context of this thesis, to explore some perceptions regarding VE in England. The following section briefly considers VE, focusing on perceptions regarding status, purpose and outcomes.

2.4.1 The Status of Vocational Education

Vocational education, and therefore further education colleges, are often seen as at the bottom of an educational hierarchy in English education policy, and many reflections on the history and future of English vocational education concur that it is perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the second class option (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Billett, 2014; Fuller & MacFadyen, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Rose, 2012; Smith & Polesel, 2010; Winch, 2012b). Indeed, the further education college sector is often referred to as the 'Cinderella' of the education sector because it is overlooked, considered second-best (Fooks, 1994; Grubb, 2005; Norton, 2012a) and is for 'other people's children', rather than the children of policy-makers (Galley, 2014; Orr, 2018). The reasons given for the lack of parity of esteem for vocational education with more traditional routes often centre on perceptions of purpose and outcomes.

2.4.2 The Purpose of Vocational Education

Vocational education is sometimes regarded as an alternative route for those who have failed at education (Parkinson & Mackay; Wallace, 2014), and this assumption appears to be the driver for recent policy decisions regarding vocational education. For example, a Select Committee report on social mobility in 2016 asserted that the divide between vocational and academic educational routes created poorer employment outcomes for vocational learners:

“In higher education, by and large, you are guaranteed pretty good outcomes..... many colleges.... ensure that young people on the vocational route go on to lead a fantastic career, but too many do not. If we are producing two grades of worker, one stuck here and the other flying up here, that does not seem to me to be much of a one-nation labour market, or, indeed, education policy” Rt. Hon Alan Milburn (Select Committee on Social Mobility, 2016).

This extract from the report suggests a view that, in England, a higher education is only available in an academic pathway, because the ‘vocational route’ is ranked beneath the academic route. This belies the fact that most vocational routes offer higher levels (level six and above) (Wolf, 2011), and reinforces the assumption that ‘vocational’ must mean lower level. The extract also assumes that higher education guarantees good outcomes, whilst vocational education does not. This perception of a system with bifurcated outcomes has steered policy decisions in English education and is not new, and this perception is not confined to policy makers, but is also a recurring motif in theory and practice (Robinson, 1997).

VE has often been described as an inequitable route (Winch, 2012b), defined by its perceived deficiencies in outcomes and lower standards of skills and knowledge compared to the academic alternative. For example, according to a careers survey in 2014, 22% of young people were told they

were too clever for vocational education by advisers (Edge, 2014) This perception of VE as a poorer alternative to the academic route is an important backdrop to this thesis as the VE learner retaking GCSE English, in effect, occupies both the academic and VE world. Moreover, the VE retake learner is being forced to retake English even though they have progressed beyond key stage 4 and have chosen VE. This may reinforce the perception that GCSE is 'proper education' (Hodgson, 2015) and reinforce the perception that VE is not.

2.4.3 The Purpose of Vocational Education Compared with GCSE

In the early 21st Century, English policy has given the vocational education sector the responsibility to develop skills that are of benefit to employers; develop skills that are of benefit to certain needed sectors; and to contribute to economic productivity (Clarke, 2002). English policy regarding vocational education has been and remains focused on the link between skills and jobs and productivity: a factor common to many industrialised countries (Brown, 2001; Crouch et al., 2001).

Ironically, despite this policy steer, the delineation of vocational education as a poorer alternative can be linked to this core purpose of work and productivity and associations with a specific occupation as an outcome (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Billett, 2014; Rose, 2012). A 2016 Select Committee report on social mobility stated that a qualification had no value 'if an employer does not understand it' (2016, pg. 82). The intended and desired outcomes of vocational education in England have been defined by government as skills, productivity and jobs (Brockmann et al., 2008; Brown, 2001; Crouch et al., 2001, p. 15; Davies & Ryan, 2011; Tickle, 2015; Winch, 2004, 2012b).

For example, in the early twenty-first century, government redefined the FE sector and therefore vocational education as ‘the learning and skills sector’ and gave the sector an economic mission to raise the skills level of young people and adults to achieve productive sustainable employment (Finlay et al., 2007; Steer et al., 2007). This mission is markedly different from the purpose given to schools and secondary education that references spiritual, moral and cultural development. The intended outcomes of the mainstream secondary national curriculum (measured by GCSE) requires a balanced and broad based offer which promotes, amongst other things, the spiritual, moral and cultural development of pupils and society and prepares pupils for the opportunities and experiences of later life (DfE, 2013). This divergence marks out VE as a form of education that is divorced from humanistic concerns (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016; Jarvis, 2004; Shreeve, 2019)

Fisher & Simmons (2012) see links between vocational education and the economy, as opposed to the more lofty aims of higher education and the broader based outcomes of academic education, as a key factor in its downgrading. Billett (2014) criticises the ‘the domination of privileged others views’ (Billett, 2014, p. 2) which leads to the perceived low status of vocational education. This link between vocational education and productivity creates negative perceptions because it narrows the educational purpose of vocational education down to occupational skills (Brockmann et al., 2008; Winch, 2004, 2012b). Silver & Brennan comment on the ‘stigmas and dichotomies’ (Silver & Brennan, 1988, p. 18) in English education history with vocational education viewed as the opposite to the liberal enlightened traditions of higher education. The narrow focus of vocational education is a key criticism and a powerful and longstanding reason for the perception of its lesser value.

In summary, the mission and value of vocational education in England is defined around employer requirements and national economic concerns (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Winch, 2012b); in comparison, the mission and worth of academic education represented by GCSE is defined around learning and

the individual. This distinction has moved vocational education's core mission away from broader aims of education (Brown, 2001; Rose, 2012; Simkins & Lumby, 2002; Winch, 2002) and vocational education's status problem may be its link with skills acquisition for the benefit of the economy, rather than it being seen and valued as an enriching, enabling experience for the individual.

2.4.4 The Purpose of Vocational Education- An Historical Example

This problem, and various attempts to tackle it, are not new. In 1955, the National Institute of Adult Education reported that the vocational education of the day was too narrow and school leavers' progress was hampered because of a 'feeble command of English' (1955, p. 118). In response, in the 1960's, Liberal Studies was introduced; an initiative to develop the vocational curriculum through cultural studies in order to produce rounded individuals, rather than potential workers and to ensure that education was not confined to narrow occupational training (Bailey & Unwin, 2008).

Liberal Studies was a relatively short-lived initiative, parodied for its lack of impact in the fictional novel Wilt (Sharpe, 1976) in which the hapless teacher is faced with vocational learners who have been forced into Liberal Studies classes that are of little interest to them:

“The man who said the pen was mightier than the sword ought to have tried reading *The Mill on the Floss* to Motor Mechanics” (Sharpe, 1976)

The humour in the quotation above betrays an attitude that assumes vocational learners are neither interested in, nor able to understand, the cultural learning represented by English literature. In the novel, these learners are stigmatised because of their vocational training and their lower social standing, and are excluded from academic learning through their own disinterest, and through a

sense that the subject is not really for them. It can therefore be considered that esteem for vocational education in the post-industrialised era has been eroded through a focus on competence based training- ‘ what individuals can do rather than on what they know’ (Fisher & Simmons, 2012, p. 14), but also because of its associations with work and workers that are of lower socio-economic value (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Bates, 1993).

2.4.5 The Purpose of Vocational Education- The Present and The Future

In 2019 the Augar Review (Hubble & Bolton, 2019), commissioned by the Department for Education described how post-compulsory vocational education has been the neglected sibling of academic higher education, especially in funding. The stated policy intent in 2020 was that the status of VE, or the government’s preferred moniker of ‘technical education’, needed to improve, and that this would be done through qualification reform and structural changes (Spours et al., 2019; Steer et al., 2007). With regards to qualification reform, VE has undergone many changes since 2010. The 2011 Wolf Review of Vocational Education (Wolf, 2011) criticised the large number of low level vocational qualifications that were available in schools and colleges and were counted as the equivalent to achieving five GCSEs at Grades A to C. The Review concluded these qualifications were of lower value and, in turn, devalued VE.

In 2016, the Sainsbury Review (Independent Panel on Technical Education, 2016) recommended a simplified and robust technical education system, which would be a viable and valued alternative to academic routes. The system would introduce a common framework of fifteen industry-related curriculum routes and all learners would work towards certain standards in English and mathematics. The UK Government accepted all the recommendations of Sainsbury and published the 2016 Post-16 Skills Plan (Department for Business, Innovation and Skills and Department for Education, 2016)

The ambition of the Sainsbury Review was to rationalise vocational qualifications and provide parity of esteem with A-levels and this resulted in the development of T-levels. These qualifications begin delivery in 2020 and are two year, full time level 3 programmes designed for 16-19 year olds as an alternative to academic A-levels or a work-based learning apprenticeship. They have three elements including technical and occupationally specific skills, a significant industry placement and an emphasis on maths, English and digital skills (Foster & Powell, 2019; Straw et al., 2019).

In summary, there has been a great degree of change and turbulence in the FE sector and VE at large in England since 2000. This has resulted in institutional change, funding change and qualification reform (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Browne, 2005; Grubb, 2005; Hodgson, 2015; Richardson, 2007; Tickle, 2015; Wolf, 2015). A great part of this has come from funding austerity, but also from a policy desire to improve the status of VE, partly through enriching it with skills such as English (Wolf, 2004, 2011). This can be seen in the 1950's and 1960's with Liberal Studies and in 2020 with the new introduction of T-levels including an emphasis on English (Foster & Powell, 2019). The new system that is spearheaded by T-levels retains and reinforces compulsory English (and maths) study, as achievement of the required standard in English is an exit requirement- in other words, learners will have to pass the English element in order to achieve their T-level (Foster & Powell, 2019; Straw et al., 2019). For VE learners who are not yet ready to access a level 3 qualification, there are plans to introduce a T-Level Transition Year at level 2. This incorporates the continuation of the condition of funding, and the requirement for learners to retake GCSE. The evidence base used for VE policy is primarily predicated on economic and employer needs (Shreeve, 2019; Winch, 2012b). This can be seen as part of a continuing trend of the purpose of education moving away from humanistic concerns towards providing skills and knowledge for local and global economies (Jarvis, 2004).

2.5 The Identity of the Vocational Education Learner Retaking GCSE English

The preceding sections have considered some of the context of the VE learner retaking GCSE English. Using the construct of Figured Worlds, it could be argued that these learners are situated in a hybrid world of cultural uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011), occupying a space that is influenced by discourses regarding VE and GCSE English. The dominant, institutional discourses of policy argue that the GCSE and A-Level are the gold standard of academic success and an indication of future success. The GCSE also has been earmarked as part of an education system that is intended to be broad based and enriching. In contrast, VE has been criticised by policymakers and has been perceived as a narrower, lower status alternative (Wolf, 2011). However, these discourses will be just one influence on the learners' Figured Worlds which also encompass the personal, and the learners' ability to improvise and choose.

The outcomes of VE are seldom described in terms of identity formation (Guenther, 2011). Instead, in the FE sector, emphasis is placed on skills and knowledge, and outputs such as qualification achievement and employment outcomes (Hodkinson et al., 2007). In other words, the outcomes of VE are more likely to be described in terms of what a person can do with their new skills and knowledge, as opposed to the influence VE has on personal and social identity. In VE, identity is a potentially neglected focus for pedagogical design and thinking (Billett, 2014; Billett & Somerville, 2004; Guenther, 2011).

Learning is a social practice, that helps to shape identity (Lave & Wenger, 1999a, 1999b). A study by Fuller (2009) into the ambitions of working class girls showed how a student's sense of personal educational identity can influence choices of educational routes. In particular, discourses at school

which were understood by the students as how other people viewed them, impacted on their learner identity and the avenues they felt were open to them. In another study, Fuller & Macfadyen (2012) found that learners' identities were formed around a sense that school was not for them, but at college they had found more success, motivation and achievement. In this study, the participants' educational identity was not strongly influenced by their choice of vocation, with other aspects such as relationships with friends and teachers being more important.

However, in other studies, learner identity was examined and found to be strongly influenced by the type of VE the learner was pursuing. In a study of vocational learner identity in apprenticeships in England and Germany (Brockmann & Laurie, 2016), research showed that English motor vehicle apprentices reinforced a VE identity through an explicit rejection of classroom learning and had developed a VE identity through a negative experience at school. This study also concluded that this VE identity, reinforced by tutors, perpetuated low expectations of the learners, and therefore perpetuated the poor status of VE. However, the study also considered that many of the apprentices had also formed positive identities regarding their vocation through home or familial associations- for example, working on cars with family members. The apprentices had also formed a strong association with being workers rather than learners and therefore regarding any activity related to the classroom or theoretical work as irrelevant.

'The focus on knowledge 'how to' (go about practical tasks), seemed to nurture the belief that what they perceived to be 'theory' was obsolete and not congenial to their work as mechanics.'

(Brockmann & Laurie, 2016, p. 8)

Brockman & Laurie (2016) conceptualised the VE identity as constructed through past experiences of learning, the curriculum and relationships with people. Some apprentices were keen to construct an

identity which offered a sense of purpose and agency that they had not had at school. Therefore, the VE identity was constructed as an oppositional force to school. In addition, an overall bureaucratic curriculum meant that disaffection with classroom or theory learning was reinforced. For other apprentices, the definition of VE and the perceived academic/vocational divide was problematic and constraining, and they argued that they were really academic learners as they perceived that the VE learner identity was not normative and therefore less socially acceptable.

However, a vocation or occupation can be considered to be normative and positive, although the distinction between these terms is important. Billett (2011) describes occupations as institutional discourse practices which are valued in particular, hierarchical ways. The concept of occupation might imply that VE should only be dictated by employers' needs, government policy and economic imperatives. However, the term vocation can be defined more personally and holistically, around an individual's aspirations and interests (Dewey, 2004). From this perspective, VE could operate in a more broad based way, offering education that reflects ambitions and the individual (Klotz et al., 2014). A vocation in this definition is a calling, interlinked with an individual's own personal identity (Guenther, 2010; Lawy & Bloomer, 2003; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

2.5.1 Identity Capital

At this point it is useful to consider the concept of 'identity capital' (Côté, 2005; Guenther, 2011; Schuller et al., 2000). This notion encapsulates attributes that are necessary for people to make decisions affecting their lives. The acquisition of identity capital is when an individual invests in a particular identity, using personal and agentic resources such as confidence and self-esteem (Côté, 2005). The learner identity is something that is brought by the learner when they engage in learning, but it is also formed by the learning experience (Schuller et al., 2000). In this case, VE, and especially

GCSE English in the VE context, could be seen as a significant learning experience, with specific characteristics of hybridisation that might create new forms of learner identity formation and identity capital.

Klotz et al (2014) suggest that free choice can shape the formation of the person's vocational identity. The development of a VE learner identity might also not just be a matter of vocational and competence development; but also the process of forming an identity and becoming a member of a vocational community (Colley et al., 2003; Rauner, 2007). Therefore, although policy views VE as a functional process intended to improve work skills and productivity, because VE is a social practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999a), concerned with experiential learning, it can be part of a reflexive process for individuals and learning (Dyke et al., 2007). This concept of learning is a human experience that not only develops skills and knowledge, but also forms attitudes and values and helps people create their own personal stories (Huda et al., 2017; Jarvis, 2004).

It is possible then, that VE learner identity might be, in part, formed through the construction of Figured Worlds that encompass more than the perceptions of policy. A learner identity might be formed from both social constraints as well as individual action- in other words, structure and agency (James & Biesta, 2007). Occupational training might be perceived as narrow. Indeed, the previous sections of this review seem to indicate that much policy in England regarding VE considers this from a narrow, occupational perspective- with an emphasis on competence and what people can do, rather than what they may become (Guenther, 2010). However, despite political perceptions of VE as a functional process of delivering skills, VE is also part of a learning experience and process that constructs identity. For when an individual learns, they bring and construct an identity as part of the process of learning (Huda et al., 2017; Wojecki, 2007), and in the case of VE, that process

involves aspects of agency, choice and belonging as the individual is inducted into a vocation (Guenther, 2011).

‘Deep transformative experiences that involve new dimensions of identification and negotiability, new forms of membership, multimembership and ownership of meaning... are likely to be more widely significant in terms of the long-term ramifications of learning than extensive coverage of a broad, but abstractly general, curriculum.’ (Wenger, 1999, p. 228)

2.6 Summary of the Literature Review

In conclusion, this chapter has reviewed literature that demonstrates the perception and status of vocational education as a lesser mode of education and that this may affect the identity of vocational learners. In addition, the literature also suggests that the GCSE retake and reform policies have created a system in which the learner experience is diminished by the predominance of a high-stakes assessment regime, and that post-sixteen learners who fail GCSE English might be condemned to repeat this ad nauseum. Ironically, it was probably this concern, exacerbated by my disquiet at the emotional impact on vocational learners, which prompted my initial interest in this research topic. As a practitioner, complicit in the implementation of the policy, I was fearful that learners’ identities were being damaged by their experience.

This thesis sets out to theorise and better understand the experience of the VE learner undertaking GCSE English retake. The review in this chapter has considered that the formation of identity is far more complex than a transaction between the participant and one facet of his or her environment. This chapter has concluded that how learners figure out their worlds is complex and ever-changing, but that the consideration of the individual’s agency in helping to form this construction and its many Figured Worlds is important.

Here lies the crux of this study's contention and interest. The policies that dictate the learning environment for GCSE retake learners operate in a Figured World in which the discourses of policy state that education is transactional and qualifications have economic and cultural value. From this perspective, learners are subject to forces beyond their control. The review has also considered different views of learner identities (Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007), the process of learning (Guenther, 2011; Jarvis, 2004) in forming identity and conceptualisations of learning that are considered legitimate or not (Levinson & Holland, 1996). From one perspective the definition of legitimacy is dictated by the dominant discourses of policy. However, the concept of Figured Worlds can also contain the possibility for the learner to influence what is deemed legitimate or not through the process of self-authoring.

The Figured Worlds of the VE learners retaking GCSE themselves are hybrid, significantly complicated and governed by the personal, as well as the political. In addition, the process of VE learning itself, may offer a more significant, transformative process, than the simple training of skills (Wenger, 1999). From the stance of the theoretical framework adopted by this study, the learner figures out and shapes their worlds, co-opting policy and experience into shifting stories they hold in their own heads (Gee, 2004; Urrieta et al., 2011). It is this uncertain cultural space of the GCSE retake learners' Figured Worlds that this research explores.

3.0 Methodological Framework

3.1 Introduction

The research engaged with thirty-six young vocational learners in the academic year of 2018/2019 between the ages of sixteen and eighteen who were retaking compulsory GCSE English at College A- a GFE college in the South-East of England. This chapter describes the methodological framework and how this framework was designed. In order to delineate the distinction between the design and construction of research (Thomas, 2013, pg. 192) the next chapter (Chapter 4) then sets out the construction- the tools and methods used. This delineation was considered important as the design of the methodology had been an iterative process, significantly influenced by the pilot which is described in some detail towards the end of this chapter.

The research questions were:

- 1. How are post-sixteen GCSE English retake discourses socially constructed by learners?**
- 2. How are these discourses used to enact and depict the socially constructed identities of learners?**
- 3. How do the learners' socially constructed identities impact on their attitude to learning?**

The research objectives were:

- 1. To explore the learning identities of post-sixteen VE students retaking GCSE English through visual methods and interview.**
- 2. To apply the construct of Figured Worlds to the discourses of post-sixteen VE students retaking GCSE English.**
- 3. To theorise the phenomenon of post-sixteen vocational learners retaking GCSE English using the construct of Figured Worlds.**

At its heart this research was a participative visual ethnographic study of young vocational students retaking GCSE English at college. The methodological framework utilised digital images sourced from an internet search engine. Pre-digital ethnographic studies often create the illusion of the 'different' or 'exotic' as the researcher immerses herself into the alien culture (Fielding, 2008, p. 52). The observed is always the outsider. The researcher represents the known and the familiar. It is a well-known device in fiction, when the narrator is always the newcomer, introducing the audience to the unfamiliar dramatic territory through their new eyes. In her work on digital ethnography Pink (2011) explores the concept of digital social worlds and suggests that these are more fluid and interconnected than previous ethnographic or anthropological studies would suggest. Digital worlds, because of their interconnectedness, are not necessarily exotic and unfamiliar, and the researcher is not therefore a detached stranger observer.

The methodology was designed to maximise participation. Therefore, the design encompassed three phases that allowed learners to 'drop out' at each stage, whilst still including their contributions in the results. The results were presented as findings from a DA of the images generated in the participant workshops; an analysis of the 'typical stories' found in these images and the group interviews and, finally, three case studies using material primarily from the individual interviews.

The Discourse Analysis (DA) was framed using the construct of Figured Worlds that represented the forces that influence how people practice within social spaces. This theoretical frame was selected because it considered how culture, status, and social positioning influenced people but also acknowledged that people have the ability to improvise and be creative (Holland et al., 2001; Urrieta, 2007). This was an important consideration in this research as the aim was to examine personal experience and bring the individuality of that experience to the fore.

The theoretical framework focused on how everyday activities create and recreate identities through Figured Worlds. Figured Worlds are where 'particular characters and actors are recognised, significance is assigned to certain acts, and particular outcomes are valued above others' (Holland et al., 2001, p. 53). In other words, the identity of the learner forms and changes through participation in these worlds; and, in response, the worlds form and reform during this participation (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Holland et al., 2001; Urrieta, 2007). If that is the case, this relatively new policy, introduced in 2015, had created a new context, through the combination of VE and GCSE English retake. The learners subject to this policy were the pioneers and settlers of this new world. Their insights into the tensions, contradictions and new meanings and identities were therefore interesting and important to explore further in order to reflect on future practice and policy.

3.2 Ontological and Epistemological Stance

The stance adopted for this research was that the social world is constructed, subjective, connected, contextualised and pluralistic (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Holland et al., 2001). This was a sociocultural perspective on learning which proposes that the nature of learning is profoundly influenced by the processes and systems within which learners learn (Holland et al., 2001; Lave & Wenger, 1999b; Rubin, 2007; Tett, 2016; Wenger, 1999). The identity of the learner forms and changes through participation in these Figured Worlds (Bartlett, 2005, 2007; Holland et al., 2001; Urrieta, 2007).

This study adopts a sociocultural perspective on learning which proposes that learning is formed by the processes and systems within which learners learn. In other words, the identity of the learner

changes and develops through participation in these worlds; and, in response, the worlds form and reform during this participation (Lave & Wenger, 1999a; Rubin, 2007; Wenger, 1999). Therefore, as with any other process or activity, learning is a vehicle for identity construction, (Hatt, 2007; Lave & Wenger, 1999a; Rubin, 2007; Wojecki, 2007) and that construction of self-authoring takes place in cultural spaces through the processes of social interactions and practice (Bartlett, 2005; Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Holland et al., 2001) For the purpose of this study, the influential aspect of identity being closely considered was the hybrid space of the vocational learner retaking GCSE English. The concept of Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 2001) was useful for understanding the way that meaning and identity is constructed in peculiar and particular contexts, such as the specific, hybridised context of the GCSE retake VE learner.

As discussed in Chapter 2, the concept of Figured Worlds emphasises that situated meanings are ultimately subjective, and are therefore constantly fluctuating. In particular, a context that is hybridised may create opportunities to recreate or create new and alternate identities within a backdrop of cultural uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011). However, participants in Figured Worlds have agency- the ability to improvise (Tett, 2016). Therefore, the research questions, in applying the concept of Figured Worlds, interrogated the personal and the specific.

The literature review (Chapter 2) surmised that the research and policy that pertains to VE learners tended to consider socio-economic or socio-historical stances. Learners are viewed as a mass, subject to economic forces, or class structures. The aims of this study were to explicitly bring out the individual subjective experience, in part as a reaction against the tendency to ignore the individual experience in this sphere. As detailed in Chapter 2, the concept of Figured Worlds introduces a smaller, more personal flavour to field analysis. It is about the imagined every-day.

Arguably, the research was related to both time and space because it is about the GCSE retake (time) in the FE environment (space). However, the methodological framework did not include more generalised considerations of family, context, time and space to understand how Figured Worlds were experienced. To include these might have been problematic as interpretation would have been influenced by subjective assumptions about the participants' lives outside college when the focus was only on the impact of the GCSE on them as learners in the FE system. Rather, the methods employed, and the subsequent analysis through DA, were focused on the individual and specific experience of these participants in relation to the GCSE retake.

Therefore the choice of method in this research study sought to generate situated understandings as an outcome (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010). It did this because the research paradigm drove the process of meaning as the production of situated understandings (Lave, 1991) and it is these situated understandings that make possible the acknowledgement of the complex nature of social worlds. The research study adopted a position of negotiated honesty (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002) which is discussed in more detail further on in this chapter in order to transparently acknowledge these limitations. In doing so, these limitations are not mitigated, but they are accepted as part of the uncertainty of all research processes (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010).

3.3 Research Paradigm

The research adopted a constructivist/interpretive paradigm, coloured by critical and postmodern referents. The researcher stance mirrored the constructivist/interpretivist approach that society is a humanistic concept, 'made by men, inhabited by men, and, in turn, making men' (Berger & Luckmann, 1991, p. 211). The research questions that emerged from the literature review might

have implied a critical research stance as they sought to explore a policy of GCSE retake with a discursive analysis of the impact on individuals. Research governed by a critical paradigm often has the aim to emancipate the disempowered (Freire, 1970, p. 49), consequently, participants may be involved in the research process. This was the case in this research as the participants in the initial sessions chose and collated the images that were then used as elicitation material in the ensuing focus groups and interviews.

However, the emergent thinking from the literature review suggested an ontological stance that social worlds are subjective and constructed around individuals rather than solely power relationships in society (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). This was a strong influence in this research as the research aims were interested in the individual, subjective experience; the methods prioritised individuals' voices and the analytical approach accepted pluralistic meaning and subjectivity. The epistemological assumption was that knowledge was co-created by the participants as well as the researcher.

The constructivist/interpretive approach suggests that social worlds are constructed (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000) and considers the participants' views of the topic of research (Tashakkori & Creswell, 2007) as well as recognising the influence of the researcher's background (Creswell, 2003). Constructivist thinking is anti-essentialist (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010) and considers there is 'no unique real world that pre-exists and is independent of human mental activity and human symbolic language' (Bruner, 1990, p. 196). Research governed by constructive/interpretive paradigms often utilises qualitative methods (Creswell, 2003). In these paradigms, success is often measured through notions of trustworthiness and authenticity. Guba and Lincoln (1989) argue that these measures of trustworthiness and authenticity are post-positivist; they are different but highly

relatable to the validity, reliability and objectivity standards of positivism, including considerations such as credibility, dependability, transferability and confirmability.

However, the ontological stance adopted here, influenced by Berger and Luckman (1991), assumed a social world that is not only constructed and subjective, but also is connected, contextualised, pluralistic and fluid. Criticism of the more post-positivist interpretive paradigm is that its methods 'attempted to do good positivist research with less rigorous methods and procedures' (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005, p. 9). Therefore, a postmodern paradigm referent was also considered. A postmodern sensibility posits that research cannot capture a singular truth (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010). If the research adopts a multi-paradigmatic stance (Taylor et al., 2012) that also incorporates a postmodern sensibility, then the quality standards such as dependability, transferability and confirmability are less important as the paradigmatic frame is interested in a multiplicity of voices, shifting contexts and verisimilitude (Lichtman, 2012). From this standpoint, a postmodern paradigm operates using a different set of trustworthiness criteria that prioritises subjectivity, feelings and situated understandings (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005) and using this as a referent resonated with the ontological and epistemological assumptions of this research study.

3.3.1 Strengths and Limitations of Qualitative Research

There were several elements that informed the adoption of a qualitative research methodology. Qualitative methods can be used to illuminate a new phenomenon (Glaser & Strauss, 2009) and can also be used to create new perspectives on existing phenomena, or to develop more detailed information that may be difficult to understand quantitatively (Bazeley, 2013). Accordingly, these methods were appropriate as the phenomenon of mandatory retaking of GCSE English for post-sixteen learners is relatively new, and, in terms of a phenomenological perspective, little

understood. Additionally, as the focus was on the individual detail of experience and identity, qualitative research methods were selected as, in the most simplistic definition, these focus on the qualities of phenomena rather than the numbers of phenomena (Bazeley, 2013).

Qualitative research methods can be used in a wide variety of research paradigms from notions of objective reality to notions of multiple realities (Lichtman, 2012). From this perspective, it could be argued that qualitative research encompasses the dynamic and complicated nature of the social world (Hoepfl, 1997) and is able to capture it in a way that statistical research cannot (Schratz & Walker, 1995). In this particular research study, the potential of qualitative methods to more fully describe the phenomenon under consideration was an important consideration to fulfil the research's aims- to understand how the experience of retaking GCSE impacted on individuals.

It was also considered that qualitative methods, particularly using data derived from participative methods, when presented, would be more meaningful and accessible to the reader, as they present detail of personal insights and experiences (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). The aspects of qualitative research that resonated with the aims of the study included the use of expressive description (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996; Guba & Lincoln, 1989) the 'presence of the voice in the text' (Eisner, 1992, p. 36); an interpretive paradigm (Davis, 2006) and a focus on the unique or idiosyncratic (Eisner, 1984, 2017). As the research aimed to discover how discourses were socially constructed and how they enacted individuals' identities, the focus of the study was individual and personal and encompassed multiple voices (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011; Lichtman, 2012). The aim was not to form generalisations- but instead to accept that experience was idiosyncratic and could be interpreted in multiple ways.

In addition, qualitative research has a method design that can be flexible and dynamic rather than pre-determined (Bazeley, 2013). The emergent nature of qualitative research design was a particular feature of this research study. As the research attempted to observe and interpret meanings in context, it was not appropriate to set research strategies in stone before data collection began. The particular relevance of this feature is highlighted later in this chapter, in the section that discusses the pilot.

Beyond the inherent perceived strengths of qualitative methodology for this thesis there are some commonly discussed limitations or problems. Often these centre on the notion of credibility, attempting to apply scientific standards of verification, transferability and dependability to a more interpretive paradigm (Lichtman, 2012). However, in this research study, the ontological position is that social worlds and identity are pluralistic, unfixed and subjective. Therefore, any insights reported by this study will not seek to be verified in this way.

3.3.2 Negotiated Honesty in Research

Objectivity has a number of definitions including the diminishment of bias; research that views the world and not the researcher; research that is fair and open to all; a method for acquiring data and, finally, research that sees the world for what it is (Eisner, 1992). Many studies that utilise qualitative methods position themselves as 'trustworthy' precisely because their chosen method is an attempt to capture the authentic and complicated nature of the social world (Coffey & Atkinson, 1996) .

Ultimately, the problem of trustworthiness and objectivity in a research field that has subjective experience at its heart is an on-going debate amongst researchers (Lichtman, 2012). Consequently, this research has striven to present reflexive consideration of the research methodology and the method of presentation of findings.

Stronach and MacLure (1997) warn against the inherent danger of the appearance of objectivity when they refer to 'trickster' methodologies such as the scientific style of academic writing that seek the appearance of objectivity and do not allow the reader to fully understand the 'devices' used to achieve the semblance of authenticity (Stronach, 1997, p. 34). They argue that when the researcher and research paradigm is, in their words 'self-effacing', (Stronach, 1997, p. 35) this should be treated with scepticism. For the purposes of this research the stance adopted addresses and acknowledges the roles of the researcher and the chosen research framework, and recognises these roles as part of the context and stories being told

This research did not seek to find a truth, rather, it aimed to try to understand subjective positions whilst recognising that there are multiple standpoints- a 'negotiated honesty' (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010) that not only accepts a shifting, pluralistic ontology, but celebrates diversity, and celebrates the individual and their subjective meaningfulness (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002). In this sense, a research study's honesty is not tested through notions of validity. Honesty is a negotiated position that includes triangulation and reflexivity (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002). For example, if this study claimed to be participative, it needed to show evidence of participation; if it advocated prioritising the voice of the participants, it needed to make that voice clear in the findings, as well as making sure the researcher's voice was transparent; and if it claimed to be interpretive it needed to show evidence of that interpretation or multiple interpretations. Additionally, to be honest, the research presentation needed to acknowledge that all research is selective (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and therefore the epistemological aspects of research frameworks fundamentally affect the ontological outcomes (Eisner 1992).

3.4 The Role of Images in the Research Methodology

Images sourced from an internet search engine were part of the data collected in this research, and were also used as elicitation material in the group and individual interviews. Images are often considered to be powerful in meaning : ‘images convey’ (Stanczak, 2007, p. 1). For example, images might elicit an emotional or sub-conscious response that words and language would not:

‘uncovering the unrecognised, unacknowledged or unsayable stories that they hold’ (Leitch, 2008, p. 37). This assertion, in effect a claim that a picture is worth a thousand words, is one of the reasons that image-based research has gained ground in recent years (Alexander, 2001) and is also a key reason for the choice of using images in this research. Not only are images everywhere, they are perceived to have powerful meaning as they are enmeshed in our personal identities and how we understand our Figured Worlds, or positioning in time and space (Pink, 2013).

Images or photographs are modern society’s preferred form of engagement and therefore carry authority (Sontag, 1977, 1990). Furthermore, as a dominant form of literacy, and a key means of figuring out the world, it could be argued that images themselves have a significant impact on how people construct and experience their social reality, their Figured World and the discourses or stories they hold in their head. Barthes (1981) recognised the difference between the obvious meaning or content of a photograph (*the studium*) and that which is solely emotional and personal, that which ‘pierces the viewer’ (*the punctum*). Barthes argues for a more subjective viewing of imagery stating that each individual’s emotional response to a photograph will differ depending on the context, their experience, and their relationship with the object in the image. This aspect of images was important for this research as the research paradigm assumed a stance that accepted the world as a shifting, pluralistic entity that was open to multiple interpretations.

3.4.1 Participative Visual Methodology

The research methodology adopted participative visual methods in part because of the possibilities for meaning that the analysis of images offered, but also because these methodologies were often used in research with young people, and in research with marginalised communities as an easier way of engaging with participants. The following sections briefly review these aspects of the methodology.

Images are perceived to have powerful meaning as they are enmeshed in our personal identities and how we understand our Figured Worlds, or positioning in time and space (Pink, 2013). Therefore, they do not hold innate meaning, but are interpreted differently, as part of different Figured Worlds. Although much image based research focuses on the image itself as offering an intrinsic advantage to the researcher as a means to meaning this characteristic should not be conflated with images offering a more unproblematic access to meaning as compared to words (MacDougall, 1997, p. 276).

This thesis adopts an understanding of the image as a culturally constructed artefact with shifting contextualised meanings (Harper, 1998). Harper (1998) considers this form of visual sociology as cultural critique and suggests that research should understand power relationships in the small areas of study, as well as understanding the research itself in the context of society itself. For the purposes of this thesis, this understanding can be directly linked here to the key concept of Figured Worlds (Holland et al., 2001).

Harper (1994, 1998) recommends an approach that can consider images as metaphor instead of hard data and creates texts which are co-operative and could be fragmentary. He suggests that

visual ethnography might be more successful if considered as a 'created tale' which does not try to attain scientific standards, but emphasises multiplicity of meaning, context and experience. Within a multi-disciplinary approach, the notion of visual discourses (Harper, 1994) can be employed as one way of studying many aspects of social life and Figured Worlds (Gee, 2004), and it is this approach that is adopted.

"People build identities and activities not just through language, but by using language together with other 'stuff' that isn't language" (Gee, 2004, p. 45)

A review of participative visual research demonstrates that a key strength of this approach is that it allows easy engagement with participants (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Burke, 2009a; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b; Stanczak, 2007; Thomson, 2009). In particular participative image-based research has often been cited as an appropriate methodology to engage young and marginalised participants (Ali-Khan & Siry, 2014; Clark-Ibáñez, 2009b; Leonard & McKnight, 2015; Prosser & Loxley, 2007) including participants who might be excluded from other forms of research and data collection because of poor literacy practice (Binder & Kotsopoulos, 2011; Kaplan, 2008). However, many studies tended to include participants with a degree of familiarity with the method being used (Clark-Ibáñez, 2009a) or the studies included a significant input from the researcher to familiarise participants with the method or medium (Croghan et al., 2008; Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998).

In summary, participative visual methods offered both strengths and pitfalls to this research. The following section describes the pilot in order to highlight some of these pitfalls, and the insights that ultimately produced a more effective research design.

3.5 The Pilot and how it Influenced the Research Design

The adoption of negotiated honesty requires explicitly describing the way the research evolved and was designed including difficulties encountered (Cook, 2009; Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002).

Therefore, this section describes the process of the pilot and the emergent thinking that influenced the research design and the findings; specifically it explains the journey towards refining the research methods used for data collection.

Initially, underpinning the pilot research design, there was a clear preconception, formed from reading existing literature that creative and participative image-based research would allow insight into meaning that was ineffable and directly generated by the participants (Boucher Jr, 2017; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b; Schratz & Steiner-Löffler, 1998; Thomson, 2009), Secondly, there was an assumption that the young people being asked to participate would be less forthcoming if asked to participate in the spoken or written word- after all, they were a group of participants defined by their perceived poorer skills in language and writing. However, the initial pilot, which asked young people to take photographs and then talk about them, failed to generate outcomes. The young people did not participate, did not want to participate and, despite the evidence of previous research studies in the creative visual field, the methods initially utilised in the pilot did not work. Therefore, flexibilities in the research design were considered to find a way through the impasse (Bazeley, 2013, p. 33).

The pilot study asked participants to make photographic images relating to their feelings about retaking GCSE English. However, the difficulties encountered during fieldwork belied the apparent advantages of visual research that had been the motivation behind the design in the first place. The pilot project was widely advertised through the student intranet and via tutorial sessions. However, participants were reluctant to volunteer. Of the four participants that eventually came forward, only

one produced any images. The pilot then focused on facilitated group sessions in the belief that individuals' confidence to participate might improve in a group and the interaction might be of heuristic value. Again, this was not successful. This experience ran contrary to other studies that championed creative visual research as a clear method to engage the disengaged (Bayre et al., 2016; Burke, 2009b; Kaplan, 2008).

3.5.1 Lessons Learned From the Pilot- Flexibility

At the end of the pilot, I found myself in 'swampy lowlands' (Schon, 1983). I had followed a research methodology deployed by many others but instead of it succeeding, the very method chosen- participatory photography- seemed to be a barrier to data collection. Bazeley (2013) discusses research designs that differ- from the tightly planned to those that take a broader approach. The problem with the former is that rigid specifications may miss new data or understandings and with the latter, that it may be ineffective. She advocates 'planned flexibility' (Bazeley, 2013, p. 33) as a middle-road approach. However, even this concession, belies the fact that data collection is often messy and frustrating (Marshall & Gretchen, 2006)

As a researcher, it is tempting to fall into the trap of epistemological and ontological certainty when presenting research. Many of the reviewed studies that utilised participative or creative visual methods confidently claimed that their choice of method was able to unlock meaning that other methodological approaches could not (Chalfen, 1987; Chalfen, 1998; Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b; Harper, 2002; Mitchell & Weber, 1998; Van Auken et al., 2010). Published research studies tend to describe successful research and successful research has an outcome and a conclusion (Law, 2004). There are few and far examples of published studies that fail to collect meaningful data (Cook, 2009; Cousin, 2010; van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010). Therefore failure of method was largely absent from the

literature reviewed as part of this study regarding visual creative media. Instead, the research that used this methodology tended to champion the method (Thomas, 1998). However, by rejecting failure, the researcher may miss a trick, and a valuable part of the research process (Cook, 2009). Law (2004) suggests that if the world is not coherent, then methods that seek to describe it coherently will be unsuccessful. If, as it is here, the ontological position is not positivist but is phenomenological with an acceptance of multi-dialectical approaches and interpretations, then the messiness of failure should be part of the picture.

3.5.2 Lessons Learned from the Pilot- Reflexivity

Inherent in some of the studies reviewed was a sense that the choice of method itself, because it was collaborative and because it was image-based, was therefore a better, more meaningful method than others. Different paradigms and methodologies help produce the reality they describe (Law, 2004). One can infer that research, in order to be successful and credible, must be planned and ordered. However, if this is so, when research does not go according to the proposal, 'not following a path that others had apparently successfully negotiated led to feelings of being deviant' (Cook, 2009, p. 3)

The initial research method choice was partially based on the 'trustworthiness' presented by other visual creative research (Law, 2004). However, the methodology that had been carefully chosen to engage the disengaged did not work. Indeed, there was evidence to suggest that the very method or medium itself was a root cause of disengagement with the task. Creative visual research using participative photography resulted in limited responses as the task created embarrassment, puzzlement and disengagement for the participants. The participants did not have expertise or agency when they were asked to take photographs. In contrast, they did appear to have a sense of

control and agency when they interacted with images from an internet search engine, which then created conditions in which they spoke with apparent ease about the images they had selected.

3.5.3 Lessons Learned from the Pilot- Participant Agency

This observation and subsequent reflection suggest a further insight about the topic of the study itself; that of the experience of retaking GCSE English. Furthermore it offers insight into the concept of agency which had arisen from the literature review. Hall argues that 'we must create opportunities for students to enact culturally specific forms of agency' (Hall, 2011, p. 3). Patently, asking these students to take photographs was not a form of agency for them and not a literacy they could easily adopt. Their reaction- puzzlement, amusement, cynicism, boredom- resembled their reported reactions to GCSE English.

In conclusion, the challenges uncovered by the pilot study were important influences in finalising the methodological approach. Crucially, the pilot demonstrated that participants did not engage in a mode of literacy or making meaning that they found antithetical. This insight enabled me to flex the research design (Bazeley, 2013) and develop participative visual methods that proved to be more effective. However, this turn of events was also reflexively considered as field work commenced and findings were analysed. It became apparent that the official GCSE English discourse might also be a mode of literacy that was hostile to the retake students. Whether this was due to lack of knowledge or capability, lack of familiarity with the texts and context, or due to more fundamental reasons wrapped up in their identities and construction of Figured Worlds was a theme of the analysis.

Ultimately though, the pilot suggested that, in order to engage in any practice, the individual needed to feel a sense of ownership and control. This emerging idea suggested that people need agency and control to engage meaningfully.

‘If the body feeds on food, the soul feeds on agency and meaningfulness’ (Gee, 2007, p. 10).

3.5.4 Conclusions from the Pilot- The Use Of Digitally Sourced Images

Recent data indicate that the vast majority of young people use search engines to access information often by random, open ended ‘fortuitous’ searching (Ito et al., 2010). This fortuitous searching represents a different way of reading and researching than that which is often conventionally taught and that relies on the intuition of the search engine and the expertise of the person (Eagleton & Dobler, 2012). In this research, it was determined that fortuitous searching might give participants a feeling of control as searching randomly is a self-taught activity that might encourage greater autonomy and agency (Ito et al., 2010) particularly as engaging with a search engine can be playful, experimental with a large element of trial and error, back buttons and different scenarios (Ito et al., 2010).

The interaction of the individual with digital social worlds is personal, emotional and an important mode of making meaning (Bartlett & Miller, 2011; Bayre et al., 2016; Caliandro, 2014; Ito et al., 2010; Knobel, 2008; Murthy, 2008; Pegrum, 2011; Pink 2016). In terms of this study, the use of images sourced from an internet search engine was also consistent with the ontological and epistemological stance, and the research paradigm. Using search engines capitalised on the participants’ digital abilities and gave them agency and control (Bawden, 2008; Bayre et al., 2016). Reusing and reinterpreting the images during the three phases of workshops, group interviews and interviews gave multiple opportunities to explore the situated meanings of the images, allowing for a plurality of interpretations.

4.0 Methods: the research in practice

This chapter describes the methods that were used in data collection and analysis. It is presented separately from the previous chapter which described the underlying methodological framework. This chapter describes the nuts and bolts of the methods used (Thomas, 2013, pg.192) and the process of Discourse Analysis (DA) (Gee, 2004) which generated the broad themes for discussion.

4.1 Data Collection

The data collection had three distinct phases: each phase involved a reduced number of participants, in part so that the research design was able to accommodate drop-out rates, but also to provide a multi-layered analysis of the data collected. In essence, Phase 1 incorporated thirty-six participants, of these, sixteen participants volunteered to take part in Phase 2, the group interviews. Then, three students volunteered to continue on to the individual interviews. The research design therefore was intended to capture data from a large number of participants, funnel down the numbers for more detailed interviews, culminating in three individual interviews to help form case studies.

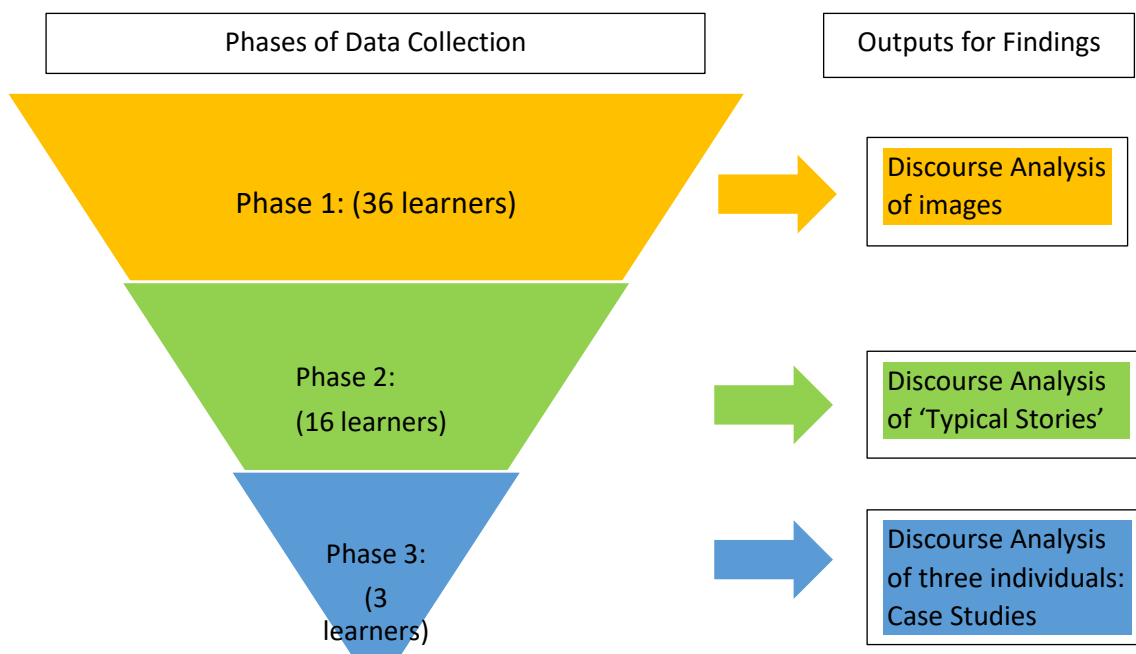


Figure 4.1 The Three Phases of Data Collection and Analysis

Each phase of data collection was distinct, and produced different types of data for analysis as follows.

	PHASE	PARTICIPANTS	METHOD	DATA COLLECTED
September 2018- November 2018	PHASE 1 Participant Workshops	36 sixteen-eighteen year olds studying VE at levels 1 and 2 from mixed curriculum areas: Hair & Beauty Construction Trades Motor Vehicle Childcare IT Health & Social Care	3 workshops with 15, 10 and 11 participants respectively.	Selected images chosen by the participants using an internet search engine Participant comment (observed, verbal and written)
November 2018- December 2018	Elicitation Group Interviews	16 sixteen-eighteen year olds studying VE at levels 1 and 2 from mixed curriculum areas: Hair & Beauty Construction Trades Motor Vehicle Childcare IT	4 elicitation semi-structured group interviews using images chosen in Phase 1 with 5, 4, 4 and 3 participants respectively.	Selected images (chosen from the images sourced in Phase 1) Transcripts
January 2019- March 2019	Elicitation Individual Interviews	3 sixteen-eighteen year olds from IT Construction Trade Motor Vehicle	3 1-1 elicitation semi-structured interviews using images chosen in Phase 1.	Selected images (chosen from the images sourced in Phase 1) Transcripts

Table 4.1 The Three Phases of Data Collection

Initially, a number of GCSE English retake students from a random selection of classes, including students with a very poor record of attending GCSE English, were invited to one workshop session of around 45 minutes. The Chair of the College gave consent for the research (Appendix 2 p. 241), and the participants consented to participate using a consent form that clearly set out the purpose and

the stages of the research (Appendix 3 p. 244). The GCSE retake learners were timetabled by College A into GCSE classes to maximise group sizes and efficiency. Therefore, a GCSE class could incorporate learners from a range and mix of vocational areas.

The participants were retaking GCSE English and were studying their vocational programmes at either levels one or two. All the participants had previously been awarded either a grade 3 (equivalent old grade D/E) at previous attempts at GCSE English. The participants were volunteers who indicated they were willing to express an opinion. Three of these sessions ran with participants of between ten and sixteen each (thirty-six participants in total). The participants were from a range of different vocational courses and the workshops were facilitated.

The participants were asked to find internet images to illustrate their thoughts and feelings about studying English while at College and were then asked to participate in a small group discussion and then an individual interview. At every stage they could decide not to continue in the study (Appendix 3, p.244). In the first phase, there were three workshops, each introduced with a brief presentation. This introduced the aims, asked participants to find images to illustrate their thoughts and feelings about being in English lessons at College improving their English and taking tests and examinations in English and then asked the workshop participants to establish their ground rules for the session (Appendix 22, p. 311). In all three workshops, participants chose to work together in small groups of two or three. Using an internet search engine, numerous possible images were available to them and over sixty images were sourced by the participants and briefly discussed within the groups. Comments were captured by the participants using post-it notes and annotations (Appendices 4-10, p. 248-260).

In the workshop sessions, volunteers were asked whether they would like to attend group interviews to further discuss the images that had been collated by the workshops. Sixteen participants volunteered. Four group interviews were implemented with up to five participants each. In these groups, participants were asked to review all the images that had been generated in all the workshops and to choose the ones they preferred, and that illustrated their experience of GCSE English. The students were asked to participate in an audio-recorded informal discussion about the images. These interviews were then transcribed (Appendices 11-14, p. 261-280).

The images that were collated were then used as prompts in the interviews for the participants who chose to participate in Phase 2. In each group interview, all of the images sourced from Phase 1 were laid out on a table, and participants were invited to pick two or three images each that they thought said the most about studying English: these to support discussion in the interview session. From their consent form (Appendix 3, p. 244) the participants were aware that the likely questions would be:

- Tell me about this picture.
- What is in the picture? – e.g. a person, a building, a landscape etc.
- What does this photo represent to you?
- How do you think the student was feeling when they chose this picture?
- Is there anything else you want to add? It doesn't have to be about the photo
- Tell me about yourself (family)
- Tell me about learning English at school and at college
- Tell me about these images- why did you choose them?

Finally, three students (Henry, Simon and Martha) volunteered to participate in a semi-structured one-to-one audio-recorded interview to discuss the images and their individual experiences in more depth. These interviews were also transcribed (Appendices 15-17, p. 281-298). In these individual interviews, the three participants spoke further about the images they had chosen in Phase 2. All learners were anonymised and given pseudonyms in the presentation of the data and at all phases of the data collection to protect confidentiality. The images that were used in the analysis of findings were therefore initially chosen from the internet by the workshop participants. Further analysis was then carried out on the images chosen by the participants for more detailed discussion in Phases 2 and 3.

PHASE 1: PARTICIPANT WORKSHOPS

WORKSHOP A	WORKSHOP B	WORKSHOP C
15 PARTICIPANTS Level 2 Multi-Trade (2) Level 2 Hairdressing (2) Level 2 Travel & Tourism (2) Level 1 Business (3) Level 2 Bricklaying (1) Level 2 Motor Vehicle (3) Level 2 Paint and Decorating (2)	10 PARTICIPANTS, Level 1 IT (1) Level 2 IT (1) Level 1 Health & Social Care (3) Level 2 Child Care (5)	11 PARTICIPANTS Level 1 Motor Vehicle (3) Level 1 Electrical Installation (3) Level 2 Plumbing (2) Level 1 Carpentry (2) Level 2 Carpentry (1)

Table 4.2 List of Participants in Phase 1 Workshops

PHASES 2 AND 3: GROUP INTERVIEWS AND INDIVIDUAL INTERVIEWS

Participants in the Group Interviews	Participants in the Individual Interviews
Session 1	Martha: Motor Vehicle Level 1

Martha: Motor Vehicle Level 1 Fred: Motor Vehicle Level 2 Claire: Hairdressing Level 2 Peter: Bricklaying Level 2 David: Painting and Decorating Level 2 Session 2 Eric: Plumbing Level 2 Simon: IT Level 2 Andrew: Carpentry Level 1 Trevor: Plumbing Level 2 Session 3 Isabelle: Health & Social Care Level 1 Daljit: Carpentry Level 2 Asha: Childcare Level 2 Session 4 Henry- Multi-Trade Level 2 Joseph- Electrical Installation Level 1 Betsy- Business Level 1 Reena- Child Care Level 2	Simon: IT Level 2 Henry: Multi-Trade Level 2
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Table 4.3 List of Participants in the Group and Individual Interviews

At every stage, on-going Discourse Analysis on the chosen images and the transcripts was conducted in order to contribute to the thinking about how identities were being enacted and articulated (Gee, 2004). This approach aligned with the ontological assumption that Figured Worlds were pluralistic and socially constructed. As the research data were analysed, considerations were given to emerging themes from both the participants' and researcher's analyses of the images. Consideration was also given to intertextuality, social languages used (Gee, 2004; Harper, 2002).

4.1.1 Maximising Participation in the Research

A key consideration of the research design was capturing the voice of students affected by the GCSE retake English policy. Keeping in mind the poor attendance record of many of these students for this subject, and their resulting disengagement from the study of English, encouraging participation in the research was a key challenge. The pilot had demonstrated that the research ran the risk of a high rate of drop out, and a high risk of only retaining the more engaged students. Accordingly, if this was not guarded against, the research outcome might only focus on participants who were more willing, who might be the participants who tended to be more engaged in lessons anyway, thereby excluding the voices of the most disengaged from GCSE English learning. Therefore, the research was designed to be inclusive and engaging through the creation of phases which included the voices of the most disengaged; the use of digital images sourced from a search engine, the use of visual participative methods and the epistemological stance which prioritised the participants' voices through a consideration of DA.

The research design built in the potential for drop-out, whilst retaining an inclusive focus on all participants. The methods therefore managed the risk of high participant drop-out rates by deliberately allowing the reduction of the numbers of participants at each stage, whilst still ensuring inclusivity as the images initially chosen by all the participants in the initial workshops, including those who were most disengaged, were included at each stage.

The research was designed to capitalise on the potential participants' ease and familiarity with internet search engines; to ensure the inclusion of even the most disaffected participants. Reflexive consideration of the pilot had revealed that potential participants were willing to engage with, discuss and work with digital images sourced from an internet search engine, as a form of meaning

that they were comfortable with, had expertise in, and control over (Bayre et al., 2016; Carrington & Robinson, 2009; Ito et al., 2010). The choice of visual based methods in elicitation focus groups and interviews was also designed to maximise both participation, and also contributions from participants, as the review of visual based methods evidenced that participants were more likely to engage in these activities (Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Buckingham, 2009; Burke, 2009b; Harper, 2002) as were more willing to discuss images second-hand. For example, they were happy to speculate on the meaning of images sourced by another, but less willing to describe their own emotions in the first instance. This is a key feature and advantage of photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b; Leonard & McKnight, 2015; Van Auken et al., 2010).

In the first phase of data collection and analysis, the participants were asked to choose images from an internet search engine to illustrate their feelings and thoughts about learning English. The outcomes of these workshops are included in Appendices 4-10 (p. 248-260). The participants were encouraged to interact with each other in small groups to choose images from an internet search engine and then discuss and annotate them. This interplay between images and discussion in exploring phenomenon is often found in visual techniques such as photo-elicitation (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b). Using an internet search engine, numerous possible images were available to them and over sixty images were sourced by the participants and briefly discussed within the groups.

As an important principle that underpinned this research was participant agency, the initial workshops gave all participants the chance to select and discuss images from the relatively unlimited resource of the internet. A large number of images were selected by the participants in the workshops. These images served as the basis for discussion in the workshops, and were intended to serve as the basis for discussion in the next two phases, but were also considered important cultural artefacts (Bartlett, 2005; Holland et al., 2001) in their own right.

The sourced images were used as elicitation materials for four group interviews with a smaller number of participants in each who had already participated in the first phase and were willing to participate further. The participants were encouraged to interact with each other to choose images from the selection already made in the first phase and then discuss them. Some participants chose images they had already chosen and were familiar with; some chose images that had been initially selected by others.

The use of images to elicit discussion made participants more comfortable in expressing a view during an interview scenario (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004b). An image gives a gentler prompt for discussion than a direct question might (Croghan et al., 2008). The research design enabled the use of images as elicitation devices to help the conversation between participants flow without researcher intervention. The use of images chosen by other participants also allowed participant to discuss motivations, insights and emotions at second hand, rather than directly exposing their own feelings and insecurities.

For example, participants commented on why they thought other people had selected the images, using cognitive I-statements (Gee, 2004) that asserted what other people in the same situation might feel *'I think the person chose that picture because he was thinking he had no choice'* (Martha, Motor Vehicle student in Group Interview 1). There were fewer examples of affective 'I-statements' (Gee, 2004) when participants ascribed feelings to themselves. The second person standpoint allowed the speaker to state describe a feeling that they may have had, but avoid the self-revelation that might have made participants uncomfortable or portrayed them as vulnerable. Instead 'you'

implied that the feelings discussed were universal- shared by others. In other words, it is not 'I' that is depressed, agitated or scared, it could be 'you': it could be a reaction shared by all of us.

The advantages to group interviews at this stage were that they enabled discussions and ideas to develop (Cohen et al., 2000) as the participants had the opportunity to listen to others' ideas, challenge and add, and could gain insight that might be further explored in the individual interviews in the third phase of data collection (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992). The group interviews utilised a less structured format and strived to minimise researcher involvement in order to encourage more free-flowing debate. This approach was more conducive to the exploratory nature of the research, and allowed participants to follow trains of thought that interested them. The group interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the transcriptions were presented in a format that included the images that were the subject of discussion in order to clearly demonstrate the relationships between the images and the transcribed discussion (Appendices 11-14, p.261-280).

The three participants in the individual interviews were self-selected. They had all participated in the first two phases and volunteered to participate in the individual interviews on request during the second phase. Henry, a Construction Multi-Trade student had been an enthusiastic contributor throughout the first two phases and was keen to contribute further. Martha, a Motor Vehicle student had been more reticent, but expressed a wish to put forward her opinion in an individual session. Simon, an Information Technology student also expressed a desire to make clear his opinion. Both Henry and Martha were eighteen years old and had retaken the GCSE English once before, so were studying it for the third time. Simon was seventeen years old, was retaking the qualification for the first time and therefore studying GCSE English for the second time.

The interviews used the selected images as stimuli for discussion. The researcher did not take a directive position, and discussion was dictated by the interests of the participant and the images they had chosen. This is in contrast to a traditional semi-structured interview in which the interviewer works through a set of topics (Galletta, 2013). Instead, the interview was semi-structured, but the images selected by the student provided the structure and the context for the discussion. In some photo-elicitation interviews, in which the images have been made or selected by the researcher, insight is gained as the interviewer realises these images can be read in an entirely different manner to her original intention (Harper, 1998, 2002). In this study however, the images that had been selected at interview were first selected, or shortlisted, by themselves and other participants. This, in itself, allowed for multi-layered interpretations through multiple interpretations, as well as inclusivity as the original selection of images was conducted by the maximum number of participants.

4.2 Ethics

There are two different considerations of ethics in research: procedural ethics and 'ethics in practice' (Guillemin & Gillam, 2004). Processes were in place to ensure ethical considerations such as clear consent forms and adherence to University of Reading guidelines (Appendices 1-3 p. 235-244). Yet, pragmatic, procedural considerations cannot predict nor safeguard against every ethical dilemma. However, it has already been established that reflexivity and negotiated honesty were considered essential facets of this research approach with regards to researcher positionality and research method. In addition, reflexivity was an important ethical notion for ethics in practice as it drove reflection and sensitivity throughout the research process.

4.2.1 Ethics- Selection of Participants

The act of research itself did call for a selection of participants and a key sensitivity was that the participants were chosen because they had 'failed' and were therefore placed in retake GCSE English classes. As such, the group of participants were homogenous as the participants shared the same characteristic. However, beyond this, there is no suggestion that the participants constituted a sample, somehow being representative of a whole (Thomas, 2013, pg. 137). The selection decision was based on the research aims and the population that was the subject of interest (Alexander, 2001). Within this no further deliberate sampling decisions were made, and the resulting participants came from a mix of backgrounds and curriculum areas. They were participants who had volunteered to take part.

However, the act of researching from one homogenous population that was defined by failure required careful consideration. Defining a population by failure might be construed as marginalisation or stigmatisation. This research study had adopted visual and elicitation methods as a strategy to unlock voices and meaning. Many studies that adopted these methods considered them effective in engaging with marginalised or voiceless participants (Kaplan, 2008) (Burke, 2009b). However, the stance taken in the research did not set out to define the participants as voiceless. Rather, it assumed that their voices were a crucial factor in their Figured Worlds. On a practical level, selection occurred within the GCSE classes that were already in train. Therefore, participants were not further defined by failure through the research sampling. Instead, the participants were volunteers who felt they had something to say. Accordingly, the participant consent form stated clearly that this was an opportunity for the participants to have their say.

In addition, the majority of the participants were familiar to each other from their GCSE classes. Although they came from a range of vocational areas, College A's timetable maximised group size by grouping learners together into GCSE classes. In some research design, ensuring group participants are strangers is felt to be important to secure the validity of the findings (Thomas, 2013). In this research paradigm, the notion of validity was less important than the concept of negotiated honesty (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002). The fact that the workshop participants and focus groups were familiar with each other enhanced the probability of more natural conversation (Epstein et al., 2006). However, the fact that conversation was more free-flowing was not considered to be a type of phenomenological validity. Instead, the sampling and methods allowed participants to be with each other and feel more comfortable and this facet of the research was transparently acknowledged.

4.2.2 Ethics- Insider Research

The FE college (College A) that was the backdrop to the research was my workplace. The specific context of College A was an important motivation for the research in the first place as qualification outcomes for GCSE English retake at the college, while no worse than national averages, remained very low. However, whilst reflexively acknowledging that the context of the research was an important personal motivator for the research as part of the stance of negotiated honesty (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002), the interpretivist/constructivist paradigm did not seek to use the college as a typical example, or a replicable example. The study assumed that social worlds were constructed by individuals, and therefore accepted that there was no one reality to be discovered.

Even though the research design had built in safeguards considering procedural ethics, reflexive consideration was also employed throughout the study, to ensure I was sensitive to the limitations

of my insider position. For example, I was still keenly aware that inequality of power between myself as the researcher and the college Principal, and the participants, might be a limitation of this research. One mitigating factor for this might be for the research to transparently acknowledge these positions (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010). However, Cousin (2010) considers this type of stance to be 'positional piety' and she critiques this position as illusory when trustworthiness is either demonstrated through a confession of 'difference and relative privilege' (Cousin, 2010, p. 9). Whilst accepting the existence of this risk, in conducting this research I took the position that, inevitably, as the researcher, I would always operate from a position of power (van Niekerk & Savin-Baden, 2010). Whilst accepting that the choice of research paradigm will always affect and shape the outcomes reached (Eisner, 1992), this research acknowledged that the outcomes will be produced through a process of negotiated honesty (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002). Accordingly, this research acknowledged researcher subjectivity through reflexive consideration: 'the self is not some kind of virus that contaminates the research' (Cousin, 2010, p. 10). In this context, reflexivity is a process of self-reference (Cousin, 2010) or a way of deconstructing the positioning of the author in relation to the research and its context.

I embarked on this research as an insider- both from my job role as CEO of the college that was the backdrop of the study, and also from my professional background as an English teacher. This insider knowledge defined the choice of research topic in the first instance, influenced by my experience, values and beliefs (Bathmaker & Avis, 2005; Unluer, 2012). There are some general identified inherent strengths in insider-research including having a greater understanding of the context, knowledge of how to approach people and established intimacy (Kanuha, 2000). However, although I was clearly an insider, the latter characteristic did not necessarily always pertain to this research situation. College A is a large, multi-sited organisation and although I was CEO, I had no normal day to day interaction with the participants, and no established knowledge of, intimacy. with, or

relationship with the participants. My insider knowledge was much more about the policy context and my knowledge of the external symptoms of the impact of GCSE English retake (for example the general poor student attendance at the college). My subjective position as an insider wholly stemmed from being part of the policy and education system. However, although I was, arguably, an outsider to the group of participants; because of my institutional insider status, and because I was CEO, I had hierarchical power in College A.

Therefore, during this research process, I was faced with a number of ethical considerations including role duality, coercion and confidentiality. As an insider, who was the researcher and also the CEO of the college, I had a dual role (Unluer, 2012) and, throughout the fieldwork, I was alive to the risk that I may not have received important information, especially if the participants were critical of an aspect of College A's service. Another risk was that I gained access to sensitive information (Breen, 2007). From the outset I was keenly aware and respected the ethical issues related to the anonymity of the organization and individual participants. Confidentiality was preserved at all times through coding of the information and participants were informed of the parameters of the research. The consent form made confidentiality clear (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 61). At all times the participants were referred to in code. In addition, the location of the college was hidden to further uphold the notion of 'nontraceability' (Cohen et al., 2000, p. 63).

Issues regarding coercion and access to privileged information were considered at every stage of the research, particularly in light of my institutional insider status. For example, when fieldwork began, I was mindful that the participants might feel compelled to participate (Hammersley, 1993). Issues of compulsion were managed through ensuring the participants were volunteers from a wide field and all participants were informed that they could withdraw at any point. Indeed, the research design was such that anticipated participant dropout rates could be contained.

The research design set clear boundaries that helped establish a 'safe container' (Leitch, 2008, p. 53) for the field work. These included clear explanation that this research was not part of my paid employment. At work I am known by my maiden name, so I chose to use my married name on all research documentation. This was not to hide my identity, as the documentation also made clear what my institutional role was, but it was intended to emphasise that my researcher role was different from my professional role. I also ensured field work was conducted in locations that the participants were familiar with (for example, their workshops or classrooms). In addition, although the participants' English teachers were not directly involved in the research, I recognised the impact my research role might have on them and the concerns that might be raised by the teachers as I was asking their students to articulate their feelings about their lessons. I met with all related teachers and ensured they were fully briefed about the context and purpose of the research and reassured about confidentiality.

4.2.3 Ethics- Participative Visual Research

The data collection tasks were also designed to help participants feel comfortable in expressing opinion. For example, there was evidence from the review of other participative visual research that using images to elicit opinion was effective (Croghan et al., 2008; Pyle, 2013). In addition, participants who were reluctant to be asked about their own feelings, might be prepared to speculate on the meaning of images that were sourced by other people (Harper, 2002; Leonard & McKnight, 2015).

Another facet of ethical consideration with regards to image is the legal obligation of copyright (Clark-Ibáñez, 2004a; Wiles et al., 2008). In sourcing images, all participants were advised and

supervised to ensure that images found by the search engine used settings that meant all images were filtered to make sure they were free to share, modify and use. In practice, this meant that many participants sourced images from websites that were free-to-use websites for sharing royalty free images such as Pixabay and PXhere. These images were free to use for any purpose, without asking for permission, giving a link to the source and attribution was not required. Even so, the images cited in the main body of the thesis are referenced in the spirit of transparency.

4.3 Discourse Analysis (DA)

Having ensured data collection was governed by appropriate ethical consideration, the process of data analysis also required consideration. A discourse is a particular, recognisable way of saying, doing or being (Coulthard, 2014; Paltridge, 2012). DA is an approach to analysis, a method; a viewpoint on social life and an approach to analysing and understanding language (Crotty, 1998; McMullen, 2011; Willig, 2003) and has evolved from multiple disciplines such as sociology and psychology. (McMullen, 2011). Therefore, variations of DA can represent different epistemological assumptions such as considering linguistics to conceptualising how discourse can be understood in relation to social structures (McMullen, 2011). In this research, in line with the epistemological and ontological position, the use of DA adopts an epistemological approach outlined by McMullen (2011). This focuses on three aspects of discourse analysis: discourse as a type of social action, using devices such as metaphor to understand how the discourse performs understanding; secondly, how the situation affects discourse (in terms of sequence of speech, and institutional or social context). The third aspect is discourse as both a construct and a constructor of meaning.

The choice of DA was fitting for the researcher's epistemological and ontological stance that the social world is constructed, subjective, connected, contextualised and pluralistic (Berger &

Luckmann, 1991; Holland et al., 2001). It was chosen because it highlights the subjective and changing nature of individual experiences and discourses. As discussed in the section on research paradigm (section 3.3, p.66), there was also a critical research aspect that coloured the methodological framework because the research questions sought to explore a policy of GCSE retake with a discursive analysis of the impact on individuals. However, the analytical methods employed were not simply Critical Analysis or social critique. Simple Critical Analysis considers reflective critique of society to challenge power structures (Rogers, 2011). Instead, the DA employed here was a bottom up approach from an initial empirical analysis of language and images, sometimes referred to as Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (Gee, 2004; Rogers, 2011). In this, learning is seen as a social interaction in which knowledge is understood in ever shifting different ways amongst people, individuals and affinity groups. This focus specifically on discourses integrates a sociocultural approach to language and learning.

Thus, DA allows insight into the socially situated identity that is being enacted, what Figured Worlds are in play and what socially-situated practice is helping this to be carried out (Gee, 2004). The DA methods used were based on Gee's (2004) recommendations for practice. In these recommendations, Gee makes clear that his principles, which he refers to as building tasks and tools of inquiry, are guidelines only, and should be deployed flexibly. The analytical framework allows for flexibility of thought around the choice of text, the relationships with other discourses, the authoring and the reading of the result. DA was used at every phase of data collection, starting with the analysis of the individual images, building to the analysis of the curated images and also considering the participants' analysis and reading of images through discourse analysis of transcripts. Gee (2004) makes clear that discourses do not have clear boundaries, and it can also be related to the concept of the social construction of reality (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). In this sense, a discourse can encompass multiple identities, so a vocational student's Figured World (Holland et al., 2001) may

not just be related to her educational setting, but to a myriad of contexts, motivations, settings and impacts (Gee, 2004).

There are many different approaches to visual analysis in social science. In the sociology of the visual, when images are studied as part of analysis, there is a strong tradition of visual anthropology when visual records describe ways of life in tandem with other modes of communication (Collier, 2001). However, this research tradition often takes the visual record as a mere illustration of reality, rather than an object of inquiry itself (Van Maanen, 2011). In this research study, Discourse Analysis (DA) (Gee, 2004) was used to interrogate the chosen images themselves as well as the transcripts. The participative visual methods, combined with discourse analysis, acknowledged the ontological and epistemological stance that Figured Worlds are pluralistic, subjective and interconnected (Berger & Luckmann, 1991; Holland et al., 2001).

The DA method used was also influenced by an approach that considered images as metaphor instead of hard data (Harper, 1998) and created texts which are co-operative and could be fragmentary (Marcus & Fischer, 2014). Harper (1998) suggests an approach which develops a 'created tale', or discourse, which does not try to attain scientific standards, but emphasises multiplicity of meaning, context and experience. This research created data including found images from internet search engines and transcripts from focus groups and interviews that discussed these images and their meaning in relation to the experience of retaking GCSE English. The images and transcripts were analysed as whole and fragmentary texts and their context and multiplicity of meanings were formed through learner participation and shared and discussed in a collaborative manner.

Discourse Analysis is one way of thinking about both how and why meaning is conveyed (Charmaz & McMullen, 2011; Gee, 2004). When related to images, a visual discourse analysis might consider the grammar of an image- the conventions of photography, the semiotics of meaning and also, intertextuality when an image 'quotes' another or alludes to another subtly (Piper & Frankham, 2007). Therefore, if an image is problematic and tentative, with shifting, contextualised meaning (Harper, 1998) a number of inferences can be drawn from one participant's choice.

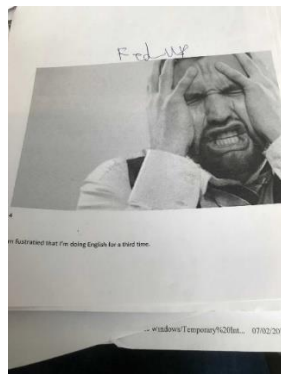


Figure 4.2 Image Chosen by a Workshop Participant
(LaurMG, 2011)

For example, in figure 4.2 the image chosen by a participant is of a frustrated man, and is labelled by the participant as '*fed up*' and '*I'm frustrated because I'm doing English for the third time*'. However, the composition of his gaze, and the choice of monochrome alludes to a much more disturbing image evoking pain. This might elicit reactions of fear and intimidation. Equally, the body language is reminiscent of a popular cultural image, from the film Home Alone which might be associated with feelings of loneliness, feeling small or helpless. In addition, another associated image is the artwork The Scream (Munch et al., 1994) which was intended to represent depression and terror.

From these brief examples, it can be seen that just one concept in discourse analysis can open up multiple meanings, and interrogate the *punctum* as well as the *studium* (Barthes, 1981). Because of intertextuality, discourse analysis also offers one way of understanding the social construction of

reality (Gee, 2004). The process of meaning is situated because it is not static, but rather, meaning is constructed or brought together within the moment (Gee, 2004).

4.3.1 The Process of Data Analysis

The images, the annotations and the transcripts were reviewed using DA in order to identify any key images, words or concepts, or related groupings. It was decided not to use computer software for analysis. The phasing of the data collection meant meanings might shift constantly at each phase and reiteration and there was a risk that the software coding would only take account of frequency and not be able to recall synonyms or other associated meanings (Ozkan, 2004). In other words, it would be problematic within this research paradigm if using software distanced the data from its multiple interpretations and lead to a more quantitative approach (Welsh, 2002). As Gee (2004) suggests, situated meanings, Figured Worlds, socially-situated identities, social languages and discourses were being recognised or formed in the data through considering connections, before then considering the sign systems themselves, and how they were being used.

The images also needed to be read, both without and alongside the text and words that might accompany them and this created inherent technical complexities for software. For example, there are three options to manage images- as a hyperlink, embedded in a document, or standalone (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013). The first option risks breaking links and has an inability to code the image; the second does not allow coding of parts of the image or link annotations; the third can be unnecessarily cumbersome (Bazeley & Jackson, 2013).

In summary, the images needed to be considered both as a whole, and as a fragment of a 'created tale' (Harper, 1998) with or without accompanying text. For DA in this research framework, the data had to be understood in its own multiple and changing contexts or Figured Worlds. The analysis was interested in particularities not generalities. Therefore, using software might have proved to be more time consuming than useful (MacMillan, 2005).

The data at each phase of the research were analysed using the guidelines for Discourse Analysis adapted from Gee (2004). The initial first pass at the data was a form of free association (Hughes, 1971) in which I viewed the images, individually and as a whole data set, revisiting them over a period of time to consider ideas or concepts from which a more detailed interpretation might be formed later on in the analysis (Grady, 2001; Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). This process aided the refinement of the research themes which are illustrated below, and described in more detail in the following chapter.

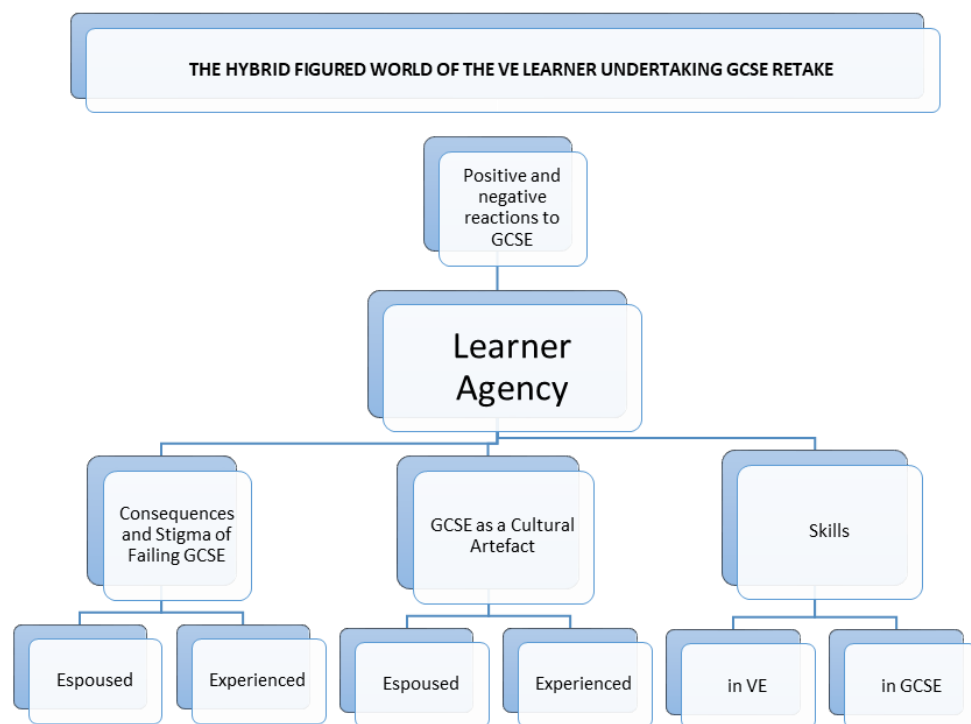


Figure 4.3 Finalised Themes for Analysis

These refined and finalised themes were used to amend and refine the guidelines for practice recommended by Gee (2004) as set out below in table 4. This was considered appropriate as Gee makes clear that the principles he outlines are guidelines only and should be deployed flexibly. Therefore, the guidelines were amended to create a tool that was tailored to the context of this thesis. Where applicable, all questions were applied to each building task.

Building Tasks	Questions
1.Learner Agency	A. What social languages are involved? What grammatical patterns? Are different social languages mixed? How so?
1.1. Consequences and Stigma	B. What socially situated identities and activities do these social languages enact?

a. Espoused	C. What Discourse or Discourses are involved? How is 'stuff' other than language ('mind stuff' 'emotional stuff' 'world stuff' and 'interactional stuff' and non-language symbols, etc.) relevant in indicating socially situated identities and activities?
b. Experienced	
1.2. Skills	
a. Skills in social and occupational realms	D. In considering this language, what sorts of relationships among different Discourses are involved (institutionally, in society or historically)? How are different Discourses aligned or in contention here?
b. Skills in GCSE English	
1.3. GCSE as a Cultural Artefact	
a. Espoused views of GCSE	E. What Conversations (public debates over issues or themes) are relevant to understand this language and to what Conversations does it contribute (institutionally, in society or historically), if any?
b. Learners' views of GCSE	F. How does intertextuality work in the text, that is, in what ways does the text quote, allude to, or otherwise borrow from other sources. What function does this serve?

Table 4.4 Tool for Analysis Based on Gee's Recommendation

(Gee, 2004)

This tool helped to frame the DA to focus on what Gee argues are the seven things that people construct or design through their discourses: significance (what is important); activities (what are we doing); identities (what are we being); relationships (are we friends or in conflict); politics (who is privileged); connections (how are things linked); sign systems and knowledge (what language or knowledge matters most) (Gee & Michaels, 2011).

In turn, the iterative process of the refinement of the themes and the development of the tool for analysis helped to inform the development of additional sub-questions to the original research questions which were:

1. How are GCSE English retake discourses socially constructed by VE learners?

- *What are the implications of the hybrid space of cultural uncertainty that is created by the phenomenon of the vocational learner retaking GCSE English?*
- *What are the characteristics of discourses regarding learner agency?*

2. How are these discourses used to enact and depict the socially constructed identities of learners?

- *How is the GCSE positioned as a cultural artefact by learners?*

3. How do learners' socially constructed identities impact on their attitude to learning?

- *What is the learner identity depicted and enacted by the participants?*
- *What are the implications for policy and practice?*

4.3.2 Data Analysis in Phase 2- Group Interviews and Phase 3-Individual Interviews

The refined themes and the tool for analysis were then employed to review the data generated from the second phase of data collection- the group interviews. The images chosen by the participants and the transcripts of the interviews were reviewed and analysed using DA in order to produce typical stories that had been found in the data that illustrated the themes of learner agency including stigma and consequences of failing GCSE, perceptions of GCSE as a cultural artefact and the participants' views regarding skills.

The final phase of analysis reviewed the data collected in the three individual interviews. The three individuals that were interviewed were presented as case studies. Again, Gee's guidelines (2004) were used to consider situated meanings and Figured Worlds whilst reviewing the transcripts and images to closely analyse their told stories. The images chosen had all been open to interpretation and analysis during the previous phases and therefore were open to multiple and varying interpretations that changed each time the image was viewed or discussed. Earlier phases and

interpretations were revisited whilst analysing the interviews from the third phase to connect diverse parts of the data to provide coherence.

Because the objective of this thesis is to highlight the individual experience, these were *key case studies* (Thomas, 2013) as the participants provided a good deal of data, and also because the data revealed useful examples that could be applied to the key concepts. The value of presenting case studies in the first place was to highlight the particularity of this experience as, in the conceptual framework used here, it was important to describe the individual experience rather than to find generalisations (Stake, 2008). These case studies were a useful step in engaging with the data in order to understand the context of the experience, as well as making cross-case observations (Bazeley, 2013). In this example, the case studies were part of the process, as well as a product of analysis (Stake, 2008), as they illustrated some of the key theoretical concepts in this study (for example agency). In this sense, the case studies were both the subject and the object: the case was studied to understand it in itself but it also was an analytical frame in which the subject was illustrating key themes (Thomas, 2013).

The main focus of the case studies were to consider how the ideas and data regarding the main themes could be illuminated (and illuminate) through a detailed DA of their narratives using Gee's guidelines (Gee, 2004). This included the images they chose, the social language they employed, grammatical patterns, significance of activities, relationships and connections, and how they constructed and figured identity and worlds. In addition, examining this narrative in close up revealed details regarding their actual *voice* (Hymes, 2003) (Gee, 2004). In other words, how they made and articulated meaning.

In order to do this, each case study was recast and analysed as a stanza and line narrative (Gee, 2004)- each line was a small piece of speech with one piece of relevant information. These were then thematically organised into stanzas and lines such as below from the analysis of a participant called Simon.

LEARNING

SUB STORY- Behaviour at school

STANZA 8

1. *It was all right.*
2. *I was pretty naughty.*
3. *I was just a really naughty kid back then.*
4. *And nobody helped me there.*
5. *I was just rude to teachers*
6. *didn't do my work.*
7. *I was probably the worst kid there.*

STANZA 9

8. *last year of secondary,*
9. *I kind of just changed a lot,*
10. *got more mature, and wasn't really messing around any.*

SUB STORY- school

STANZA 10

11. *School was a bit of a dead end*

SUB STORY- teachers

STANZA 11

12. *because I think any help was what I needed*
13. *and some of the teachers—*
14. *they just kind of made up stuff about me.*
15. *And that's why I got transferred.*
16. *Yeah. I didn't really get help.*
17. *Sometimes I would just not go to class.*
18. *And they wouldn't do anything about it but just punish me.*
19. *There was reasons on why I didn't go to my class, but they wouldn't really try to understand why and help me. I*
20. *It was a dead end because it wasn't for me.*

This approach was part of the overarching principles adopted from Gee's guidelines (2004), and was still guided by the identified themes and the revised tool (Table 4.4, p. 101). This extract demonstrates how the line and stanza analysis can help identify themes or stories. In this particular example, the analysis has categorised some of Simon's statements into a theme of 'learning'. Within

this, the analysis of some of the lines has revealed sub stories regarding his behaviour, his reaction to school, and his teachers.

The line and stanza format was adopted in order to systematically analyse the interview transcripts. It had two functions: to represent the patterns and shapes of how the participants formed meaning, and also a representation of the analysis- or the meanings that were assigned to the data through analysis (Gee, 2004). This, in itself was a facet of negotiated honesty (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002), as the presentation showed both the participants' voices, as well as the input of the researcher, imbuing meaning through analysis. The full line and stanza transcripts are included in the appendices (Appendices 18-20, p.299-309). In summary, whether data was reviewed using free association, or the line and stanza format, all data collected at each phase was analysed using the guidelines set out by Gee (2004). This meant that the principles of DA were consistently applied. The identification of the themes for analysis (Fig.4.3, p. 100) and the resultant tool for analysis (Table 4.4, p. 101) also meant that the themes could be reflected on and revisited through all phases of data collection.

5.0 Findings

This chapter sets out the findings from the DA of the data collected during all three phases. Firstly it presents a summary of the DA of the images from Phase 1, and then it sets out the typical stories or discourses that were revealed through DA from Phase 2- the Group Interviews. The case studies, using data from Phases 2 and 3, are presented in the chapter 6. This form of presentation was adopted for two reasons. Firstly, as part of 'negotiated honesty' (Savin-Baden & Fisher, 2002), this presentational order mirrored the chronology of the data collection. Secondly, this mirroring of chronology revealed the process by which the themes were refined and finalised.

5.1 Summary Analysis of the Images from Phase 1- Participant Workshops

The images collected in the participant workshops are set out in the appendices (Appendices 4-10, p. 248-260). The initial analysis of the images chosen in the participant workshops in phase 1 identified seven themes that were initially broadly categorised into two main categories: negative or positive reactions to the experience of retaking the GCSE.

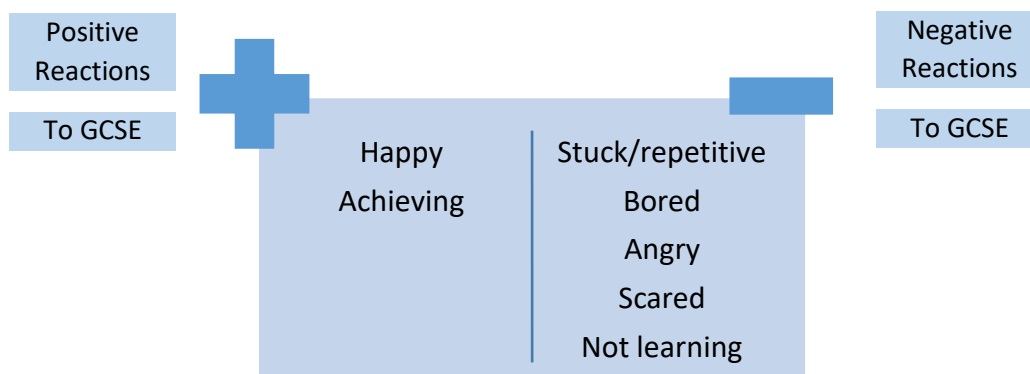


Figure 5.1 Early Identified Themes in the Data Categorised as Positive or Negative Reactions

The images chosen by participants to demonstrate a positive reaction to the GCSE often used sign systems that were impersonal, more often associated with quick or easy communications such as text, or conventions used by the corporate world. One example of this was figure 5.2.



Figure 5.2 'Achieving' Image Chosen by a Participant in Phase 1

(Pixabay, 2015)

This picture shows an anonymous male adult figure in pursuit of an award. The meaning of the image is designed to be easy to read, and its conventions are not meant to elicit an emotional

response. In contrast, to illustrate negative reactions to the GCSE, the participants often chose realistic, photographic images that depicted explosions, homelessness, fear and terror such as the image of a homeless person below (fig. 5.3).



Figure 5.3 'Scared' Image and Annotation Chosen by a Participant in Phase 1

(Sardaka, 2017)

Therefore, using the guidelines adapted from Gee (2004), the DA revealed the images chosen to represent negative emotions often utilised more powerful, complex and emotive sign systems, conventions and non-language symbols.

In addition, many of the images chosen that represented a negative reaction towards the GCSE English, also conveyed a sense of power and agency, even if that was a violent rejection. For example, figure 5.4, which was also subsequently chosen and discussed by other participants in the interview phases, showed an image of a man striding away from an explosion. The annotation, *'wanting to leave the room like... and never come back because it's pointless'*, without the counterpoint of the image, could be read as passive. However, in tandem with the image, the annotated response may be interpreted as imbued with impact and drama. This connotes an active rejection of the GCSE, with the figure in the image as the main character, possibly the cause of the explosion, performing his reaction and making his own decisions.

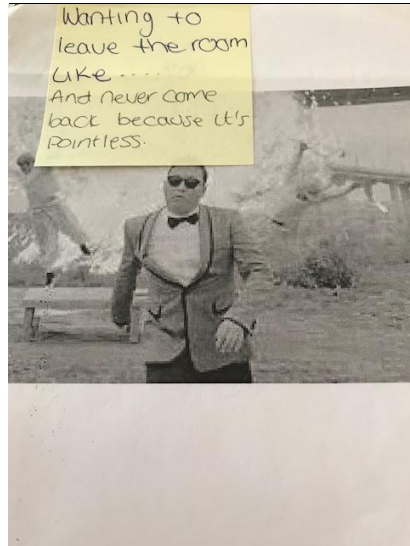


Figure 5.4 'Angry' Image and Annotation Chosen by a Participant in Phase 1

(memegenerator.net, 2016)

Therefore, although the initial analysis identified two categories of either negative or positive reactions to the GCSE retake, the Discourse Analysis (Gee, 2004) suggested that these two categories were not straightforward. The analysis based on the tool in table 4.4 (p.101) suggested that the participants' responses that were positive reactions to the GCSE might have employed discourses that were less powerful or meaningful to the participants. For example, many images chosen to signify achievement were generic clipart with suited figures that used discourses that were more suited to a corporate world. Secondly, the DA suggested that the participants that had more negative reactions to the GCSE chose images that employed complex inter-textuality, metaphors and strongly emotive imagery (the 'emotional stuff' referenced in table 4.4. p.102). Therefore, the more powerful and complex discourses were actually those that represented negative reactions.

This analysis suggested that the categorisation set out in figure 5.1 could be recast into two alternative categories: firstly, responses that used discourses with greater reference to emotive reactions, intertextuality, meaning and relevance to the participants and secondly, responses that used discourses with lesser reliance on emotion, intertextuality and relevance. This is set out below in figure 5.5.

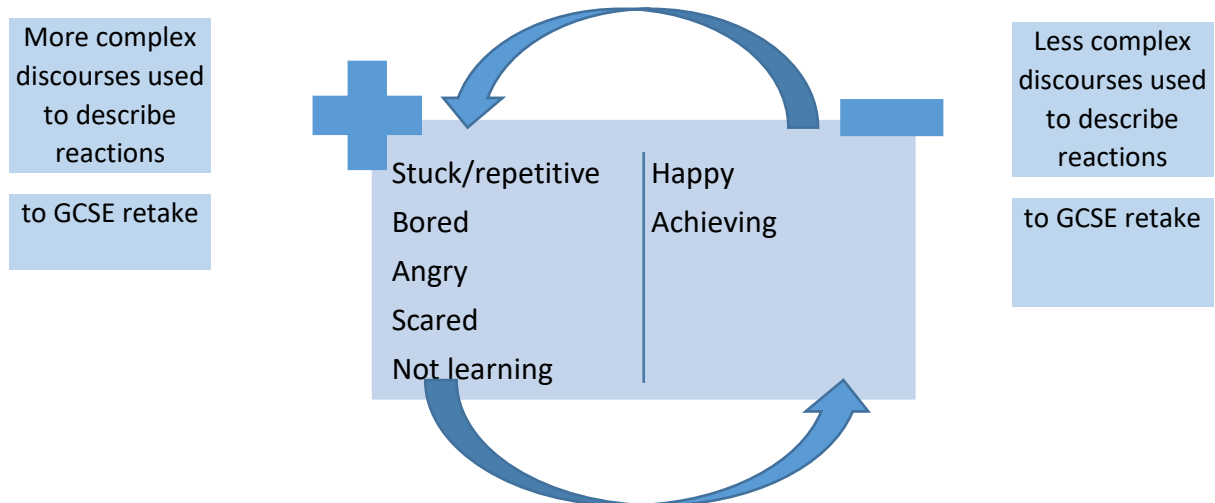


Figure 5.5 Early Identified Themes Categorised by Type of Discourse Used

Practiced identities (Holland et al., 2001) are enacted within the context of Figured Worlds and are interpreted within this context. These worlds are socially identified (Bakhtin, 2010), and any practice or activity within them is also imbued with meaning. Therefore the choice of images in the workshops was a type of social and cultural work, and a process of self-authoring (Bakhtin, 2010).

The insight illustrated by figure 5.5 above demonstrated that, using the construct of Figured Worlds, a key theme for analysis might be learner agency. The more negative responses from participants regarding the GCSE were expressed using more complex discourses and expressing these might be regarded as a form of agentic behaviour (Mercer, 2011, 2012). The responses themselves may have expressed boredom, anger and frustration at a lack of agency with regards to the GCSE retake, but the participants' negative reactions employed powerful and emotive discourses that could be viewed as constructing a sense of identity and agency.

“Human agency may be frail especially among those with little power, but it happens daily and mundanely and it deserves our attention” (Holland et al., 2001, p. 5).

In fact, all seven of the early identified themes could be related to the concept of agency- of feeling and being in control; or feeling or being out of control. Learner agency therefore became a key theme through which other impacts on Figured Worlds could be explored such as the stigma and consequences of failure, perceptions of skills and abilities and the benefits of learning. Accordingly, the categories relating to the positive and negative reactions to GCSE retake were refined into more theoretical themes as follows in Figure 5.6.

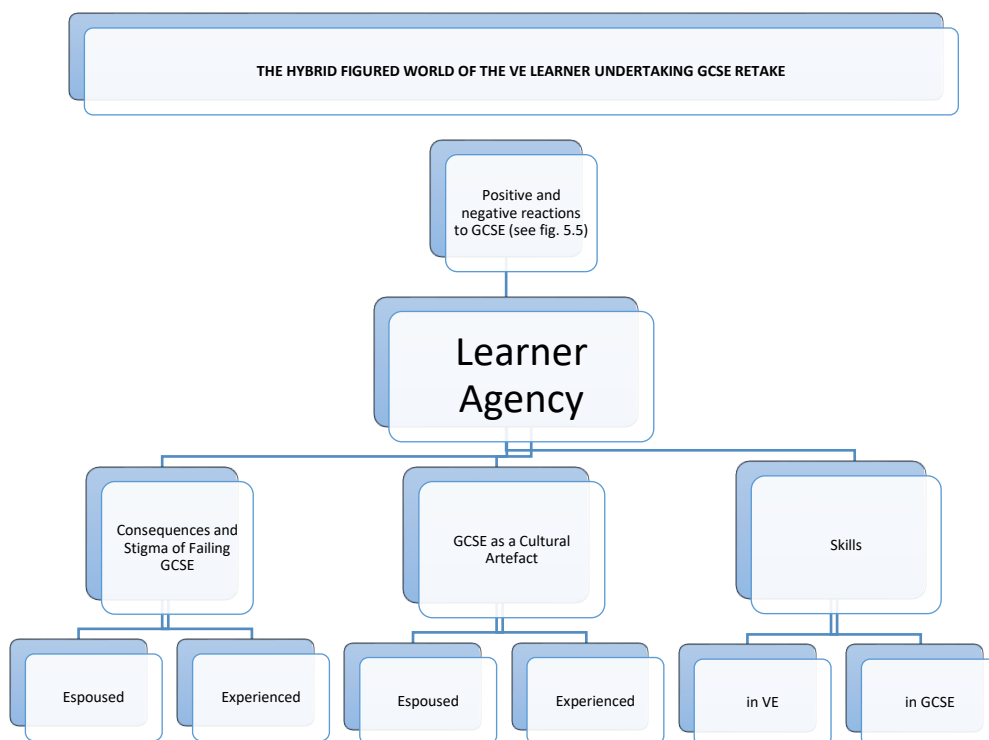


Figure 5.6 Finalised Themes for Analysis

5.2 Findings from Phase 2- Typical Stories in the Data

The finalised themes (fig. 5.6) were then used to identify and analyse typical stories (Gee, 2000, 2004) in the data collected from the group interviews in phase two through Discourse Analysis. The

typical stories were identified in the data using the themes of skills; consequences/stigma and GCSE as a cultural artefact, and the tool based on Gee’s guidelines (Table 4.4, p. 101). These typical stories illustrated and illuminated the themes and all four stories illuminated the concept of learner agency because this was important in relation to the Figured World of the VE learner who was mandated to retake GCSE English. In summary, four main stories were identified that related to the themes as follows:

Typical Story	Main Theme (from Fig. 5.6)	Other Themes (from Fig. 5.6)
Being a Kid	Learner Agency	
Stuck on Repeat	Learner Agency	Consequences and Stigma of Failing GCSE
Teachers Lie	Learner Agency	GCSE as a Cultural Artefact
Adult Life	Learner Agency	Skills in VE and GCSE

Table 3.1 Identified Themes and Typical Stories Identified in Phase 2

The stories were entitled: *Being a Kid*, *Stuck on Repeat*, *Teachers Lie*, and *Adult Life*. The first analysed the recurring imagery of children in the chosen images and verbal responses to explore the concept of agency. The second analysed the multitude of responses that related to the stigma, consequences and frustration of repeating a qualification, sometimes more than once. The third reviewed the responses from more than one participant that stated they felt they had been misled over the consequence and importance of the GCSE. The last story identified the varied ways that the participants considered their abilities, skills and literacies in relation to their vocational skills and courses as well as the GCSE retake.

5.2.1 Typical Story ‘Being a Kid’- Choice and Agency

Amongst the images chosen during the workshops and subsequently selected and discussed in the group and individual interviews, there were images of children: in harm's way, being angry, upset or having tantrums. As many of these chosen images were used by participants to describe their own feelings, it might be inferred that the participants were positioning themselves as subordinate in their Figured Worlds with less power and agency than others.



Figure 5.7 Image of a 'Horror Clown Movie' Chosen by Eric in Group Interview 2

(Needpix.com, 2010)

"It doesn't just mean when you're in school, it means when you're at home as well, it follows you like a horror film bad guy, what you can go through when you're doing your English tests because some people aren't as good as others. So it kind of entraps you and expose you."

'Eric': Plumbing Level 2 Student discussing Fig. 5.7 (Group Interview 2)

In this extract, Eric discussed an image that owed much to inter-textuality and filmic conventions. A clown (a popular horror archetype) was shown overshadowing or '*following*' a young child who appeared pensive and vulnerable. Eric recognised the socially shared meaning and significance of this image ('*horror film bad guy*') and related it to the experience of retaking English, described as '*so it kind of entraps you and exposes you*'. The phraseology here referred to both the mandatory nature of the GCSE (*a trap*) as well as the associated stigma, because the object of the imagery is '*exposed*' as '*not as good as others*'. Eric also spoke about the consequences of failure and retaking as '*depressed*', '*agitated*', or '*scared*'. All these emotions were negative, and were related to reactive moods prompted by an external event. The inference might be that the GCSE retake learner was positioned as a child because they have failed (and are therefore not as good as others who have

passed the GCSE). In this reading, the significance of using a child as an image symbolised lack of power and agency as well as an element of vulnerability as implied by the words '*entrapped*' and '*exposed*'.

Analysis of other respondents' conversation also suggested that the experience of failing GCSE created vulnerability and a potential lack of agency. Henry, a Multi-Trade student in Group Interview 4 positioned himself as a child and related his experience of having to tell his parents about his failure. Also in the second group interview, Simon, an Information Technology student selected images of destitute, homeless people. In discussion, Simon talked about students that needed to ask for help. In the same workshop, Trevor, a Plumbing student stated that sometimes at college, '*they treat us like kids*'. Similarly, in the same session, Andrew, a Carpentry student spoke about not understanding the GCSE- its content or structure:

'It make you feel like a kid. I can never get it. I know I might need it. I think I know I might need it. That's what people tell me, that's what my teachers tell me. I guess that's why we're being made to do it.' 'Andrew': Carpentry Level 1 student (Group Interview 2)

In this extract, Andrew linked feeling *like a kid* with teachers telling him what to do. Feeling *like a kid* was linked to school, teachers and, importantly in the context of the compulsory GCSE retake, being told what to do.

An Information Technology (IT) student, Simon, discussed an image of a distressed young child (Figure 5.8).



Figure 5.8 Image of a 'Crying Child' Chosen by Simon in Group Interview 2

(Pikist, 2016)

I got this because sometimes this is how I feel at college. It just sometimes makes me really angry that I have to do things that I don't get. This makes me laugh, but it does show that I get-- I can't really explain it. I get angry. I sit in class sometimes and I just feel like kicking the chair. But that's funny, isn't it.' 'Simon' IT Level 2 Student discussing Fig. 5.8 in his individual interview

Simon found the image both amusing and representative of his feelings. He described his anger because he is forced to do a subject he does not understand- '*things I don't get*'. This anger is not characterized as agentic as he '*feels like kicking the chair*' but does not translate this feeling into action.

Other participants highlighted the lack of choice related to the study of English, because the policy, and therefore the college, mandated them to attend lessons.

'I think it's because you're forced to and you don't get to choose. It's someone telling you, you have to do it. And especially our generation, we're not used to that. We're just raised in bubble wrap. And so when you are forced to and you don't want to be there, you're going to just turn up your attendance so you don't get kicked out, and you're going to just do whatever you like. You're not there to focus. You're not there to learn. You're just there to be a nuisance, to be honest.' 'Eric': Plumbing Level 2 student (Group Interview 2)

In this extract, Eric was responding to commentary regarding other students misbehaving in class. This was a strong view that was shared by many of the participants in this and other sessions, often linked to behaviour that was seen as childish or *like a kid*. In the above extract, Eric positioned himself as separate from his generation (albeit he acknowledged he was part of the generation). He dismissed the attitudes of others when faced with being told what to do, and suggested they were coddled and not able to deal with hard realities – *'raised in bubble wrap'*. This extract implied that his generation were positioned as children both because they had been *'raised'* to be protected and soft, and also because of how they behaved- *'a nuisance'*. In another session, Claire discussed images of explosions that were chosen to signify anger. These prompted her to relate her feelings of anger towards other students:

*"I get p*ssed off with people in my class because they mess about. Gets in the way. Behave like kids because they don't want to be there."* 'Claire': Hairdressing level 2 student (Group Interview 1)

Both Eric and Claire considered that their classmates behave badly, or like kids, because their attendance in English lessons was forced. In Eric's view, this enforcement created poor behaviour as people attended to stay out of trouble, but did not learn in their lesson time as they did not focus. In addition, as, in his opinion, his generation was not used to being told what to do, they resorted to disruptive behaviour. In a separate session Claire concurred with this view and dismissed this cohort of students as *like kids*. In this iteration of being a kid, other GCSE retake students were figured as poorly disciplined and uncaring for their fellow classmates, because they had been forced and entrapped into learning English.

In summary, in these chosen stories and analysis, the GCSE English retake was figured as a world in which students were positioned as kids: firstly because they had failed GCSE and therefore were labelled as not as good as others. Secondly, students were forced back into the milieu of school-like English study; and finally, some students behaved like kids in response to this entrapment. In addition, there was a sense that this phenomenon was a barrier to progression to a more adult life. The stigma of not reaching the required grade marked students out as not good enough and entrapped and exposed them. Equally, for some, the experience of retaking the qualification and repeating the classroom experience recycled the poor experience of school and repositioned learners away from the more adult realm and back into the world of being a kid, feeling like a kid, and acting like a kid.

5.2.2 Typical Story- 'Stuck on Repeat'- Stigma

In relation to the GCSE English, the consequences of failure were a key theme. In this context, the consequences were three-fold; being *stuck* with the stigma of retaking, being *stuck* with constant repetition of learning and experience, and being *stuck* with no progression. Martha, a Motor Vehicle student, selected an image of a type of entrapment or being stuck- a prison (Figure 5.9). She described it thus:

'I think that the person chose that picture because he was thinking that he has no choice or something. And he can't go forward or just move forward and just going back something.

He's just stuck in a one lonely place.' 'Martha' Motor Vehicle Level 1 Learner discussing Fig.

5.9 (Group Interview 1)



Figure 5.9 Image of 'Prison' Chosen by Martha in Group Interview 1

(Pxhere, 2017a)

In the findings described in the previous section *Being a Kid*, the stigma of failure, of feeling like a powerless child, and being forced back into a school milieu was highlighted. In choosing this image, Martha was describing a feeling of being boxed, and labelled, but also boxed and stuck.

In response to Martha's image in the same group interview, Peter, a Bricklaying student commented:

"Also, everyone knows like when you go to prison. If you come to college and you go to English, people know that you have failed. You can't get out of it.....They might feel shameful. Like if you've done something wrong. Like a crime. It's also like being punished for doing something bad." 'Peter' Bricklaying Level 2 Learner discussing Fig. 5.9 (Group Interview 1)

The image of a prison (Figure 5.9) was chosen by Martha to signify *no choice*' and *'one lonely place*'. Peter's response to the image focused on shame, punishment and stigma. Peter's conversational tactic of using the second person voice 'you' perhaps created imagined feelings assigned to other people, distancing himself from a direct association with these emotions. In this case though, the disassociated emotions were those of the people who had failed GCSE- in other words, people like him.

In the same session, Fred, a seventeen year old Motor Vehicle student chose and commented on an image of the football tackle (fig. 5.10).



Figure 5.10 Image of 'Football Tackle' Chosen by Fred in Group Interview 1

(Pikist, 2014)

'So then the other one's blocked. You're not going forward, you're staying in the middle.

Feeling under pressure, because now they have to do the GCSE again.' 'Fred' Motor Vehicle level 2 Learner discussing Fig. 5.10 (Group Interview 1)

Fred characterised people who had passed the GCSE as '*champions*'. Martha agreed, stating that her teacher had called the people who pass '*normal*', and that people who fail GCSE do not succeed in life. Again, not passing was seen as a stigma, but also, in this instance, failing the GCSE led to being stuck or '*blocked*'. Later on in the session, Fred discussed images of dead end signs (fig. 6.6, p.164), comparing passing GCSE with '*freedom*' and failing as a dead end because you have to repeat. *'So it's not a funny way when you're just not passing GCSE. You are just stuffed.'*

In the second group interview, Simon reflected on a story that another participant had told about failing twice:

'I don't think I'd be able to carry on myself from that, just generally get on my nerves. I've done it so many times in a row and then just kept failing' 'Simon', IT level 2 student (Group Interview 2)

Repetition was a key theme that, ironically, was repeated by many participants. In the above extract Simon spoke about repeating failure. The emotional toll of repeated failure was also noted by other participants, including Henry, the Construction student who appears as the key case study in the following chapter. He stated that he had to *'constantly retake'* his English because his *'grade wasn't good enough'*. In effect, the repeated experience was a constant reminder of failure. In addition, Henry spoke about the tedium of repeated learning, also using the image of a crying child (Fig. 5.8, p.114) as an illustration.

'..it's really difficult to make something you were spending most of your entire life learning interesting again. I think it's because it conveys their emotions, how they feel about lesson, really. It's a real struggle trying to get through and do it every time and trying to pass this time around you could. Yeah. Because it just gets repetitive, the same thing over and over again.' 'Henry' Construction Multi-Trade Level 2 Learner discussing Fig. 5.8 (Group Interview 4)

For Henry, the experience was frustrating because it was boring. It was boring because it was learning that was not new. This experience of repeating the same lessons and content was also discussed by other participants. For example, in the third group interview, Isabelle, a Health and Social Care student commented on an image of a man (Figure 5.11) and stated that he looked *'bored'* and *'tired'*.



Figure 5.11 Image of 'Yawning Man' Chosen by Isabelle in Group Interview 3

(Pixabay, 2018a)

In response, Daljit, a Carpentry student spoke about '*dreading*' English because he had done it for so many years and that he had a sense of '*going round and round in circles*'. Asha, a Childcare student agreed: '*Well, it makes us unhappy. Because we keep on- we have to keep reading again and again*'. A number of other students in other groups also highlighted the themes of repetition and lack of progression such as Claire who chose the following image of a figure in a hamster wheel (fig. 5.12).



Figure 5.12 Image of 'Hamster Wheel' Chosen by Claire in Group Interview 1

(Pixabay, 2017b)

This aspect of retaking- repeating the same syllabus, recycling old learning, and not learning anything new suggested that participants felt stuck, repeating the same topics as the repetition did not add anything new, and did not improve their learning. In the third group interview, Andrew spoke about feeling like the GCSE was never going to end and chose an image of a road receding into the distance (Figure 5.13). This road was featureless, against a backdrop of a grey sky. It was not an image that connoted a sense of progress, new experiences or excitement.



Figure 5.13 Image of 'Never Ending Road' Chosen by Andrew in Group Interview 2

(Pixabay, 2016)

Instead, the feeling of repetition, or a never ending experience, was either a reminder of failure, or a reinforcement of the lack of learning that had occurred the first time around. Accordingly, Peter equated passing the GCSE, not with success, but with freedom because the consequence of passing simply meant that they did not have to repeat the qualification again.

'Now you're free and you don't have to do it again' 'Peter' Bricklaying Level 2 Learner (Group Interview 1)

Interestingly, in the fourth group interview, Betsy also chose the image of a road (Figure 5.13). For her though, this image represented travelling or relaxing. She linked this image with an image of a man running up stairs and stated:

'I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. If you make one mistake, you should be able to do the same thing again with no one judging you.' 'Betsy' Business Level 1 Learner (Group Interview 4)

Both Peter and Betsy's responses implicitly referred to negative consequences of failing GCSE. For Peter, passing the GCSE meant freedom from the tyranny of the GCSE retake. Betsy's statement implied that if you fail, and if you repeat, people judge you negatively.

For some, the key feature of repeating or being 'stuck' was anxiety and fear about the failure to pass GCSE being a barrier to progress or achieving their ambition. For example, Martha wanted to be a mechanic and own her own company. However, she was concerned because if she did not pass GCSE she might be unable to progress up to the advanced level (level 3) of her motor vehicle course; and this would limit her chances to fulfil her ambition. Similarly, in the fourth group interview, Joseph, an Electrical Installation student, was angry that his potential failure at GCSE retake would stop him progressing to the next level of his chosen course and trade:

'It's like you could be really good at electrical, and you could have all the properties of being an electrician, but you can't pass math and English, and that means you can't get to the next level, so you can't actually become an electrician, but you still have all the skills. Because math and English don't benefit whatever you're doing in any way really' 'Joseph' Electrical Installation Learner Level 1 (Group Interview 4)

Joseph described a very real threat to his progression being that the entry requirements to advanced level (level 3) Electrical qualifications were that applicants had reached grade 4 or more in both GCSE maths and English. Without completing the advanced qualification, Joseph could not become an accredited electrician. However, Joseph's comments revealed his doubts whether the benefits gained from undertaking, or indeed, retaking, the GCSE qualifications, had any bearing at all on his ability to become a skilled electrician.

In summary, the fact that the participants were forced to retake the GCSE qualification, and that this meant they had to repeat old learning with no sense of learning anything new, meant that the current consequences for retaking on some participants were potential stigmatisation and potential punishment. This because repeating the qualification reminded them of failure and also meant they

had to endure the boredom of English lessons. In addition, there was a very real threatened consequence for some of being *stuck*, because failure to achieve the GCSE would block their progression in their chosen trade.

5.2.3 Typical Story: My Teachers Lied- Consequences and Perceived Benefits of the GCSE English Retake

The perceived benefits of achieving the GCSE was a key theme in the data. In the case of Joseph, achieving the GCSE might indeed help him progress towards his stated career ambition. However, the DA revealed that there were clear distinctions between the espoused benefits of passing the GCSE and the participants' own viewpoints.



Figure 5.14 Image of a 'Mansion' Chosen by Claire in Group Interview 1

(Pixabay, 2015b)



Figure 5.15 Image of a 'Happy Family' Chosen by Claire in Group Interview 1

(Pixabay, 2018d)

'I also chose these because I think my teachers lied. At school, like they all said you must get GCSEs to be successful, but I'm not smart, and I don't want a smart job, like in an office. I

haven't passed GCSE and I'm doing OK- I have a job and I want to be a manager and I can be without my GCSE. I'm a hairdresser and I'm a mum. My kid is happy. GCSE isn't for me.'

'Claire' Hairdressing Level 2 Learner discussing fig 5.14 and 5.15 (Group Interview 1)

The images of the house and the family that were chosen by Claire, as with all the images then used in the group and individual images, had been chosen in participant workshops. In the workshops, they were chosen by participants to represent success, achievement or happiness of passing the GCSE. The DA of the images and the accompanying comments and annotation surmised that these images might represent distant and unobtainable aspirations, divorced from reality because the images were constructed from the visual grammar of advertising. However, Claire co-opted the meaning of the images, and in this context, they were imbued with different and multiple meanings.

Claire stated that she was 'doing OK' and picked the images because they showed a good standard of life which she believed she had as a Hairdresser. She wanted to move into management and was clear that she did not need to achieve the GCSE in order to do that. In particular, she referenced her child and chose an image portraying a happy family. For her, this was not a distant aspiration. This was an image she claimed as her own, representing a standard of being '*successful*' she directly related to her current circumstances.

However, Claire also stated that she was not '*smart*' and did not want a '*smart job*'. For Claire, a smart job was one located in an office. Her use of the word '*smart*' could connote two different meanings- one referencing intellectual ability and the other referencing standard of attire. Both attributes could be related to jobs that were conventionally higher up the socioeconomic ladder than a hairdresser. In that sense, one possible reading of Claire's statement and choice of images

was not that she felt secure in her success, but was instead defensive about her position, and therefore was rejecting the success that the GCSE might have represented- *'GCSE isn't for me'*.

However, Claire's statement began with a powerful declaration- *'Teachers lied'*. This framed her statement and suggested that the benefits of GCSE (represented by the chosen images), which were financial and social success, might very well be desirable, but were not, in themselves, only gained from passing GCSE. Many participants recognised the possible benefits of GCSE. For example, Andrew, a Carpentry student had marginally failed to gain the required grade in his first retake the previous year and stated:

'it opens the world just to more things. So many more options.' 'Andrew' Carpentry level 1 Learner (Group Interview 2)

Andrew's statement directly related with some of the themes of lack of choice and agency discussed in the section above- *Being a Kid*. However, in the same discussion Andrew also spoke confidently about pursuing construction courses that he was *'good at'* and expressed a small amount of doubt regarding the benefits of GCSE

'I know I might need it. I think I know I might need it. That's what people tell me, that's what my teachers tell me. I guess that's why we're being made to do it. I've done it twice now.'
'Andrew' Carpentry level 1 Learner (Group Interview 2)

The progression in this extract illustrated how Andrew had begun to doubt the espoused benefits of the GCSE- moving from *'know'* to *'think'* and then *'that's what people tell me'*.

Similarly to Claire, Andrew also named teachers as a key group of people who had told him that he must pass GCSE. This was a recurring theme and a key finding throughout much of the data. For example, in his individual interview, Henry also commented on the image of a mansion (fig. 5.14, p.124) and, like Claire, mused on the fact that he was confused because teachers had told him he needed to pass the GCSE to be successful, but he was now doing well without it.

'I'd always been led to believe it was by teachers. They'd always say that once you get the result, it will impact your future life.' 'Henry' Construction Multi-Trade Level 2 Learner
(Group Interview 4)

Although Henry did not use the word 'lie', at best he appeared to imply that the teachers were leading him in the wrong direction. In the case of Claire, Andrew and Henry's comments, teachers were portrayed as the exponents of information and advice (the GCSE is important) that had not necessarily been shown to be correct in their own experience.

In these stories, Claire may have believed that the teachers were deliberately being untruthful, whereas Andrew and Henry were more doubtful of teachers' intentions. In the DA of other comments, teachers were mentioned as important stakeholders in the learners' lives, often as the gatekeepers who passed judgement and dictated how people were treated, and whether they did well.

'The ones who just passed the GCSE and the teacher said that they are most normal, not like us or something. And they pass and so they want me to do it again so I can pass. I don't know. She said people who don't pass, don't do well' 'Martha' Motor Vehicle Level 1 Learner,
Group Interview 1

In this comment the teacher has deemed the people who pass as 'normal'. This choice of wording implied that Martha, in this comment, was portraying people who do not pass as deviant or

abnormal. However, Martha also stated that the teacher said people who fail *'don't do well'*. This implied that people who did not pass were not only perceived as deviant, but also characterised as sub-normal, or lesser than the standardised norm. Crucially though, Martha's authorial position in this small anecdote is one of doubt- *'I don't know'*. Although she has recounted what the teacher reportedly said, she has not presented it as a truth she herself necessarily believed in.

The analysis of the transcripts and images had identified a key theme of the stigma of failure; being judged as not good enough. However, the DA had also identified a key theme of the benefits of the GCSE, and moreover, that the advantages of passing were often doubted by the learners. In part, this doubt was justified by learners because of their perception of the assessment regime, of which teachers were a part.

'I get confused and when I do work, the teacher says it's always wrong' 'Daljit' Level 2
Carpentry Learner (Group Interview 3)

Daljit chose an image of a man with his head in his hands (fig. 5.16) and discussed feelings of confusion and frustration. In the chosen image, the subject's face is unseen but the performed body language is clear- the image connotes frustration, and possibly desperation.



Figure 5.16 Image of 'Man With Head in Hands' Chosen by Daljit

(Pixabay, 2017e)

In Daljit's comments, the teacher was the gatekeeper of what was right and wrong. There are similarities to Martha's comment in that the teacher was not seen as a helper, or as a figure that

helps learning. The teacher was perhaps perceived as a judge- deciding what was normal, and what was right. In other words, the teacher's prime purpose was not to teach, but instead to assess.

A number of participants spoke about needing help, but not receiving it. In the fourth group interview, Joseph said that he needed help to catch up on English, whereas he did not need help in his main vocational programme. He illustrated this sentiment with the following image of a person with a sign stating 'help' (fig.5.17).



Figure 5.17 Image of 'Homeless Person Chosen by Joseph in Group Interview 4

(Pixabay, 2017c)

This image underscored that Joseph might feel helpless because he has to ask for help. The image also connotes a sense of inequality or unfairness as the subject portrayed seems to be homeless, and there is no indication that they are receiving support.

There was evidence in the data that some of the participants were suspicious and dismissive of the assessment regime that governed GCSE English. Henry considered it to be an unfair and arbitrary as it was '*potluck*' whether the examination paper was suited to the individual. Eric also characterised it as unfair because of changes in grade boundaries from year to year:

'So if the year above us does really well, it's going to be harder for us to get them marks because the number of marks you have to get goes up. So then I see that as not equal. It's

not equality, because they have a test that is easier than ours, but why do they have to change the marks?’ ‘Eric’, Plumbing Level 2 Learner (Group Interview 2).

Andrew agreed, and considered that the recent changes to the grades (from alphabetical to numerical) made the system even more confusing:

‘They have changed the grades now. They say you have to pass to have a good life, but they can’t even understand the grades’ ‘Andrew’, Carpentry Level 1 Learner (Group Interview 2).

These two statements both employed a discourse that implied the assessment regime was unfair. Both participants used the pronoun *‘they’* to refer to the people with the ability to change the assessment. This word implied that the powers behind the assessment regime were separate from the learners, and anonymous. Further, Andrew referred to the *‘they’* that govern the assessment. Later on in the interview Andrew stated that teachers told him he had to pass to do well. The data therefore suggested that teachers were not seen as helpful, but were seen as part of the assessment regime that was not only challenging and difficult, but also deliberately obscure. For example, the new grading system was described as difficult to understand by Simon in Group interview 2; *‘it just confuses employers’*.

In summary, the DA of the data suggested that the participants were well aware of the espoused benefits of passing the GCSE; namely, improved job prospects and positive economic consequences. Some learners doubted this narrative as their current circumstances seemed to evidence that they could be successful without passing GCSE. However, there was also evidence in their discourses that the GCSE was considered an unreliable, unfair and arbitrary act of judgement. Therefore, the teachers who represented the GCSE favourably were, at worst, liars, or, at best, wrong. In addition, teachers in the context of the GCSE were often characterised as unhelpful assessors, rather than

helpful facilitators of learning. Further, if the teachers were regarded as assessors only, in a context in which assessment had created failure for the learners, then teachers were part of the judgemental system that had created the stigma of failing GCSE.

5.2.4 Typical Story- Adult Life- Participants' Perceptions of Skills

Analysis found evidence that the participants often blamed their failure of the GCSE on the content of the curriculum. This was seen as a failure of the qualification, rather than a personal failure. A key criticism was that the GCSE represented topics that were not relevant to their everyday life and some participants suggested changing the texts that were used.

'Change it from the old literature. The 19th Century' Peter' Bricklaying Level 2 Learner (Group Interview 1).

This is a direct criticism of the GCSE reform that was intended to celebrate the 'great tradition of our literature' (Gove, 2010).

However, the DA also suggested that the criticisms of the GCSE went beyond the texts that were used. Analysis identified that there were three key aspects to the perceived irrelevancy of the GCSE syllabus: its tenuous links to the participants' vocational courses; its even more tenuous links to the world of work; and its relationship to the participants' views of adult life in general.

In Group Interview 2, the participants discussed the relevance of English GCSE to their vocational courses and skills. Trevor, a student of Plumbing, chose the image of the man walking away from an explosion (fig. 5.4, p.108) and stated that English was '*deadbrain*' because it had no relevance to his main course. When asked how the study of English could help him, he sarcastically replied: '*I don't*

know. To recognise the tools.' The phrase *'deadbrain'* is not very common terminology and conjured up an interesting image of an empty, unused, atrophied part of the brain. Trevor's sarcastic response also implied that he saw no use in the skills represented by the English GCSE, and considered them as basic as the ability to recognise an object.

There was a lively exchange in Group Interview 4 about the role that the GCSE played in their vocational courses. Joseph, an Electrical Installation student, recognised that he had to pass the GCSE in order to achieve the appropriate entry qualifications for the next level of his study, but was clear it had no relationship to the important skills he was developing as an electrician:

'I just think it's a waste of time. What I'm doing in English has gotten nothing to do with what I'm doing in electrics in life' 'Joseph', Electrical Installation Level 1 Learner (Group Interview 4)

The discourses used to describe the English GCSE in both discussions emphasised that it was pointless, with no purpose- *'deadbrain'* *'waste of time'*. This was also underlined by the repeated motif of boredom and frustration in the images chosen by participants. For example, Reena in Group Interview 4 chose an image and described it as *'bored'* and *'moody'* (fig. 5.18).



Figure 5.18 Image Chosen by Reena of 'Bored Girl' in Group Interview 4

(Pixabay, 2017a)

In contrast, the skills developed in vocational courses were often characterised as better because they enabled better progression and also were more intrinsically useful. Joseph spoke enthusiastically about his electrical course:

'I'm like perfect with that. I love it. I'm rather keen on it, so. It's more practical. It's more fun, in a way. You're reading English, reading books and annotating and all that stuff. In electrical, you're wiring up or learning practical skills. That's quite good. Yeah.' 'Joseph' Electrical Installation Level 1 Learner (Group Interview 4)

For Joseph, the skills that were developed in his vocational course were *'fun'*. It was implied they were more entertaining because they were practical. In this sense, *'fun'* and *'practical'* connoted a sense of activity, agency, as well as a notion of usefulness. In the same session, Henry, a multi-trade student agreed: *'I've been able to progress. I can see what I've done and I've gotten better.'*

Therefore, the skills and abilities learnt in the vocational programme were perceived as more tangible, with positive consequences.

The practical aspect of vocational learning, compared with the GCSE was identified as a recurring motif. In Group Interview 3 Daljit, a Carpentry student said that he enjoyed construction because it was *'hands-on'* and *'not always just sitting'*

'You get to move about so you're being active and doing more stuff than sitting and reading all day' 'Daljit Carpentry level 2 Learner (Group Interview 3')

These characteristics of vocational learning, when compared to the discourses used to describe GCSE English (boredom, fatigue, unhappiness, reading, no progress) implied that the participants saw vocational learning as not only a better experience, but a more valid form of learning, and a more valuable outcome. They considered VE as a more legitimate form of learning (Lave & Wenger, 1999b).

In contrast, the skills and knowledge associated with the English GCSE were not only described as having no relevance to the vocational courses, but were not useful anyway in any context. The discourses used to illustrate this in the discussion in Group Interview 4 employed humorous examples:

'I mean like I'm not going to be writing an electrical quotation in a sonnet' 'Joseph' Electrical Installation Level 1 Learner (Group Interview 4)

This juxtapositioning of *electrical* and *sonnet* was successfully used to elicit laughter from the other participants, and was used to clearly demonstrate that not only was the content of the GCSE English syllabus irrelevant to Joseph's electrical course, it was ridiculous in and of itself. In the same discussion, Joseph and Henry also used a joke to make the point that the academic GCSE curriculum as a whole could be viewed as irrelevant to the world of work.

'What's geography? It's not a work skill' 'Joseph' Electrical Installation Level 1 (Group Interview 4)

'So I'm going to come over, and we're going to do a construction job in the future, and need to know, 'Africa's that way'.' 'Henry' Construction Multi-Trade Level 2 student (Group Interview 4)

These two examples of improvised humour demonstrated that both Henry and Joseph were claiming a position of authority and knowledge- from their vantage point, with the benefit of vocational learning, they could identify that the skills taught in the GCSE English were not useful and, when contrasted with the serious and useful work skills of their VE study, were ridiculous and simply funny.

This theme was also picked up by other participants in the same group with examples from more domestic settings:

'But learning about Shakespeare and all that. A lot of the stuff you learn in maths anyway you won't use it in later life. You forget and adults will tell you that.' 'Reena' Child Care Level 2 Learner (Group Interview 3)

'Yeah, my mum don't draw an equation of what shopping to get. She just buys at the till. She's not doing bar charts.' 'Betsy' Business level 1 Learner (Group Interview 3)

In this exchange, Reena and Betsy were very certain that the skills that were represented by GCSE were not directly related to everyday life. Moreover, the adults in their lives confirmed this was the case. This assertion directly contrasted with the discourses discussed above regarding teachers and the supposed benefits of GCSE.

As discussed in the section above, most participants had been told about the benefits of the GCSE by teachers. However, for some participants, other adults in their lives told a different story. Several of the participants spoke about adults in their family or circle of friends who had inspired their ambition in vocational learning and career aspirations. In the individual interviews Martha spoke of sharing her passion for cars with her father, a lorry driver. Simon, the student of Information Technology also discussed his father who was an Engineer Manager and an expert in technology. Henry had been inspired to enrol on a construction course because of a summer job working on site with his girlfriend's father. In Group Interview 4, Joseph explained that he was interested in electrics because it was also an interest of his father's:

'I mean, I'm interested. Mostly my dad. He's not an electrician, but he's self-taught. And he messes around with all electrical stuff and controls and he wants them and stuff. And he sells them to all his mates. That's what I wanted to get involved in. It's just the best trade, really.'

I've worked with electricians. I've worked with labourers. Electrician all the way, 100%, every time. Yeah.' 'Joseph' Electrical Installation Level 1 (Group Interview 4)

Therefore, a number of the participants had insight into their vocational trades because of trusted adults in their lives. For Joseph, this role model represented an adult life that he aspired to because it was the '*best*'.

The skills and outcomes of vocational learning, as opposed to the GCSE, were championed strongly by many of the participants. In particular, the skills and outcomes were characterised as being part of an adult world that was considered authentic. In other words, some participants recognised the usefulness of the skills associated with their vocational skills in the adult worlds they were aspiring to join, but did not recognise the benefits of the GCSE. For example, in Group Interview 2, Trevor stated:

'Plumbing. All the money's in plumbing. My dad is working as handyman, so a few times I've spotted, too, some plumbing. Yeah. I'm already earning more than my mom. I'm working for my uncle. I get a buzz out of that in a way that I don't get a buzz at some of the things that I do at college.' 'Trevor' Plumbing level 2 Learner, (Group Interview 2)

In this extract Trevor is clear that his vocational skills have given him the ability to earn money, as well as delivering an enjoyable experience for him.

In summary, the skills and abilities learnt in GCSE were considered irrelevant to the participants' vocational courses, their chosen careers and, in some cases, wholly irrelevant to everyday adult life. Also in some cases, the participants told stories that confirmed that the trusted adults in their lives did not require GCSE to function or be successful. The adult lives that the participants experienced,

observed and aspired to were not reliant on succeeding at GCSE. Moreover, the skills that the GCSE represented were antithetical to adult life.

5.3 Summary of the Analysis of Typical Stories

The DA of the Phase 2 Group Interviews suggested that participants distrusted the GCSE retake as an unfair and arbitrary judgement; considered the teaching on the course was unhelpful; were doubtful that the GCSE was a useful addition to their skills, and valued their vocational skills and aspirations above the more academic skills of the GCSE. The findings suggested that the participants had strong aspirations and possessed an agentic learner identity that was resilient despite the perceived failures represented by the GCSE.

The findings from the workshops and the group interviews did suggest that learners felt a lack of agency with regards to the GCSE English retake. In the typical stories of *Being a Kid*, the learners spoke about GCSE English as a cultural artefact (Bartlett, 2005, Urrietta, 2011, 2012) that represented poor experiences at school, made them feel like they were being treated as a child, and made some of their classmates behave like children. However, this lack of agency did not pervade other aspects of their life. Rather, the GCSE threw the experiences from their vocational study into sharp relief. In *Adult Life*, the learners associated VE with the ability to earn money and be independent. Through VE, learners may have cultivated a sense of agency (Mercer, 2011), and a strong, resilient learner identity (Rubin, 2007; Tett, 2016), again, reinforced through their reactions to the GCSE. The learners had constructed discourses that positioned GCSE as a lie- a cultural artefact that represented unfair assessment, poor learning experiences and skills that were irrelevant.

6.0 Findings From Phase 3- Case Studies

Because the objective of this thesis is to highlight the individual experience, this chapter presents three key case studies (Thomas, 2013) of the learners who participated in all three phases of the research- the workshops, group interviews and individual interviews. Both Henry and Martha were eighteen years old and had retaken the GCSE English once before, so were studying it for the third time. Simon was seventeen years old, was retaking the qualification for the first time and therefore studying GCSE English for the second time. Their stories are presented in this chapter as case studies that exemplify and illuminate the key themes identified in the data presented in chapter 5.

Each story was analysed closely as a line and stanza narrative (Gee, 2004). Each line was a small piece of speech with one piece of relevant information. These were then organised into thematic stanzas to form a narrative with a clearly defined structure (Appendices 18-20, p. 299-309). The lines and stanzas were organised thematically, with identified sub-stories, sourcing data from both the group interview and the individual interview to present a unified narrative. This format was adopted in order to systematically analyse the interview transcripts. It had two functions: to represent the patterns and shapes of how the participants formed meaning, and also a representation of the analysis- or the meanings that were assigned to the data through analysis (Gee, 2004). The full line and stanza transcripts are included in the appendices (Appendices 18-20, p.299-309). The following analyses use extracts from this, as well as from the original interview transcripts (Appendices 15-17, p. 281-298) to illustrate analytical findings.

6.1 A Case Study: Henry

Henry was an eighteen-year-old college student, retaking GCSE English for the second time having gained a Grade 4 in a previous retake at school. He described himself as a shy, younger child who grew in confidence, but had a poor set of results at GCSE at age sixteen (key stage 4), achieving a Grade 2 in English Language and a Grade 3 in English Literature. He stayed on at school for one more year, studying Travel and Tourism (a subject he did not enjoy) and retaking English Language GCSE in which he gained a Grade 3, which was still below the required standard of Grade 4. He decided to move to college to study a more practical subject and, at the time of the interviews, was in the first term, retaking GCSE English and undertaking a Study Programme in Level 2 Construction (Multi-Trades).

Through the analysis of both the group interview, and the individual interview, the line and stanza presentation of Henry's story (Appendix 18, p.299) revealed a tale of the transition from school to college through a series of vignettes, and descriptions of key moments and times in his life. These included an emotionally charged description of opening his GCSE results and telling his family that he had failed; sitting the English GCSE examination; the experience of studying at school sixth form; a description of how he viewed himself as special and different, and an explanation of why he liked practical work. These initially appeared to be loosely connected, but when Gee's guidelines for organising speech into lines and stanzas (Gee, 2004) were applied, it became apparent that Henry's numerous stories were parts of one overarching narrative- a transition from school to college and a narrative of growing up.

The overarching narrative structure in this presentation of findings was chronological, telling Henry's story of moving from school to college. This structure was chosen during analysis as his sub-stories

and themes were often about change and transition. The main narrative was divided into the following sections: *setting, catalyst, crisis, evaluation, resolution* and then a *coda*.

In reviewing the idealised 'line and stanza' presentation of Henry's narrative, it is clear that he presented articulate and well described stories. The presentational form shows Henry's speech chunked up into lines with one pertinent piece of information or idea unit (Gee, 1986). For example:

CATALYST

SUB-STORY 3: Secondary School

Stanza 4

- 1. I was so sort of scatter-brained with all of the subjects*
- 2. It was so chaotic. I had, I think it was, seven or eight different subjects I was trying to learn all at once, all trying to get it down on a piece of paper.*
- 3. I'm a very single minded person.*
- 4. I think that's why I did so bad because I didn't know how to focus on doing everything rather than just one thing.*
- 5. Every single day was quite sort of stressful on me and I didn't know how to cope with it.*

Overall, the higher-order structure of this presentational form revealed a setting which set out Henry's background and his thoughts about his early school experiences and the formation of his own personality; a catalyst which set out the problems he had in secondary school; the crisis of receiving his GCSE results and the resulting impacts which then required a solution; an evaluation in which he pondered on whether the perceived stigma and consequences of GCSE failure were worth a crisis; a resolution in which he transferred to a vocational course and finally, a coda which posed questions and concerns about the fickle nature of GCSE retake results.

The identified sub-stories highlighted Henry's story about his academic track record, the issues he encountered and his eventual success at college because of the skills and experience of vocational education as part of his construction course. At primary school, he was in a lower set, in part because of his refusal to practice neat handwriting. He considered himself an unusual younger child

because of his shyness. His transition to secondary school also marked him out as being different. He described overcoming bullying and developing a confident, *over-dramatic* identity and style. There were related themes that ran through Henry's stories that were told in the group interview and individual interview. All these themes were dominated by a repeated frame of individuality, or being different. In fact, the notion of difference was a major theme in Henry's self-authoring and worldview and in the overarching, identified, connected themes of *agency, consequences, stigma* and *GCSE as a cultural artefact* that were to be found throughout Henry's contributions to the group interview and individual interview.

6.1.1 Henry's Story- Being Different

Henry's story positioned him as both an object and an agent of difference. The line and stanza analysis identified a main story regarding Henry's early life. However, it also helped to pinpoint a number of lines, or spurts of speech in which Henry positioned himself as being 'different'. These differences were described as Henry being dissimilar to family members; being isolated from other people; being different academically; being less academically able but also wanting to be seen to be different, and wanting to do things his own way. In the following extract of the analysis, these are highlighted.

SETTING

SUB-STORY 1: Younger Life

Stanza 1

1. *Quite lovely people. They've raised me well.*
2. *It's quite a stable family life.*
3. *My older brother's ten years older than me.*
4. *He's 'out there'.*
5. *And he's got a different dad, but I still see him as my full brother because he's just an amazing person.*
6. *And you've got my sister who's opposite me. She's A's across the board. She can do it, she can be successful, I can't.*

7. *And she's currently doing really well. A lot better than I was at her age. Honestly, she's a lot more academic.*

Stanza 2

8. *I was a very shy kid.*
9. *I would shun people*
10. *Shut them out*
11. *Didn't want to be a bother*
12. *My only problem was my handwriting. So a lot of the time I had teachers who couldn't understand what I'd written.*
13. *And for the longest time I was in the lower set for maths*
14. *'Why is he in this class? He can do better than this. He's already finished the work'*
15. *So she moved me up a class. And ever since I've been pretty good at maths*

SUB-STORY 2: Being Different

Stanza 3

16. *I'd always do stuff my own way*
17. *I never really learned the way other people did*
18. *(My handwriting) was quite messy.*
19. *When they used to give you those exercises where you would draw a single letter, I wouldn't listen*
20. *I wanted to be special.*
21. *I used to watch old movies*
22. *It gave me a lot more to talk about to a lot of different people.*
23. *I think it matured me a lot quicker*
24. *I think I just like to stand out quite a bit to be honest*
25. *I like being the centre of attention, and when I'm not I like being able to support people and have people sort of notice me*
26. *Because if I don't, then who will?*

In discussing his family, he initially used relatively formal vocabulary that read almost like a review and therefore distanced him from them: *'Quite lovely people. They've raised me well.'* He then described himself as different from his siblings because his brother was *'very out there'*, and his sister was more academically successful. He spoke about being shy when he was younger. However, he did not use the passive voice; he was not shut out by other people; instead he employed an active voice: shutting people out and shunning people because he did not want to talk to them. The language used here implied an active and deliberate choice rather than a passive position. As such, Henry described a younger, socially situated identity that was formed through choices of individuality and separation. Similarly, when he described his primary school experience, he cited his *'terrible'* handwriting as a distinctive feature, making him different from others. Again, the

language employed implied an active choice in this. He stated that he always did *'stuff my own way'*. He described himself as wanting attention, and wanting to be *'special'*.

In his individual interview, Henry mentioned a number of examples that might have marked out socially situated identities or activities that he perceived to be different from others and his peers. He spoke about not watching television, like his peers, but watching *'old movies'* and *'VHS'* instead. He was interested in anime, and considered that his cultural tastes were more mature were influenced by his older brother. Notably, these franchises have become assimilated into adult nerd culture, a recent cultural phenomenon that reclaims genres such as comics, science fiction and fantasy as a *cool* alternative to mainstream popular culture (Turner, 2013).

Henry described his shyness when younger as a mark of difference; conversely, he also described his growing confidence in speaking and expressing himself (in part developed by his different cultural tastes) as something that was remarkable and special: *'I had sort of glimpses of being very outgoing and over-dramatic, like I am today'*. He openly acknowledged his love of attention, as part of his desire to be special. He also linked this to a desire to help and support people. To exemplify this, he related a story of overcoming prolonged bullying at school by befriending the bully, finding a common interest (being bullied) and making friends. Henry also used this anecdote to explain that the experience of being bullied helped him to develop and grow in confidence.

Therefore, Henry's descriptions of events and activities in his life potentially could have positioned him as an object of difference, focused on negative aspects of being different- being bullied for having *'big feet'*, being *'slow'* and not being *'athletic'*; being shy; and not wanting to talk to people. However, for Henry, being different was special and he was an active subject and agent- he

described difference as a positive, whether it was his development of confidence because of the experience of bullying; his shyness disguising his ability to talk *'his parent's ears off'*; his love of old movies, VHS and nerd culture; his decision to *'change track'* to a practical course or, indeed, his idiosyncratic approach to handwriting.

6.1.2 Henry's Story- Agency- Writing, Reading and Speaking

The story Henry told about practising his handwriting in primary school was very detailed: the fact it was so detailed may have illustrated the significance he ascribed to this moment in his life.

'It was quite messy [handwriting]. When I was quite young, I'd always do stuff my own way. And because of it, I never really learned the way most people did. So for example, when they used to give you those exercises where you draw a single letter or something like that, three on a line, I wouldn't listen. And I'd draw 20 or so 'A's, all really small, across this massive line. So when everyone else has got eight or nine done, I'm still there drawing the same letter repeatedly in this tiny little writing.'

The detail in the description implies that Henry saw this moment as meaningful in his life story. He used it as an example of why he did not do well at school, but he also used it as an example of a deliberate choice – doing stuff his own way. This description of his early efforts at writing might be related directly to Henry's views on literacies or making meaning. He linked his messy handwriting directly to his teachers' inability to understand him and recognise his talent in maths at primary school. His written skills were characterised as elements in his socially constituted *difference* and, in his story, he may not have necessarily ascribed importance to written communication. For example, in the above extract, tellingly, he spoke about *drawing* letters rather than *writing*. This might be related to the fact that he was describing an activity that took place in an early childhood setting,

but could also be due to the fact that Henry did not see handwriting practice as a relevant form of making meaning. Instead, it was merely drawing shapes.

In contrast, Henry described his ability to talk and communicate verbally in confident terms. He considered that his tastes in distinctive popular culture gave him a *'lot more to talk about to a lot of different people'*. He talked about his shyness as a front, and that he needed to find an *outlet*. He described his style as *'outgoing and over-dramatic'*. Certainly, this view of his style as being dramatic seemed to be backed up by the social languages he deployed in the interviews. For example, a pivotal moment in Henry's story was the story of opening his GCSE results. In consideration of his ability to make meaning, this following extract is a strong example of how he did this with real power and impact. It was also pertinent, that Henry used this story in the group interview. In effect, this was a story told to an audience of the researcher, but also a story constructed, told and performed for an audience of his peers.

'It's like a wound that you can't really feel unless it happens to you, and it's like oh. It was the experience of going home and telling my mum that I'd failed again. I'd wasted 10 years for nothing, and then I'd failed again. It's like these pictures.'



Figure 6.1 Image of Frustrated Man, Chosen by 'Henry'

(Pixabay, 2018b)



Figure 6.2 Image of Homeless Child, Chosen by 'Henry'

(Pixabay, 2013)

'It's the same feeling every time, like feeling your gut wrench. You feel like you're going to throw up. It's such stress. I don't want to fail again, I don't want to go back to my parents and say, "I've messed up again. I've got to do it all over again".'

The suggestion here is not that Henry over-dramatised or embellished his experience to be mendacious. Rather, the dramatic and performative discourses he employed here illustrated a way of making meaning. The images he chose showed people in distress. The image of the children implied threat and harm as the figures appeared destitute and vulnerable. This image in particular could be related to Henry's comment about telling his parents about failure as it is an image of a child. In his recount of telling his parents, Henry positioned himself as a child. At several points in his narrative he returned to the idea of having to tell his mother, his parents and his family about failure. He spoke about the actual event of having to do it, as well as the fear of having to do it again in the future. The chosen image implied destitution, but also the possibility of rejection, loneliness and harm.

In Henry's narrative, the simile of a *wound* is used to describe failing the GCSE. This implied it was something external that was inflicted, making a personal and painful impact. Similarly, the impact of failing was also compared to physical ailments- gut wrenching, throwing up. In addition, he

performed elements of his story, relating imagined direct speech, using emotive tone and pitch. In this extract, Henry skilfully used imagery to figure out the experience of failing GCSE English: an experience that seemingly positioned him as a victim of violence or illness. It is also notable that in the individual interview he described his experience of the more academic study in school sixth form as *'torture'*.

Equally, he was able to reflect upon and describe his ability to use written communication, in the context of academic study, the GCSE retake, as well as his everyday work and life. A recurring motif in his narrative was *'a piece of paper'*. This was a notable image as Henry took a commonly understood cultural artefact that might have represented schoolwork, academia and writing, and refigured it for his own narrative purposes. Henry used the image and idea of *a piece of paper* repeatedly in differing contexts. For example, in the group interview, he talked about feeling a lack of progress in English.

*'I changed track to do a practical course, and I'm loving it compared to what I used to do because while as before, I didn't feel like I was making any progress. I'd get somewhere, and as much as I'd focus on it a lot, all I had at the end of the day was **a piece of paper** that just said what I'd written. Whereas with construction, I've built stuff. I've been able to progress. I can see what I've done, and I've gotten better.'*

In this extract, *the piece of paper* was the product of English study and, in Henry's view, it was neither important nor meaningful. He echoed this view when comparing his current, more practical course to English:

'Say your boiler breaks and you've been doing plumbing. Fix it yourself. Whereas with English, it's like at any point, I can go out and read a book and improve that. But I haven't really got anything other than to say, "I've read this book and enjoyed it." That's it.'

Henry considered that his practical work offered real, tangible progress that he could experience. Moreover, practical work resulted in a real result or outcome- an ability to fix things, or a physical object that had been built. In contrast, he considered the outcome of English study to be intangible and of less value.

A piece of paper is also used as a metaphor for barriers to success and achievement:

*'I can read and I can speak as well as I can, really, but when it came to finally putting it into words and writing on **a piece of paper**, I really struggled with that. It's almost like there's a wall there between what I want to say and what I can write.'*

Here, a piece of paper was compared to a wall, a barrier to meaning and making meaning. Henry recognised that he had ideas and words- *the piece of paper* was an encumbrance that impeded his ability to communicate. Paper as a barrier was a recurring motif. When Henry described his struggle to cope with eight subjects at once during secondary school, he spoke about trying to learn all the subjects *'at once, all trying to get it down on **a piece of paper**'*. He also repeatedly referred to the examination as the *exam paper*: an extrinsic object that contained criteria and content that was difficult to predict and prepare for. It was *'potluck'* or a *'roulette wheel'* whether you got a paper that suited you: *'It panics you because you don't know what you're going to get when you open that exam **paper**.'* In his case, the exam paper did not suit and presented an insurmountable barrier to achieving the desired grade:

*'You just hear the word, "Start." And you open this **paper** and you don't understand a single word.'*

The motif of a piece of paper was also used when Henry spoke about the desired result of GCSE English- passing the exam and receiving the certificate: *'that one specific **piece of paper** that says you've passed'*. However, for Henry, the significance of the piece of paper that communicates the result is symbolic of failure and, moreover, a symbol of *'being told you're no good'*.

*'All that time working up to that just feels like it's wasted when you read that **piece of paper** that just says, "You didn't get high enough mark in this."*

In summary, the analysis of Henry's story demonstrated effective and powerful oral discourses that refigured identities, significance and sign systems. Henry disavowed the espoused Figured World (Strauss, 1992) of GCSE retake through the co-option of a cultural artefact- a *piece of paper*. Rather than viewing paper as a valid carrier of communication and an important tool for English study, Henry conceived the *piece of paper* as a meaningless product, a barrier to communication, an extrinsic object that offered a bar to success and finally, a means of conveying failure and low status.

6.1.3 Henry's Story- Stigma and Consequence

Henry's construction of the GCSE as less important than VE directly contrasted with institutional and policy discourses that considered vocational education was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as the second class option (Ainley & Bailey, 1997; Billett, 2014; Fuller & MacFadyen, 2012; Richardson, 2007; Rose, 2012; Smith & Polesel, 2010; Winch, 2012b). Equally, in his story, Henry acknowledged that there was a perceived stigma in VE as well as in failing GCSE.

*'Well, even the whole concept of talking about it, it just makes you look so cr*p. Like what people ask: 'I got four Ds and Cs. What did you get?' They think you can tell what type of person he is. But my grades aren't me that much because they can't do what I can do. Do you know what I mean? You see some people you think, 'Oh, the sh*t they're doing, useless'*

And they're like- you see some with 10 GCSEs: 'Oh, they're going to be a business person, doctor', and most of the time it's not even like that.'

As noted above, Henry's narrative made repeated use of second-hand reported discourses, which were often used to dramatise the context and emphasise the point that was being made. In this statement, Henry discussed the stigma of grading and academic failure. Henry considered that people who achieve many GCSEs were judged to be headed for careers that were valued as higher status in socio-economic terms. Interestingly, Henry made this point through role modelling others' imagined speech- *'what people ask'*, and assigning hypothetical emotions and judgements to others. This imagined speech was also relayed in the present tense, making it feel very direct and current. This social language- a second-hand, imagined speech distanced Henry from these opinions, but also placed him in an objectified position, as the person that is judged for poor academic performance in the GCSE, and the person who is pursuing a vocational path- *'the sh*t they're doing'*. This second-hand grammatical structure might have signified that Henry felt victimised by the comments that labelled him as a certain type of person. However, it might have also signified that he disagreed with the sentiments of the commentary, a reading that is reinforced by his comment that *'it's not even like that.'*

Certainly, Henry understood that the espoused benefits of achieving GCSE English also meant that failure might have had negative consequences beyond immediate feelings and value judgements. In the group interview, when he reflected on the experience of failing he said: *'You won't be successful, like this photo.'*



Figure 6.3 'Mansion' Image Chosen by Henry
(Pixabay, 2015b)

However, the photograph chosen (Fig. 6.3) used glossy advertising conventions and portrayed a very aspirational, glamorous image that might be read as fake or divorced from reality. Henry also referred to this image in his individual interview:

'I'd always been led to believe it was by teachers. They'd always say that once you get the result, it will impact your future life. It will determine what jobs you do in the future, how well you get paid, how sort of financially stable you'll be. They make it sound like everything rides on just your skills in those subjects alone'.

In this extract, Henry was expressing doubt regarding what his teachers at school had told him. Directly after this extract he stated he was confused as his teachers had told him he would not do well, but he felt he was, even without passing the GCSE. However, Discourse Analysis of his choice of image and chosen language did not seem to suggest that he was confused. The image he had chosen was a carefully framed artifice. Similarly, the grammatical patterns of his language (Gee, 1986, 2004) demonstrated that he viewed the teachers' views as constructed and incorrect. He used the past perfect tense: (*I had been*) which signified that his belief in his teachers had started in the past, had been true in the past, but was not necessarily true now. To emphasise that this was in the past, and that it had now stopped he stated: '*They would always*'. This form of words implied that the teachers often said this in the past. Unlike *used to* and *simple past*, the use of the words *would*

always also expressed Henry's exasperation and annoyance at the teachers. This exasperation might have been because he now disbelieved it. Again, this can be inferred from his choice of words. The teachers *made* (constructed) *it sound like* (not real). In contrast, he was very clear that his experience was real: *'I'm doing so well now that I've left school and gone to college instead.'*

One of Henry's stated reasons for making better progress at College was the fact that he was only studying one main subject alongside English.

'I'm a very single-minded person. Once I focus on something, I do really well at that one thing and shut everything else out. So trying to focus on eight different things throughout the day, throughout the week, every single day was quite sort of stressful on me and I didn't know how to cope with it'

In consideration of some of the literature that was reviewed in Chapter Two, some of the criticisms of vocational education, and the rationale in part for its lesser status, was the fact that the curriculum was narrow and skills based (Fisher & Simmons, 2012). In contrast, Henry considered that the studying a narrower, more focused curriculum gave him two advantages: a better chance of success and a prioritisation of skills that mattered and were more worthwhile. In addition, college was *'calmer'* than school because he could focus better and he did not have *'pointless lessons'*. However, he did not present his inability to cope at school as a complete weakness. He described himself as single-minded, which implied a strength and considered that he could do really well if he focused on one matter at a time. In this extract, Henry seemed to be implying that his failure at school was the fault of the school context and conditions, rather than an intrinsic fault of his own.

Henry's story, when he described his vocational course and the satisfaction he derived from making progress and the twin tangible outcomes of built objects and his skills underlined his view that he was doing well under different conditions at college. He articulated his developing construction skills

as part of his figured identity as an adult: able to support himself, and help other people. This latter point echoed his stated identity as a younger child as a person who wanted to stand out, support people and have people notice him. Henry repeated the word *skills* a number of times in his individual interview, primarily he highlighted the different skills his teachers at school valued compared to the skills he was developing as part of his construction course.

In direct contrast to his teachers' views, and to some of the policy literature reviewed in Chapter Two (Select Committee on Social Mobility, 2016), Henry considered his construction skills as higher order and higher status because they were tangible and of use. The skills that were represented by school were exemplified by spending an *'entire year sitting behind a keyboard typing away'*, conjuring an image of passivity stretched out over a long time. For Henry, school represented boredom, *'My God, it felt like a century'* and skills that were of no use with no discernible impact: *'And it felt like torture just watching the whole world go by as I did nothing to impact it at all.'*

Alternatively, he figured his construction skills as positive, active, of use and tangible: *'So I feel those skills help me a lot more than ones that sixth form tried pushing me to get.'* In Henry's view, English skills were prioritised at school, but were less important, whereas his construction course was an independently made choice- he *'changed track'* because of a positive experience with his girlfriend's father- and this was a choice with positive consequences.

6.2 A Case Study- Martha's Story

Martha had gained a grade 3 in English GCSE at school, having retaken it once at school in a repeated GCSE year and had gained a grade 4 in mathematics.. At the time of the interviews, she

was in the first term of college, retaking GCSE English and undertaking a study programme in Level 1 Motor Vehicle. Martha was a contributor in a workshop, had attended one of the group interviews and also participated in an individual interview. Her story is presented here as a single case that exemplified and illuminated the key themes identified in the data.

Martha was a student from a Polish family. She had been born in Poland and moved to England with her family as a very young child. She had a hearing impairment. She was studying Motor Vehicle, an interest based in part on a shared love of mechanics and cars with her father who was a lorry driver. As with Henry's story, Gee's (2004) guidelines to better process and understand language were used to organise the data from both interviews into a line and stanza representation of a text (Gee, 1986, 2004). This analysis of the text was organised into two key sections based on time- the past and the present. This was because through the analysis of both the group interview, and the individual interview, it was identified that Martha's story was unlike Henry's- it was not a tale of transition and it did not lend itself to the same chronological structure of setting, crisis and resolution. Instead, Martha described a series of states and contexts that had acted as barriers to learning in her past, and then recounted her current circumstances and future hopes. The perceived barriers in the past had included her nationality, her need to acquire greater proficiency in English, her disability, and her experiences at with teachers at school compared with her experiences at college.

6.2.1 Martha's Story- The Past- Stigma and School

In her Group Interview, Martha chose an image of a prison (Fig. 5.9. p. 117):

'I think that the person chose that picture because he was thinking that he has no choice or something. And he can't go forward or just move forward and just going back something. He's just stuck in a one lonely place.'

Martha also spoke about the image of prison in her individual interview when she spoke about her difficulties in English and understanding linked to her hearing impairment. She spoke about feeling ignored and stigmatised at school by her teacher- *'She put us in boxes, and I wasn't good.... She thought I was not good'*. In both her interpretations of the image, Martha described being trapped- either *stuck* or in *boxes*. This implied GCSE English was both a trap, because Martha was forced to retake it, as well as a stigma, because Martha was labelled or put in 'boxes' by her teacher.

The line and stanza structure that evolved from the analysis revealed that Martha cited a number of external factors that led her to being stigmatised or treated differently or unfairly. In the third stanzas, the DA of the data identified the theme of bullying, often attributed to her hearing impairment.

SUB-SUB-STORY Hearing Impairment

Stanza 3

- *I was not treated well as I had hearing aids.*
- *I was born deaf.*
- *people have three tubes behind their eardrum. I have two*
- *I was born like that.*
- *So they can't do operation on that.*
- *They can't do that.*

In this analysis, Martha's speech emphasises that her hearing impairment is congenital- repeating *'born'* twice, and repeating that *'they can't'* operate for emphasis. This interpretation might imply a sense of fatalism in her attitude: she was not treated well because she was born deaf, and had hearing aids. In other words, this treatment because of her disability was inevitable and expected.

However, a key theme was her attitude towards and opinions of teachers. The data suggested that Martha considered teachers as an external barrier.

SUB SUB STORY: Unhelpful teachers

Stanza 6

1. *I was in primary school*
2. *I didn't get much help*
3. *And I was off track*
4. *And then secondary*
5. *I didn't get as much help*
6. *she wasn't giving us enough detail*
7. *they weren't teaching us enough detailed things*
8. *Still ain't helping me enough*

In contrast to her fatalistic view of bullying by peers because of her hearing aids, Martha's opinion of teachers was highly critical and implied that this treatment was not inevitable or understandable.

She suggested that the teachers chose to behave in this way towards her. In the past they had either ignored her in favour of others who were 'normal', had not been good at explaining the subject or, had been actively unhelpful, blocking her from asking for support. In her narrative Martha blamed this teacher behaviour and attitude on a sense that her teachers had stereotyped her as 'not good enough'. In addition, some elements of Martha's narrative implied that she had been less successful at school, and in English study because English was an additional language. She spoke Polish at home and stated that: 'I think it's a bit of a problem when I speak to others. It's like I'm a bit shy to people to talk and I sometimes mess up with languages.' Martha linked this issue with her assertion that she was not treated well at school.

Therefore, in Martha's story, teachers were not agents of help and support, but instead were agents that blocked her from accessing support.

Stanza 7

28. *Asking my friend for help*
29. *And the teacher was like 'No you cannot talk'*
30. *I was like 'Can I ask for help'*
31. *No.*

This sense of teachers as external barriers was emphasised by how Martha referred to them. Martha often uses the definite article '*the teacher*'. Linguistically, the use of the definite article in English is commonly considered to denote something uniquely specific or familiar (Birner & Ward, 1994). However, in this case, Martha's teacher was not familiar to the listener and the teacher is not uniquely specific. In her first mention of the teacher in the group interview, Martha used the definite article from the start instead of more usual conversational devices such as 'a teacher at my school' or 'my teacher'. Another view of definite article usage is one in which speakers select the definite article to convey the prominence of an entity in the discourse (Epstein, 2002). In Martha's discourse, she does not refer to a teacher- *the teacher* had an important symbolic function in her story- the entity that stopped her seeking help, boxed her in, and deemed her not to be good enough.

In tandem with *the teacher*, some of Martha's statements implied that *school* was also a prominent and important symbol in her narrative. In discussion of the prison picture (fig. 5.9, p.117), Martha described school as '*a bit messed up*'. The image she chose showed a prison block with a small crowd of people, and a row of many, anonymous prison cells. In the individual interview, this image prompted the following comments, included in the fourth stanza under the heading 'too many people':

'In English, in my other school, it was a bit messed up. As they teach there's more students which were talking in the background. And the teacher was more focusing on them than teaching the lesson. And she wasn't giving us enough detail about English like down here. She put us in boxes, and I wasn't good... she thought I was not good'.

As in her group interview, Martha used the image of a prison to illustrate stigma- '*I wasn't good*'. It may be that, for Martha, the image of prison represented a consequence for not being academically able. Being put in a box, or imprisoned, was a punishment. However, in the individual interview this

image also illustrated a school environment that was messed up, that was crowded, and that offered other people attention whilst ignoring Martha. There was a sense from both the chosen image, and Martha's discourse that she felt anonymous and overlooked at school- one amongst many. In addition, the concept of prison could also be interpreted as a mandatory punishment that was prescribed and enforced by authority, as well as an experience that was shameful and one in which individuality and care for the person is overlooked.

In her group interview, Martha chose the following image (fig. 6.4).



Figure 6.4 Image of a Boy with Stupid Written on his Forehead Chosen by Martha in Group Interview 1

(Lewis, 2016)

She commented that in school she did not receive help. The choice of image inferred that she may have considered that this lack of support was linked to teachers labelling her as stupid. This potentially resonated with her choice of the image of prison to represent the stigma of GCSE English retake.

The line and stanza analysis of the data illustrated that, for Martha, the stigma attached to retaking English, or rather, not being very good at English, was cemented firmly in the past, at school, and driven by the teacher who denied her help in favour of others. In common with other participants, such as Henry, Martha also cited the curriculum at school as a key reason that set the conditions for her failure.

'It's because of in school, you have too many lessons concentrating in one. So you have to concentrate in science, English, math, and so on, which is seven lessons. And it's too much information in my head, so I was all lost with science, English, and math.'



Figure 6.5 Image of an 'Exploding Head' Chosen by Martha

(Pixabay, 2018c)

Part of Martha's feelings of loneliness (reported in the group interview), being overlooked and being one anonymous part of many were also linked with the school curriculum and the number of subjects. Using the image of an exploding head (fig. 6.5), Martha described having to hold *'too much information'* in her head, and therefore feeling lost. The image enhanced this point and illustrated notions of explosive pressure. Similarly to Henry, Martha disliked studying too many subjects at once and preferred the narrower, more specialised, vocational curriculum at college.

6.2.2 Martha's Story- The Present-Vocational Study and Agency

Martha considered that the environment of school, and the teacher's attitude towards her, created conditions that caused her to fail: *'I was not understanding the things they were talking about'* (Stanza 11), and this then created feelings of worry and fear as she became concerned about future failure. In consideration of GCSE English, Martha was clear that she was *'not good'*: *'Even though I asked what it means, I still didn't understand.'* In direct contrast, Martha reported that she enjoyed college, and the opportunity to *'focus on one thing'*.

There were three factors that Martha considered beneficial for her learning at college. Firstly, there were fewer people in a class, meaning that the teachers could be more helpful to her. Secondly, only studying one main subject (and English) was more focused and enjoyable and gave her more of a chance to succeed: *'Motor vehicle is fun. It's not a lot of jobs'*. Thirdly, and most importantly, Martha spoke confidently about her *'passion'* and ability in her chosen trade- motor vehicle engineering. Unlike English at school, where the teacher *'wasn't giving us enough detail'*, Martha presented Motor Vehicle as a logical, focused and detailed skill. Despite her initial description of the subject as *'not a lot of jobs'*, the line and stanza analysis showed that in the description of her trade, she used small spurts of speech, utilising technical language that illustrated the precision, sequencing and significant detail of her skill and work.

Stanza 14

53. *Plate lights*
54. *So I took the whole steering wheel*
55. *check the cables*
56. *make the brake light work*
57. *Now I've got to fit that back in*
58. *so it's going to the BMW service right now*
59. *on the 23rd*
60. *I was more interested when my dad was starting to help me*

In this description, Martha presented as an active and knowledgeable agent. She had clear understanding and control over her technical skill and, importantly, the language associated with technical skills. As an English language learner vocational education was associated with successful use of English, in contrast to the GCSE which was not. In Martha's story, her vocational skills are agentic behaviour. Again, similarly to Henry, she also cited a positive adult role model- in this case, her father- as a key reason for her enthusiasm for cars. Her passion for cars was influenced by her experiences with him and the development of her skills are a gateway to a desirable version of future adult life: *'I want to be a mechanic, have my own company.'*

6.4 A Case Study- Simon's Story

Simon was a seventeen-year-old college student, retaking GCSE English for the first time having gained a Grade 4 at school. He described himself as a poorly behaved school pupil who had transferred to a new school during his school career because of disruptive behaviour. At sixteen, he decided to move to college to study Information Technology because of his interest in computing and, at the time of the interviews, was in the first term, retaking GCSE English and undertaking a Study programme in Level 2 Information Technology. His story is presented here as a single case that exemplified and illuminated the key themes identified in the data. As with the previous two case studies, Gee's guidelines to better process and understand language was used to organise the data from both interviews into a line and stanza representation of a text (Gee, 1986, 2004). This analysis of the text was organised into two key sections based on the two organising themes- *work* and *learning*.

6.3.1 Simon's Story-Work and Agency

The line and stanza analysis divided Simon's comments into two main themes- work and learning. This was because the DA of the data suggested that Simon conceptualised these two realms as completely separate, with very little cross-over, even in his main vocational study programme. In describing his current employment (in a fast food restaurant) Simon emphasised his long hours, being '*in charge*', and the '*responsibility*' (stanza 1). The analysis of the interview demonstrated that Simon's descriptions of his work and his vocation (computers) was directly comparable with his description of his father, as illustrated by the following table (Table 6).

Simon's Self-Description (of work and vocation)	Simon's Description of his Father
<p>I have a lot of responsibility</p> <p>I sometimes am in charge</p>	<p>My dad's an Engineer Manager, does lots of things for (redacted) UK.</p> <p>It's like in cinemas and that. He basically manages the cinemas.</p> <p>He's all around the country and stuff, so. He's important.</p>
<p>I have always been the one that people will come to for help. Computers</p> <p>I loved computers so I'd just pick things up very quickly</p> <p>I know a lot about the tech world. I follow a lot of stuff. I'm just really knowledgeable about tech stuff.</p>	<p>And builds the projectors and stuff. He's very expert in mechanics and technology for the digital cinema. He knows a lot.</p>

Table 6.1 Comparison of Descriptions of Simon and his Father

In the realm of work and vocational skills, Simon characterised himself as responsible, knowledgeable, expert and authoritative. Similarly, in describing his father, Simon emphasised that he had the same characteristics. He compared his managing of the restaurant at a young age with his father 'basically' managing the cinema and having responsibility nationwide. Both he and his father were described as knowledgeable or expert. In summary, the analysis revealed similarities

between the vocabulary and themes that Simon used in relation to himself and his father. These themes suggested that Simon had a sense of agency in the realm of his work and his vocational skills as well as displaying agentic behaviour. For example, he confidently asserted that he was now 'better' than his Dad. Other people came to him for help now, including his father. He earned money to contribute to the family; he was in control, and he had set up his own e-commerce business. However, in discussing the realm of school, learning and English study, Simon positioned himself in a very different manner. Instead of being in charge and expert Simon described an experience of being out of control and inexperienced.

6.3.2 Simon's Story-Learning English, Agency and Skills

In describing his work, Simon was very clear that he had responsibility beyond his years. In contrast, when he described himself at school he characterised himself as '*I was just a really naughty kid back then*'. The choice of vocabulary (*kid, naughty*) emphasized that school was an experience for children. This in turn implied that Simon did not feel that he had agency in this situation as children are not conventionally perceived as having direct power and influence.

When describing his school experience, Simon referred to his 'anxiety' in attending large classes in which he felt he did not understand and did not 'fit in'. In discussion regarding school, he chose the following images, and described school as a '*dead end*'.

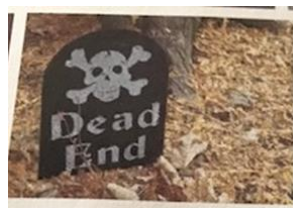


Figure 6.6 Dead End Image Chosen by Simon

(Needpix, 2017)



Figure 6.7 Image of a Homeless Person Chosen by Simon

(Pixabay, 2017c)

The chosen images connoted feelings of threat, fear and helplessness. Figure 6.7 explicitly showed a homeless person asking for help. The signs in figure 6.6 emphasised lack of agency, hopelessness and inevitability through the word 'dead'. This was also underlined as one of the signs resembled a gravestone and featured a skull and crossbones.

Similarly to Martha, Simon described his teachers at school as unhelpful and as active agents in stopping him progressing. In this instance, Simon referred to his teachers as instrumental in his transfer to another school because they were untruthful about him.

'School was a bit of a dead end [points to pictures (figs 6.6, 6.7)] because I think any help was what I needed, and some of the teachers-- they just kind of made up stuff about me. And that's why I got transferred. Yeah. I didn't really get help. Sometimes I would just not go to class. And they wouldn't do anything about it but just punish me. There was reasons on why I didn't go to my class, but they wouldn't really try to understand why and help me. It was a dead end because it wasn't for me.'

When considered, using the theme of agency, the analysis of this extract suggested that Simon's evaluation of this experience was that he had no agency at the time, but that the treatment he received from his teachers was unfair and unjustified. He expressed opinion with the benefit of hindsight- *'I think any help was what I needed'*, and concluded that the lack of help (and the active

antipathy he experienced from teachers) resulted in him not belonging' *'it wasn't for me.'* This echoed his later assertion in the interview that *'I could tell I was not fitting in'* at school.

Therefore, Simon's story revealed a picture of school that was unwelcoming and antagonistic. In this setting he had little control except to reject learning and not attend, or be *'naughty'*. These feelings had also continued at college during post-sixteen study.

'It just sometimes makes me really angry that I have to do things that I don't get. This makes me laugh, but it does show that I get-- I can't really explain it. I get angry. I sit in class sometimes and I just feel like kicking the chair.'

In this extract, Simon struggled to explain the feelings he experiences during English lessons at college, using the image of a crying child (fig. 5.8, p.114) to try to illustrate them. The image shows a very young child, possibly echoing Simon's earlier comments about being a naughty kid. One possible interpretation is that Simon equated the experience of studying English as being like a child at school again; frustrated, emotional and out of control.

Part of Simon's frustration appeared to be linked to feeling incompetent and unskilled in relation to English study. As noted above, Simon confidently expressed his skills at work and in relation to his chosen vocation of computers. However, for the English GCSE he was less confident. He considered that he was unable to remember and recall concepts.

SUB SUB STORY- Ability at English

STANZA 14

- 21. I always needed help,*
- 22. because I didn't really understand.*
- 23. Because you have to memorize everything*
- 24. I just found that really daunting,*
- 25. and annoying, and stuff because I'd have to revise quotes,*
- 26. and if I don't remember, then I get less marks.*

6.3.3 Simon's Story- The Perceived Benefits of Learning GCSE English

Simon also strongly stated that the experience of retaking English was not a beneficial learning experience in and of itself.

'I'm not really sure I'm studying to help me because I'm not—it's doing some of the same things again, you know. I want to pass so I can do IT but I don't see the point of repeating stuff I've already done.'

In this extract, Simon acknowledged that he needed to pass the GCSE English in order to gain the entry requirements for the next level of his vocational course. This was also a theme that was mentioned by a number of other participants in the group interviews. However, repeating the content of the syllabus was not considered to be learning something new; it was just more of the same without adding any value.

'it's not learning. It's like just getting the grade so I don't have to do it again and again.'

Therefore, the GCSE did not represent learning. It is, instead, a grade that can act either as a gateway for progression or a barrier. In Simon's story, the GCSE has no intrinsic worth beyond that.

Through the analysis of both the group interview, and the individual interview, Simon's story shared some similar themes to the stories told by Martha and Henry. All three expressed confidence, skill and agency with regard to their vocational work and studies. In addition, all three had been influenced by an adult role model who worked in related trades. In the line and stanza analysis of Simon's story, two organising principles emerged- work and learning. In discussing the former, Simon was clear that he was able to work, earn, develop and enjoy adult life. In discussing the latter,

he was dismissive of school, academic learning and in particular the skills represented by English GCSE.

6.4 Conclusion of Findings of All Three Phases

In summary, the three case studies both exemplified and illuminated the identified themes in the DA. All three participants expressed a sense of agency with regards to their vocational study and described agentic behaviour. All three, in differing ways, described a lack of agency and skill in relation to the GCSE English. However, the analysis of the responses did not reveal that the participants were disenfranchised by this potential lack of agency. Instead, all three justified their positions and opinions through an evaluation of the GCSE English.

Contrary to the institutional view that GCSE was beneficial, for the three participants it was irrelevant to their world; useless, repetitive and of no new value. Therefore, they felt that the GCSE was not as important as VE. Their agency was strongly linked to their vocational skills and ambitions, as exemplified by adult role models, but these role models represented an adult world that had no relation to the GCSE English. In contrast, the other adults in their stories- teachers- represented at best, ignorance of the worlds that mattered to the participants, or, at worst, malevolent intent towards the participants. As such, teachers and the GCSE represented barriers to progression. Teachers were not advocates or helpers to the participants, but were instead judges and assessors, using the tool of GCSE to block progression rather than enable learning.

Through all three phases of data collection- the workshops, group interviews and individual interviews- the participants used powerful, compelling and persuasive discourses to explain their

experience of retaking GCSE English and articulate their learner identity. The concept of identity can be understood as how people 'figure' who they are, through the 'worlds' that they operate in (Boaler & Greeno, 2000; Brubaker & Cooper, 2000; Urrieta, 2007). Holland et al. consider that some people may not gain access to some Figured Worlds based on societal position, therefore Figured Worlds are not always accessible to everyone. Whether people enter particular Figured Worlds depends on who they are. Therefore, the Figured World of the GCSE retake learner is only accessible to the GCSE retake learner, or a participant that has failed to reach the required standard of GCSE English at school. They are the pioneers of this world.

For example, in considering the study of Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain, 1991), Holland et al. noted the '*symbolic bootstrapping*' into identities (Holland et al., 2001, p. 44) that occurs in these circumstances. In the case of GCSE English, the findings suggested that a learning identity of failing was a risk faced by participants who recognised the GCSE retake might stand as a cultural artefact of disappointment, failure and not being good enough. However, 'bootstrapping' implies a sense of using one's own initiative so, these findings have also suggested that, through the peculiar and particular Figured World of VE and GCSE retake learners might also be able to improvise and self-author opportunities to 'bootstrap' on other different or more positive identities of their own imaginings.

In Urrieta et al.'s (2011) research on prison learning, the participants considered prison represented oppression, and the programme represented liberation- not school, but college. In the Figured World of the GCSE learner, it could be argued that the same processes work, albeit in reverse. The participants may have had free choice over their VE pathway, but have not had free choice regarding the study of GCSE English. In the world of the vocational learner, a similar clash occurs- between the vocational activity of the main programme, and the more academic functions of the GCSE.

Therefore, GCSE English retake may be a site of cultural uncertainty where different self-authoring might become possible. As with the newcomers, inducted into Alcoholics Anonymous (Cain, 1991) the identity of failure that might be inferred is conferred by institutional and societal structures onto participants by the forces of policy. However, this identity may not be necessarily accepted by the individuals who instead might 'symbolically bootstrap' on identities to create a revised sense of self (Cain, 1991; Holland et al., 2001, p. 44).

In summary, the DA of all phases of data collection suggested that participants had strong negative reactions to the experience including anger, boredom and frustration. However, this negativity was not necessarily coloured by passivity or depression. The analysis did not demonstrate that learners felt wholly disenfranchised and stigmatised. Rather, the responses revealed that the participants had strong opinions about the GCSE and their vocational courses. Gee (2004) considers that Figured Worlds are stories that people hold in their head- they are 'typical stories' (Gee, 2004, p. 89). As such, this conception of Figured Worlds focuses on interpretation of a world that is socially and culturally constructed, but emphasises that their situated meanings are ultimately dependent on context of time, space and situation, and are therefore constantly fluctuating.

The policies underlying the phenomenon of GCSE English retake could be characterised as an espoused Figured World (Strauss, 1992) in which the acquisition of GCSE English is considered to economically benefit the individual and the nation. However, this world with its attitudes and values regarding wealth generation and social mobility is in complex interplay with GCSE reform and attitudes about cultural quality and with evaluative worlds in which learners are judged for failing and retaking and vocational education is perceived as being of lesser status and, finally, and possibly most importantly, with worlds-in-(inter)action (Strauss, 1992) represented by learners who may create their own discourses and Figured Worlds around the GCSE retake. Some understandings and

meanings are widely shared, known and understood- such as the GCSE retake being a consequence of failure. But this does not mean these situated meanings cannot co-exist in a hybrid space in which GCSE retake learners can consider themselves as failures and successful agents, all at the same time in a dialogic process (Bakhtin, 2010). Ultimately, the findings suggested that these complex interactions create a disruptive hybrid space that the VE and GCSE retake learner occupies- as a free agent, choosing their own vocational educational path, and also a student mandated to repeat previous failures. This hybrid space may create opportunities to recreate or create new and alternate identities within a backdrop of cultural uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011).

7.0 Discussion

7.1 Introduction

GCSEs have been positioned as the benchmark of academic performance, a socially defined and legitimised form of learning and a clear indicator of future individual success by policy makers. This policy, societal and institutional definition has been inscribed onto the consciousness of post-sixteen learners; particularly as since 2015 young people who had not reached the desired standard were compelled by colleges and schools to retake until they passed. Using the concept of Figured Worlds, this chapter explores the 'figuring' of GCSE English retake and VE by the participants and the impact on learner identity.

This chapter presents a discussion of the field research that examined the phenomenon of GCSE English retake for young vocational learners in 2018/2019 and addresses the research questions:

- 1. How are GCSE English retake discourses socially constructed by VE learners?**
 - *What are the implications of the hybrid space of cultural uncertainty that is created by the phenomenon of the vocational learner retaking GCSE English?*
 - *What are the characteristics of discourses regarding learner agency?*
- 2. How are these discourses used to enact and depict the socially constructed identities of learners?**
 - *How is the GCSE positioned as a cultural artefact by learners?*
- 3. How do learners' socially constructed identities impact on their attitude to learning?**
 - *What is the learner identity depicted and enacted by the participants?*
 - *What are the implications for policy and practice?*

The theoretical framework used the rubric of Figured Worlds to understand the cultural worlds that were described and enacted by the participants. These cultural worlds were governed by the political, the institutional and the personal. The policy created the conditions for a bounded learning community (Wilson et al., 2004) of GCSE retake learners compelled to attend lessons. These conditions set down certain rules such as mandatory attendance and conventional, dominant preconceptions about the value of the GCSE retake (Vygotsky, 1987). However, the Figured World of the GCSE retake Learner was also created by the people who carried out activities within it and these people had differing opinions and perspectives about it. Therefore the political, institutional and, importantly, the *personal* elements of the Figured World of GCSE retakes were meaningful, and helped to form a world that was figured (Billett, 2009; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Rubin, 2007; Tett, 2016; Urrieta, 2007).

Holland et al (2001) consider Figured Worlds as having three elements- discourse, artefacts and identity. Using these three parts of the Figured World, the discussion addresses the research questions and considers how the participants created the Figured World of the VE learner retaking GCSE English which then shaped their learning identities. This Figured World was a confluence of the context created by the GCSE retake policy, and the individual experiences of the participants that were subject to it.

7.2 Research Question 1: How are Post-sixteen GCSE English retake discourses socially constructed by learners?

The acquisition of a good set of GCSEs is habitually linked to success by politicians, teachers and dominant social discourses and therefore has become difficult to challenge or question. The

dominant discourse in our educational system, evidenced by policy documents (Roy, 2019; Wolf, 2011) is that GCSEs, and in particular maths and English, are a benchmark of achievement. In these discourses, GCSEs are a key indicator of academic success. They measure success in academic terms, and also are a key indicator for future life and economic success, thus shaping people's view of themselves as good or not good enough. In this discourse of policy, people who do not pass GCSE are set up for failure (Stock, 2017).

The reformed GCSE English curriculum (DfE, 2013) also has adopted a very specific set of criteria which is more wedded to a traditional school and academic milieu (Gove, 2010). The findings suggested that this reformed GCSE specification is not working for post-sixteen learners. This may be because there is a disconnection between the reform policy and the GCSE retake policy. The reformed GCSE English valued academic discourses above every-day, work related discourses. Therefore, there is a dissonance between a reform policy that implied that everyday work-related communication skills are not of value; a retake policy that considered the achievement of GCSE is important to progress in work and, finally, the findings in this study that suggested VE learners value the skills and knowledge in VE as more important than the skills and knowledge represented by the GCSE. This potentially offers an alternative viewpoint to the more conventional views that were identified in policy and research in the literature review that suggested academic study is considered higher value than VE (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Winch, 2012b)

The images chosen by the participants clearly illustrated how the learners understood both the dominant discourses related to the failure (and success) of GCSE, as well as their own socially constructed discourses regarding the GCSE retake. For example, the findings in the previous two chapters demonstrated that the participants were keenly aware of the stigma associated with academic failure, particularly with regards to the GCSE.

The findings revealed that participants were aware of the perceived consequences of failure, and the perceived importance of GCSE. Even when railing against the unfairness of having to continue studying English, a number of participants acknowledged that achieving the certificate may open up more choice of occupations.

However, the findings also amply demonstrated that the GCSE was regarded as boring, repetitive, irrelevant to adult life, demeaning and infantilising. In their discourses regarding GCSE, participants portrayed the qualification, and the skills it represented, as meaningless. Contrary to the assertions of policy, that considered the opportunity to continue the study of English useful for individual progress (Wolf, 2011), and contrary to the intention of the GCSE Reform policy to provide a broad, high quality, enriching curriculum, the GCSE was dismissed as 'not learning'. In particular, some participants clearly viewed the GCSE as not learning, but merely assessment. This was a view that tallied with literature that suggested the new GCSE reforms had created a situation in which teachers taught to the test (Marsh, 2017; Marshall & Gibbons, 2018; Stacey, 2015). Rather, it was the VE that was considered by the participants as the broad, human learning experience that informed their attitudes, values and personal identities (Jarvis, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1999a).

The continuing study of English (and maths) was clearly intended to broaden the VE curriculum, and therefore make it better. As the literature review presented, these good intentions were not necessarily new, and previous attempts had also been made such as Liberal Studies (Bailey & Unwin, 2008). However, these good intentions were based on the assumption that narrow, or skills-based education, is an inferior mode of education to a broader based academic curriculum. The literature review concluded that a broad-based academic curriculum with an emphasis on the whole

individual, was more valued by the dominant political discourses (Wolf, 2011). This assumption placed VE at the bottom of an educational hierarchy.

However, in participants' discourses, the GCSE belonged to a school milieu and was mocked for its complete lack of relevance to their lives. Therefore, VE was valued precisely because it was narrow- it was functional and directly applicable to the participants' lives and ambitions. In fact, in a complete contrast to policy-makers' assertions that a narrow curriculum was disabling rather than enabling (Wolf, 2011), the focus of VE was a defining characteristic that a number of participants highlighted and praised, contrasting it with the school curriculum that was described as confusing and muddled.

VE was more valued because it had more to offer than the GCSE- in terms of a sense of personal achievement and progression, but also because of its perceived direct links with independence and adult life. Moreover, the participants constructed discourses that claimed VE as a more meaningful and transformative educational experience than the GCSE. In their discourses, VE was a more important and significant form of education because it involved their identities, a sense of membership and a sense of ownership (Guenther, 2010; Wenger, 1999).

'Deep transformative experiences that involve new dimensions of identification and negotiability, new forms of membership, multimembership and ownership of meaning... are likely to be more widely significant in terms of the long-term ramifications of learning than extensive coverage of a broad, but abstractly general, curriculum.' (Wenger, 1999, p. 228)

In these discourses, VE was a gateway to being a member of a trusted, expert group. For example, there were sub-narratives in all three case studies that centred on adult role models. For Simon and Martha, their fathers were successful because they were expert or occupationally competent. For Henry, a work experience with his girlfriend's father had inducted him into the world of construction. Others repeated this theme as well, citing trades and people they admired in the adult world. The students in this study articulated key distinctions between the dominant policy views of the value of GCSE English and their own views of the value of the skills represented by their vocational studies and trades. This dichotomy was a challenge to the dominant discourse of 'success' as it operates in schools and the academic mainstream. To the participants, the skills they associated more with successful adult life were connected to tangible outcomes- the ability to make, mend or create- and connected to skills that were of use in their everyday domestic and work lives.

These adults were contrasted with teachers (in the section of analysis entitled 'Teachers lie'). In the Figured Worlds of the participants, teachers were the spokespeople of the dominant discourse that GCSE was needed to be successful. However, in the learners' experiences, this assertion had been disproven. Therefore, in contrast to the political and academic realms, in the personal Figured World of the VE learner, the participants constructed a discourse in which the GCSE is at the bottom of an educational hierarchy dictated by political institutions. The dominant discourses that valued GCSE above VE rely on assumptions of what can be regarded as legitimate learning, linked to notions of economic capital and social class. In contrast, in the VE learner discourse, the GCSE was demoted below VE in a new, learner hierarchy that valued learning that was focused, useful, applicable, tangible and emancipatory. In this discourse, VE was not a merely narrow, skills-based curriculum, it was a deeply meaningful and transformative induction into adult life (Jarvis, 2004).

7.2.1 What are the implications of the hybrid space of cultural uncertainty that is created by the phenomenon of the vocational learner retaking GCSE English?

The discourses of a strong VE learner identity revealed by this study through the lens of Figured Worlds were only constructed in this way because of the sharp contrast found by the learners in comparing their experiences of their main vocational programmes and the GCSE. Therefore, the Figured World of the post-sixteen VE learner undertaking GCSE English retake might be considered a hybrid space of cultural uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011). The Figured World of the VE learner retaking the GCSE was patently hybrid, but it was also a culturally uncertain space because of the dissonance between the two modes of education.

For example, the reformed GCSE English specification has clear standards that are linked to technical skills and value judgements in language and literature. These standards are outlined in a policy discourse that is positioned in the realm of academia and school. However, the outcome of the retake policy for post-sixteen learners means that many young vocational learners are positioned between discourses of VE and discourses of GCSE English that do not necessarily sit comfortably together. The fact that these learners are required to resit, not through their own choice, has implications for a space of cultural uncertainty.

The findings suggested that the Figured World under scrutiny was hybridised because it brought together the academic (GCSE) and the vocational. In addition, the participants brought a number of aspects of learner identity to the table- the experience of school; the experience of studying English at school; the experience of studying English at college as a retake; and, finally, the experience of being a VE learner. All these experiences coloured the participants' discourses and differed from individual to individual. However, the common characteristic shared by all participants was that they had chosen VE, but had not chosen GCSE.

Holland et al. (2011) consider that some people do not gain access to some Figured Worlds based on societal position, therefore Figured Worlds are not always accessible to everyone. This was very much the case with this hybrid world. The only people with insight into this Figured World were the ones who have access because they have been positioned there by policy. This concept has a relationship with the concepts of field (Bourdieu, 2005), communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999a) and bounded communities (Wilson et al., 2004), but the fact that the space was culturally uncertain also highlighted the ability of the individuals to improvise and (re)create their world.

For example, some participants in the research did discuss identity as a 'label', describing the conventional, fixed view of the role of a learner forced into retaking GCSE because of previous failure. However, at other points in the data collection, learners also described themselves as motivated vocational learners, ambitious aspirational business owners and loyal family members. Identity is not a concept that is only formed by the labels- '*stupid*', '*kid*'- that people place on themselves and others. Identity is also how people 'figure' who they are, through the 'worlds' that they operate in (Urrieta, 2007). Rather than being subjugated by the process, some learners also confidently expressed their views on the policy, either agreeing or disagreeing with it. Other learners positioned themselves in relation to their fellow learners or teachers and criticised perceived deficiencies in teaching and the GCSE curriculum. In their narratives, the skills represented by VE were more prized.

This finding strongly resonated with other studies that utilised the concept of Figured Worlds (Hatt, 2007; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta et al., 2011). In the culturally uncertain world of the GCSE retake learner, there was evidence in the findings that the participants improvised a definition of skill and success that rejected the skills that embodied by the GCSE English curriculum such as grammatical accuracy. These skills were often dismissed by participants as meaningless, irrelevant and useless. Instead, the

useful and tangible skills and outcomes of VE, such as the ability to make and mend and earn money, were more often championed.

Holland et al (2001) consider that whilst dominant discourses might be inscribed upon people, the social construction of identity is a process of mediation. The apparent oppressiveness of a dominant discourse is complicated and contradictory: people improvise to create alternative positions and subjectivity. Bahktin (2010) considered self-authoring or finding a voice as a space for agency. This space happens when people develop an authorial stance. When analysing the discourse of participants regarding GCSE, there was evidence of them having developed their own authorial stances. The participants had created a symbolic bootstrapping (Cain, 1991; Holland et al., 2001) of an agentic learner identity centred on VE that encompassed their own feelings of agency, and agentic behaviour (Mercer, 2011, 2012) in a direct challenge to the dominant discourse of academic success.

The Figured World of the GCSE retake VE learner is only accessible to the GCSE retake learner, or, in other words, a participant that has failed to reach the required standard of GCSE English at school. However, this does not mean that the GCSE retake learner must always adopt and perform the same role. The importance of Figured Worlds is that they are recreated, again and again, with others. Fundamentally, the concept is humanistic and dependent on improvisation, individual action, subjectivity, change and interaction (Urrieta, 2007). In particular, because the world of the VE learner undertaking GCSE was hybridised and culturally uncertain, the participants could improvise and create- uncertainty opened up the potential for self-authoring (Urrieta et al., 2011). The learners were the pioneers and settlers of these worlds.

In this study, the findings revealed that the experience of retaking GCSE- repetitiveness, boredom, anger and frustration helped to form a strong agentic VE learner identity as this experience reinforced the participants' beliefs and values regarding VE. As they settled their world, the participants were able to construct discourses that valued VE. These discourses focused on VE as the authentic meaningful learning experience, whereas GCSE was exposed as a meaningless piece of paper- an experience that was endured not enjoyed; an experience of 'not learning'.

7.2.2 What are the characteristics of discourses regarding learner agency?

In the context of this study, the two aspects of agency (the feeling of agency and agentic behaviour) (Mercer, 2011) were pertinent because, in the culturally uncertain space of GCSE English, it was important to understand how learners felt about their agency, as well as to understand their agentic behaviour. For example, one of the motivations for the inception of this study was the observed poor attendance of VE learners to GCSE English lessons. It was possible that learners might feel a loss of agency with regards to GCSE English that might lead to poor attendance. However, in this context, choosing to not attend a lesson could also be regarded as a form of agentic behaviour.

The concept of agency was also important in the consideration of the learners' Figured Worlds. As described above, these worlds were culturally uncertain and therefore not monolithic or stable in meaning. Rather, these Figured Worlds and the learners' sense of agency and agentic behaviours were in constant interplay, changing and mutable. As such, these Figured Worlds held latent potential (Mercer, 2012) and possibilities as agency might be created from the interaction with uncertain contexts (Van Lier, 2008).

Learner agency became an important feature of the analysis and findings from the outset. Perhaps this was not surprising considering that the study's focus was on participants that were mandated to retake GCSE. Agency and choice were featured themes in the response because, in the main, the participants had exercised free choice in their VE study (Klotz et al., 2014), but had no choice with regards to the GCSE retake. The images chosen to represent responses to the GCSE might have connoted negative reactions, but they also demonstrated a clear sense of agency and agentic behaviours as the images illustrated strong, emotive responses, opinions and feelings.

7.2.3 The Values Hierarchy of GCSE English retake and VE

The discourses of language and imagery, which were employed by the participants, were constructed to provide alternative narratives. In these, the GCSE was rejected by learners, or at very best tolerated with cynical humour, in favour of the benefits of VE. In this regard, the confluence of VE and the GCSE retake created the conditions for the construction of these discourses. The discourses of the GCSE as a useless, fraudulent qualification were only possible when GCSE was placed in a new values hierarchy with VE.

In the dominant policy discourse, GCSE is a more valued qualification than VE. However, in the findings of this study, this educational hierarchy is stood on its head. In the participants' discourses, VE was valued and valuable. It was useful and pertinent to their lives in a way that GCSE just was not. VE gave them the ability to earn money, to enter adult life, to become independent.

In one case study- Henry's story- the participant chose and performed emotive imagery to create an alternative discourse for the GCSE. The dominant discourse of policymakers positioned the GCSE as a benefit to the individual. In contrast, the imagery chosen by Henry repositioned the GCSE English as damaging for individuals. His imagery was ostentatious, deliberate and powerful. This exhibition was

agentic behaviour (Mercer 2012): Henry was using discourses to figure a world in which the GCSE retake was a source of harm and threat.

Through all three phases of data collection- the workshops, group interviews and individual interviews- the participants used powerful, compelling and persuasive discourses to explain their experience of retaking GCSE English. The DA suggested that participants had strong negative reactions to the experience including anger, boredom and frustration. However, this negativity was not necessarily coloured by passivity or depression. The focus of the analysis on agency and stigma did not reveal that learners felt wholly disenfranchised and stigmatised. Rather, the responses revealed that the participants had strong opinions about the GCSE and their vocational courses. In part, these strong opinions were formed because of the construction of a powerful VE learner identity. These responses offered opinion on the value and usefulness of the GCSE that suggested that participants distrusted the GCSE retake as an unfair and arbitrary judgement; considered the teaching on the course was unhelpful; were doubtful that the GCSE was a useful addition to their skills, and valued their vocational skills and aspirations above the more academic elements of the GCSE.

By claiming the value of vocational skills and their pertinence to everyday life over English skills, the participants spoke against the processes of GCSE. Through the discourse of vocational skills and a symbolic bootstrapping on of a VE identity (Cain, 1991) they found a voice, gained a sense of control and found alternate routes to status and success (Wenger, 1999). The key characteristics of VE in these discourses were that the skills were tangible- learned through experience and useful. Their usefulness was especially ascribed to the everyday experience of the participants, their colleagues and their families. This was powerfully illustrated in one group interview in which a participant humorously juxtaposed '*electrical sonnets*' in order to describe how the skills represented by the

GCSE English were irrelevant to his electrician course. Therefore valuable knowledge was framed around their own experience- what they have found, rather than what they had been told or taught at school, by teachers. It was these discourses, that inverted the normal, dominant discourses regarding GCSE and VE, that had the greatest impact and weight as illustrated by the following diagram

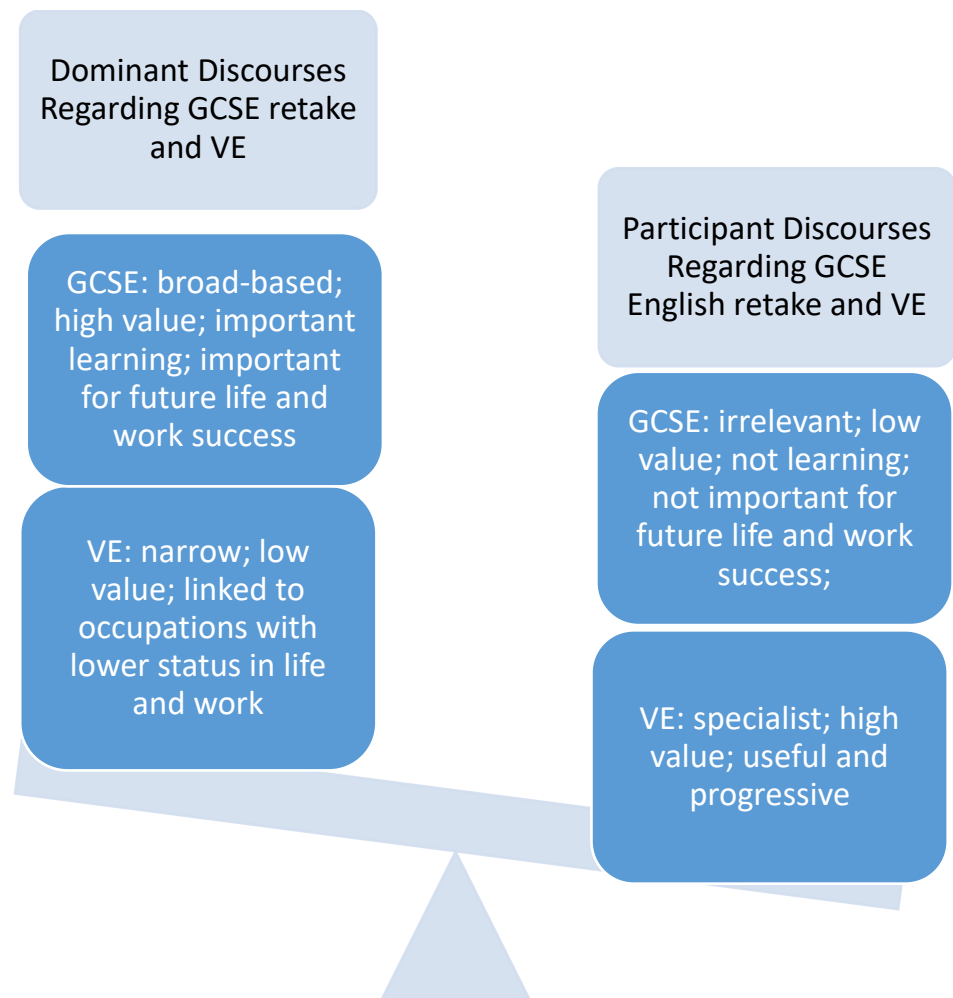


Figure 7.1 The Inversion of the Dominant Discourses around GCSE retake and VE

Through figuring success and skills counter to the dominant discourse, the discourses were a form of self-authoring (Tett, 2016). After being potentially framed as a failure because of the GCSE, the learners were asserting their agency and reclaiming a more valued set of skills, in the vocational realm, as part of their own identities through their discourses of alternative success. These new discourses created Figured Worlds that were described in Chapter 5 as *Being a Kid*, *Stuck on Repeat*, *Teachers Lie*, and *Adult Life*. These improvised discourses, constructed by participants, rejected the GCSE English skills as being only relevant in a school setting, stultifying, boring, but also not useful and intangible. Moreover, these discourses positioned the espoused benefits of the GCSE English retake as a lie or fiction. In their experience, the GCSE was not useful, but their vocational skills were. In these discourses, the skills represented by the GCSE and the achievement of the GCSE were not meaningful not important; therefore logically, the failure of GCSE was also not important.

7.3 Research Question 2: How are these discourses used to enact and depict the socially constructed identities of learners?

One way in which people develop the figured elements of their identities and thus counteract powerful social positioning is through the adoption and use of powerful, compelling cultural resources, or artefacts (Bartlett, 2005; Scanlan, 2010). The students in this study articulated key distinctions between the supposed value of GCSE English and the value of the skills represented by their vocational studies and trades. This dichotomy was a direct challenge by the participants to the dominant discourse of 'success' as it operated in schools and the academic mainstream. To the participants, the skills they associated more with successful adult life were connected to tangible outcomes- the ability to make, mend or create- and connected to skills that were of use in their everyday domestic and work lives.

7.3.1 How is the GCSE positioned as a cultural artefact by learners?

Cultural artefacts are objects, stories or symbols made meaningful by collective understanding (Bartlett, 2005). GCSE English might be considered a cultural artefact of educational attainment, prescribed by the dominant discourse of society as the required standard. Moreover, GCSE, through the policy of retaking beyond Key Stage 4, has become a benchmark of measure, not only of academic attainment, but also as a predictor of future success. Therefore, the GCSE English retake might be considered as a cultural artefact that represents lack of achievement, and failure to reach a required societal standard.

In the discourses constructed by the participants, the cultural artefact of the GCSE English retake was a key tool in the depiction and enactment of their learner identity. These new meanings were not static- their meaning was produced through their use in practice, and therefore provided the basis for identity development or self-authoring (Hill & Cole, 1995).

For example, Henry's story constructed the GCSE retake as a complex cultural artefact. Firstly, the GCSE was part of an espoused Figured World (Strauss, 1992) in which the qualification represented the attainment of a required level of skill in reading and writing. Henry acknowledged that the qualification, and the skills it represented were valued by society. He also, in parts of his story, considered the skills to be useful, at least to some extent. For example, during the group interview he demurred when other participants were criticising the GCSE syllabus as being completely irrelevant: *'Yeah, to make sense, you need punctuation'*. Although he also agreed that some elements of the syllabus were not important, such as knowing the technical term of dynamic verb: *'I had to Google it, I swear. I went looking for 20 minutes to find out what it was'*.

The dominant discourse described the GCSE as attainment of skills to allow progression. It was a cultural artefact representing achievement and the attainment of acceptable standards. It was also a qualification that represented a gateway for progression- to other levels of study and for work. Holland et al (2011) posit that the meaning given to artefacts is part of a collective memory and is commonly interpreted through social commentary. This suggests that the meaning that the participants attributed to the failure of the GCSE (stigma) was not unique, accidental or unexpected. Rather, the ascribed meaning had been assimilated throughout their experience. When the participants acknowledged the artefact of the GCSE as being connected to success, this came from a prescribed dominant discourse learned at school.

However, this discourse, whilst it was carried with them into post-sixteen study, belied the complex relationship between the participants, the dominant discourse of success from school, the relationship to their discourses and self-authorship and how these influenced their actions and behaviour as a learner. For example, Henry figured the GCSE to be a cultural artefact that was a barrier to progression. Using the symbol of a piece of paper, Henry described the GCSE as an artefact that was merely a piece of paper- a certificate. Concurring with Simon's view that the GCSE was '*not learning*', this was a concept of the GCSE, represented by paper, as certification. Paper as a cultural artefact that was symbolic of a school milieu, outcomes that were intangible and not useful, because they were paper based and representative of an unfair, arbitrary assessment regime. These views represented by participants chimed with some of the literature which suggested that the predominance of a high stakes assessment regime adversely affected pedagogy and the learning experience (Marsh, 2017; Marshall & Gibbons, 2018; Morby, 2014; Stacey, 2015; Stock, 2017). The findings suggested that the participants had direct experience of this phenomenon.

Similarly, the concept of teachers as unfair and unhelpful assessors was presented by some participants as a cultural artefact. The teacher was the gatekeeper of progression and certification. However, the teacher was also the proponent of the dominant discourse (that GCSE was essential to a good life) that the participants considered to be untruthful. Therefore, the teacher stood as a symbol of a system in which the participants felt they did not belong. Indeed, the GCSE represented a context (school), adult figures (teachers) and skills (writing and reading) that were irrelevant to their Figured Worlds and ambitions. They wanted tangible progress and outcomes- results they could touch, feel and see, and skills they could deploy to fix things, be independent and help others.

Therefore, if the skills the participants developed in their vocational study were more valuable, the GCSE was not only irrelevant: because of its espoused benefits (and therefore dis-benefits and associated stigma), it became an active agent of threat and harm. The participants had also figured the GCSE English as an experience; and that experience was one of failure. As a consequence, the GCSE represented fear (of failure) and threat (of failure). For example in Henry's case, the image of a piece of paper was also used to describe the traumatic experience of failing the examination. For Martha, the teacher of GCSE was a gatekeeper- barring her from help and progress.

In contrast, the participants' abilities in VE were part of their agentic identity because, in the main, they had made a positive decision to switch to a practical course (Klotz et al., 2014). The GCSE English was acknowledged, albeit reluctantly, as an activity they were expected to do, but they did not feel they had any agency or influence over its outcomes. The GCSE was an extrinsic and fickle force- a deus-ex-machina- that could dictate success or failure based on a choice of text. Therefore failure or otherwise was not in their control. The grade boundaries were arbitrary; the content of the syllabus was unpredictable; and the results were entirely random.

'It's like a roulette wheel. You never know what you're going to get. And there's only a chance that you are going to achieve in the end.' 'Henry'

Therefore, the GCSE was an artefact of erroneous logic and inauthentic values from a Figured World of school which the participants, with their privileged insight into the world of vocational learning had spotted and figured out as fraudulent. At the end of the day, their Figured World was authentic to their experience- one in which their constructed identity as a vocational learner gave them a sense of achievement and agency. This conceptualisation was important because their perceptions of their vocational skills enhanced their sense of agency and agentic behaviour in countering social structures that were perceived as rigid, unfair and meaningless for everyday needs. For many of the participants, GCSE English was a cultural artefact (Holland et al., 2001; Leander, 2002; Scanlan, 2010) that represented those structures- both in terms of the certificate that was received, and the skills the English curriculum represented.

7.3 Research Question 3: How do the learners' socially constructed identities impact on their attitude to learning?

7.3.1 What is the learner identity depicted and enacted by the participants?

The learner identity depicted and enacted by the participants was shaped by free choice (Klotz et al., 2014) and was a strong vocational identity, informed by a sense of belonging to a vocational community (Rauner, 2007). VE was considered to be a meaningful, transformative learning experience (Jarvis, 2004; Wenger, 1999). However, the experience of being compelled to retake GCSE English was also a strong influencing factor on learner identity. The GCSE served as a reinforcement of the skills, attitudes, values that were embedded in VE because it represented the

diametric opposite. All good stories have villains and heroes. In the participants' personal narratives, the GCSE (at school or as a retake) was the villain- it represented at best boredom, and worse a threat of harm.

Conversely, VE was the hero of the story- it had rescued the participants from a stultifying experience at school. It embodied skills that were tangible, useful, enjoyable and progressive. It gave them the freedom to be independent and earn money. Most of all, it had enabled the participants to construct a strong sense of self-esteem and motivation.

It is at this juncture that the crux of these findings are to be found. The purpose of education, in some spheres, has been perceived to be moving away from humanistic concerns towards serving economic concerns (Jarvis, 2004). Therefore, through the discourses of policy, VE is a functional process of skills acquisition, whereas GCSE English is a vehicle for more high-quality aspirations regarding a broad based education. However, a vocation can also be defined as a deeply personal concept (Dewey, 2004), not just an employer defined occupational grouping (Billett & Somerville, 2004). A vocation can be a significant facet of personal identity (Billett, 2009; Guenther, 2011; Klotz et al., 2014; Meijers & Lengelle, 2012).

The findings have revealed that VE is 'identity capital' (Côté, 2005; Guenther, 2011; Schuller et al., 2000) as well as a means of acquiring skills. The acquisition of identity capital is when an individual invests in a particular identity, using personal and agentic resources such as confidence and self-esteem (Côté, 2005; Schuller et al., 2000). The findings have also suggested that the GCSE retake plays a part in this acquisition of identity capital. However, despite best policy intent, its role was not an enrichment or betterment of the learning experience. Instead, it served as a cultural artefact of

meaningless assessment, used in the learners' discourses as a comparison to enhance the legitimacy of VE.

The building of identity is influenced through dominant institutions such as schools which legitimise certain identities (Castells, 2011; Levinson & Holland, 1996). In this study participants recognised the legitimate identities in schools were those of students who passed and achieved the gatekeeping of GCSE. The students that Martha referred to as '*normal*'. At the same time they recognised that this meant marginal identities were created- the trouble makers, or those who were not normal.

Whilst the participants recognised the school definitions of legitimacy, and the potential for marginal learner identities that were therefore de-legitimised, the findings also strongly suggested that the participants were also figuring a strong and positive learner identity that rejected GCSE and embraced VE. When the participants were framed as failures in school through GCSE they improvised to redefine success: framed by vocational skills and their own experiences of the adult world.

This was their own way of refiguring success and finding some sense of agency within the institutionalised Figured World which considered GCSE as legitimate knowledge. In the Figured Worlds of the GCSE retake learner, discourses were used to enact and depict a different legitimate learning identity- that of the agentic vocational student. This learning identity was opposed to the more passive, paper based learning of the GCSE. In these Figured Worlds, GCSE learners recognised the institutionally inscribed identity of failure, but also had pioneered their own versions of legitimate learner identity.

This legitimised learner identity contrasted with the skills represented by the GCSE with the skills represented by their vocational learning (Table 7.1).

GCSE English Retake Skills	Vocational Education (VE) Skills
Paper based- intangible	Tangible
Repetitive	Progression
Useless	Useful
Boring	Enjoyable
Irrelevant to the everyday	Relevant to the everyday
Not linked to work	Linked to work
Not linked to normal life	Linked to normal life

Table 4.1 Comparison of the perceived benefits of VE and GCSE English retake

The findings suggested that both the GCSE and VE were used as a means to build learner identity. The learning identity of the young vocational learner was legitimised through discourses of the difference of VE, particularly its tangibility and usefulness. This was defined through comparison with the GCSE content which was intangible and not useful. The VE learning identity was also legitimised because it was pertinent to the everyday- the domestic and the occupational- the figured adult world that the participants knew well and aspired to. In contrast, the learning represented by the GCSE retake was de-legitimised because it was repeated (and therefore not new learning), linked to school (and the social structure that had rejected the VE learner); rarefied and abstract; defined and created by failure and finally, representative of a dominant discourse that had been proven to be untrue. Teachers had told the participants that they needed GCSE to be successful. Experience

was demonstrating a different reality. In relation to the GCSE retake, attitudes varied from reluctant acceptance to active rejection. Ultimately, for the participants, the de-legitimisation of previous school experiences and the GCSE retake strengthened the legitimacy of VE.

7.5 Summary of Discussion

Using DA and the tool for analysis (Table 4.4, p.101) helped to focus on the seven things that people construct or project through their discourses: significance, activities, identities, relationships, politics, connections, sign systems and knowledge (Gee & Michaels, 2011). Accordingly, the findings suggested that the GCSE is an important process by which the dominant discourses of academic and economic policy seemingly dictate and distribute status and opportunity. In addition, much policy and theory seemed to characterise VE as lesser in status and opportunity. However, the findings in this research study did not reveal depressed and suppressed participants. Instead, the participants had created and recreated strong and positive learning identities within the Figured World of vocational education (VE) and GCSE English retakes, as illustrated in table 7.2.

Summary of Participant Discourses in Relation to VE and GCSE retake English	
Significance	The skills represented by VE are important. In comparison, the GCSE is not a vehicle for important skills and therefore is less significant.
Activities	Therefore, in retaking GCSE English, the participants are complying with a policy that they do not agree with.
Identities	Their participation in VE and the GCSE retake has given them the insight that others do not have. This strengthens their construction of a strong VE learner identity that does not really need GCSE.

Relationships	However, they do recognise the dominant discourses that might position them as failures because of the GCSE retake, and how this might position them in the eyes of other people.
Politics	This might mean that they are outsiders, without access to the capital represented by the GCSE English. However, their discourses also position themselves as insiders, strongly associated with a trade or vocational identity, with privileged insight into what really matters.
Connections	Their insight allows them to see the connections between VE and the world of work, and to spot the perceived lies or inconsistencies in the espoused benefits of the GCSE.
Sign Systems and Knowledge	Therefore, the participants consider that the language and knowledge represented by the GCSE does not count, whilst the knowledge that matters most is that embodied by their personal experience and VE.

Table 7.2 Summary of Participant Discourses in Relation to VE and GCSE retake English

However, these participant discourses were created from the tensions and problems caused by the hybrid learning world that the learners had been thrust in to. In this thesis, learner identity was defined as how people understand themselves and figure out their position within and without learning institutions (Rubin, 2007). The participants were affected and influenced by experiences of academic learning in school, vocational education (VE) in college and English study in both types of institutions. This confluence of experience helped to shape their perceptions of agency, ability and success; who the learners thought they were in relation to their learning, what others thought they were, and who they thought they should become. Moreover, as well as the social forces of policy and institutions, the learners' agency and experiences shaped their Figured World. The vocational learner retaking GCSE English occupied a hybrid Figured World, encompassing academic and vocational education (VE). This study found that this confluence created a hybrid FW of cultural

uncertainty (Urrieta et al., 2011), which offered both tensions and the potential for learners to imagine learning identities as illustrated below by Figure 7.2.

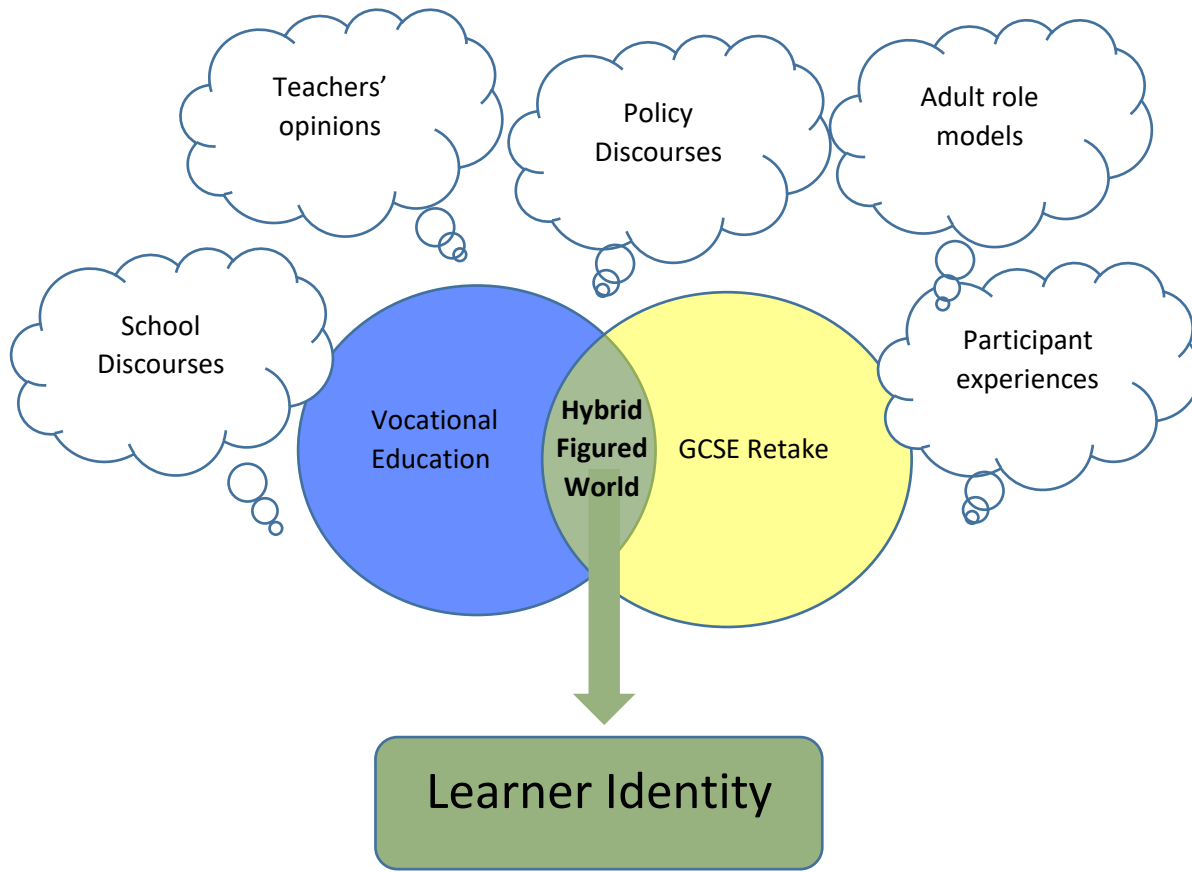


Figure 7.2 The Hybridised Figured World of the VE learner Retaking GCSE English

8.0 Conclusions and Implications for Practice and Policy

8.1 Introduction

This final section reflects on the contribution to original knowledge and implications for research, practice and policy that relate to this thesis. When I began the research, I wanted to understand the impact of GCSE retake on young vocational learners because I was concerned that the mandating of retakes was demotivating and risked a resulting disengagement with learning. What the research revealed instead was that the participants conceptualised important differences between the skills represented by the GCSE and the skills they valued, enjoyed and considered they needed. They had a higher regard for vocational 'work' skills and used this concept to directly address definitions of success and skills connected to the GCSE. The participants used an embrace of VE and also a dismissal of GCSE as the means to *symbolically bootstrap* (Holland et al., 2001) on a learner identity that was positive and agentic.

In this study, the participants defined their own concepts of legitimised learning and positioned VE as a cultural artefact of adulthood and agency and the GCSE retake as an artefact of a meaningless, arbitrary assessment regime, linked to school. These findings suggest that the mandation of GCSE has strengthened the VE learner identity for these participants. However, this is not because they value the GCSE. Rather it is because they have constructed a discourse in which the GCSE is meaningless. Within this discourse, the VE learner placed themselves in a privileged position of narrator and author- of understanding and revealing that the GCSE is not worthwhile, but that VE is worthwhile and more legitimate. As in all the best stories, the villain of the piece has been exposed.

8.2 Limitations of this Study

This study was limited because it was conducted by an insider-researcher; because of its methodological design (in data collection and analysis) and because of its size. My subjective position as an insider was a key motivation for the study, and a key influencing factor of how it was designed and conducted. If another researcher had set out to address the same identified gap in research, different findings may have emerged. Although the research design built in safeguards regarding number of ethical considerations including coercion and confidentiality, as an insider, who was also the CEO of the college, I had a dual role (Unluer, 2012) and this influenced both the identification of the gap in research, and the conduct of the study. This, in turn, inevitably influenced the findings that were revealed. The act of research is partial and selective (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) and therefore aspects of research frameworks fundamentally affect the ontological outcomes (Eisner 1992).

This study was also limited because it adapted elements of participative visual research. These methods are not always applicable or useful (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). For example, whilst visual methods can be accessible and emotive, they are also open to accusations of ambiguity and subjectivity (Pink, 2013), although any type of social science data could be considered open to the same accusation (Becker, 1995). The ambiguity of visual data may not be a significant problem if the study is not working within a realist paradigm (Knowles & Sweetman, 2004). In this thesis the paradigm was not realist: the ontological and epistemological stance was that social worlds are subjective and constructed around individuals rather than solely power relationships in society (Berger & Luckmann, 1991). The research aims were focused on the individual, subjective experience; the methods prioritised individuals' voices and the analytical approach accepted pluralistic meaning and subjectivity. The epistemological assumption was that knowledge was co-created by the participants as well as the researcher.

Similarly, the application of DA is valid in a framework that focuses on interpretation rather than truth. The concept of discourse itself is still somewhat ambiguous. It might mean the study of language or communicative acts (Johnstone, 2018), or it may encompass the study of the structures and thinking beyond the words; or it may also be thematic or content-based studies of communication or texts in a specific social world. This thesis adopted Gee's recommendations for analysis which related to the latter definition (Gee, 2004; Gee & Michaels, 2011). As such, the DA has taken into account situated meanings. Further, this thesis adopted the idea that, through discourse, people create or construct their Figured Worlds (Gee, 2015; Holland et al., 2001).

The potential ambiguity and multiple interpretations of both participative methods and DA were potential limiting factors in this study. This thesis has something to say to the worlds of policy and practice. In these contexts a methodology that prioritises the individual, subjective experience has limitations. The realm of English education policy is most often concerned with national economic productivity (Hodgson, 2015; Jones, 2015; Winch, 2004, 2012b; Wolf, 2004); this thesis is concerned with the small, the personal and with the individual and the design deliberately created data that was subjective and open to interpretation. Because of these factors, it may be less influential in policy and practice.

This study has limitations because it focuses on a few individuals in a specific context. However, it is also less meaningful because it is not surrounded by other, similar research. In the introductory chapter, I reflected on the comparative lack of research regarding the FE sector. One of the key limitations of this study is that it is isolated. In order to develop thinking further, and influence policy and practice, more work needs to be done. A policy that affects hundreds of thousands of young people every year must be scrutinised and understood, and that takes more than one study.

8.3 Contribution to Knowledge

However, despite these recognised limitations, this small study has shed light on the crucial importance of considering individual learner identity within the world of VE and GCSE retake; and this is a significant contribution to the field. This study addresses the identified lack of research regarding the FE learner experience, including the sixteen to eighteen year old FE learner undertaking vocational education (VE). Existing research tends to be focused either on institutional or policy matters (Bailey & Unwin, 2014; Browne, 2005; Finlay et al., 2007; Grubb, 2005; Hodgson, 2015; Tickle, 2015), or workforce (Briggs, 2005; Jupp, 2015; Page, 2013). In light of the fact that the FE sector serves so many people, this gap in the research meant the learning experiences of FE learners was relatively disregarded. This study contributes to knowledge of a little understood phenomenon of the learner experience in FE and, specifically, the experience of VE learners undertaking GCSE English retake.

This study has contributed insight into the existence of a hybridised learning experience and the resulting implications for learner identity. Institutions (including College A that hosted this study) have embodied the cultural artefact of GCSE that represents failure, threat and harm to those who have to retake. The GCSE resits ape school structures and experiences such as formal classrooms and the mandatory inclusion of disruptive students who do not want to engage. These are the diametric opposite to the typical experience of VE- in workshops, with learners who have made a positive choice to engage. The GCSE English retake experience is also coloured by the requirement to repeat learning that has already occurred. However, the conclusion is that the participants did not uniformly accept the dominant discourse of failure, and instead, the confluence of VE and GCSE English has made possible the construction of positive learning identities. This study has revealed strong, negative feelings about the GCSE. As I embarked upon this research, I anticipated that these strong negative feelings might be uncovered. However, these negative feelings regarding the GCSE

have not been the headline of the findings. The strong and positive VE learning identity, in part constructed and reinforced through the learners' evaluation and dismissal of GCSE, is the key finding and the key contribution to knowledge.

The theoretical framework, using the construct of Figured Worlds, also offers another way of examining the FE sector and policy beyond the more usual methods of considering the sector's impact on economic productivity that had been found in much of the literature regarding FE and VE in England. In the literature review, the construct of Figured Worlds was most often used in studies that focused on North or South American contexts (Chang, 2014; Chang et al., 2017; Hatt, 2007; Lei, 2003; Luttrell & Parker, 2001; Peña-Talamantes, 2013; Rubin, 2007; Tett, 2016; Yosso, 2005) In these studies, the areas of interest were often defined by sexuality, ethnicity, socio-economic background or class. In this study, these definitions were of less interest as the participants were from a wide range of backgrounds. Their inclusion in the study was due to one defining characteristic; that they were retaking GCSE English as part of a VE study programme. Therefore, a facet of this study's original contribution was using the construct of Figured Worlds to better understand the individual experience of English vocational learners who are retaking GCSE English and to examine the learner identity that formed in this very specific circumstance. The focus on the effect of a very specific policy shift threw into sharp relief the mismatch between how we might think learners are affected by GCSE English re-takes and their actual perceptions of its impact.

The participative visual methodology adopted in this study, which used images sourced by participants using an internet search engine, adapted and amended participative visual methods that were applicable either to children or marginalised participants in other studies. These other methods either used participant generated photography or art, or researcher found images (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015; Bragg & Buckingham, 2008; Burke, 2009b; Clark-Ibáñez, 2009a; Thomson, 2009). The

pilot of methods (described in Chapter 3) refined these methods in order to design a methodology that young FE learners felt comfortable engaging with. This adjustment of methodology (namely using participant sourced images, rather than participant created imagery) offers a potential way of engaging with young FE learners that may help to increase theoretical understanding of the individual learner experience in other studies.

8.4 Implications for Practice

In light of this key finding, this study's implications suggested that it was not good enough to promote the benefits of GCSE and champion its connection to social and economic success. The findings clearly revealed a strong distrust of the supposed benefits of the GCSE and therefore an associated cynicism of the institutional structures that supported the GCSE. Simply stating that the GCSE was important was considered by the participants to be inauthentic and untrue. This merely resulted in the perception that the importance was ascribed to the certification rather than the learning. The institutional and pedagogic approach to GCSE retake did not take into account the hybrid, culturally uncertain space (Urrieta et al., 2011) in which the learners were constructing their learning identities. The findings indicated that the participants had hybrid identities resulting from the mandation of GCSE, and the choice of VE. This created a space of cultural uncertainty in which students could assert self-authorship. Therefore, rather than the participants self-authoring a story of personal failure (with regard to English), they instead self-authored stories of institutional failure (with regard to English) and personal success (with regard to VE). There are opportunities to learn from this study, and for FE institutions to consider how the strong VE learning identity can be harnessed to help improve the learning of English.

In summary, rather than positioning the GCSE English as an important symbol of achievement, and a barrier to attainment, institutions such as College A should consider how to prioritise, nurture and capitalise on the strong VE identities of their learners. If this is done well, the GCSE retake learner would embark upon post-sixteen study with a context of success and agency, rather than institutionalised failure. If VE does not consider this process of identity, the programme of study might lead to short term competence but may not lead to sustained changes in practices required for long term (Jarvis, 2004; Tett, 2016).

People will have good and improved engagement if they participate in activities that enact the discourses and views of their new Figured Worlds (Urrieta et al., 2011). The methodological approach used in the data collection, influenced by the pilot, suggested that the individual needed to feel a sense of ownership and control of practice and that people need agency and control to engage meaningfully (Gee, 2007). In the bounded learning community (Wilson et al., 2004) that the GCSE retake English represents, there is an opportunity to provide a social context for the material. This does not mean platitudes that attest to the importance of the GCSE.

The findings indicated that the VE learner identity encompassed perceived positive characteristics including learner agency that the participants associated with being an adult. These feelings and behaviours including the sense of choice and being independent. Conversely, the GCSE English retake was often characterised as being like school, and making participants feel like a kid. Therefore, one possible pedagogical approach is instilling elements of independent learning into the GCSE retake curriculum. Perversely, if this was not mandated, learners might be more likely to engage as they would have choice and agency in the matter.

'If the body feeds on food, the soul feeds on agency and meaningfulness' (Gee, 2007, p. 10).

Therefore, the outcomes of this thesis suggested two implications for changes in institutional practice. Firstly, the curriculum for GCSE English might be amended to include a larger element of voluntary or independent study. Because of the constraints of policy and the condition of funding, a minimum requirement to attend some core lessons would have to be mandated. However, beyond that, learners would be able to choose what they attended, with the hope that greater agency and choice would encourage better participation from those who wanted or needed to pass the GCSE.

The issue for the institution would be if the vast majority of learners 'voted with their feet' and did not engage. This would mean that the institution was spending resource on sessions with no or few learners, and also negatively affect institutional pass rates. This approach would be a risk for an institution. The condition of funding policy punishes an institution financially if students do not attend English and maths lessons. However, the current approach, which places the learners back into a traditional 'school' classroom, pedagogy and environment, is not working. Attendance is poor and dissatisfaction is high. Introducing a minimum requirement of attendance, and leaving the learners to choose whether to attend additional lessons would preserve a sense of agency and, accordingly, might encourage more positive attendance.

The second implication for institutional practice involves taking advantage of and nurturing VE as a means of symbolically bootstrapping (Cain, 1991; Holland et al., 2001) on a positive and resilient learner identity. Currently, at College A, for financial efficiency, learners are timetabled into mixed GCSE classes- incorporating learners from a wide variety of vocational areas. The findings of this thesis have demonstrated that VE learners have strong VE learner identities. It is possible that these

identities, set so firmly in a vocational context, would differ from vocation to vocation. The skills, attitudes and values inherent in construction, might be different from those embodied in the vocation of hairdressing (Guenther, 2010; Winch, 2003).

Within the confines of this thesis, differentiating aspects of vocational identities have not been explored, and more consideration would need to be given to this. However, the findings open the door to consider how to organise GCSE retake classes into vocational groups to reinforce the VE learner identity, and therefore create the conditions for a more transformative, meaningful learning experience characterised by vocational membership and identity (Wenger, 1999).

Collaborative work and reflexive discussion, such as the workshops and group interviews that the students undertook in this study might create an appreciation for the sharing of different perspectives and create conditions in which students are more willing to take the personal risk of failing the GCSE again. GCSE classes that are grouped along vocational lines might provide more space in the curriculum so that learners participate in a learning community, or community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1999a, 1999b) in which the strong and positive aspects of the VE learning identity might be used to bolster confidence and attitude to any type of English learning. Holland et al. state that 'people tell others who they are, but even more importantly they tell themselves and then try to act as though they are who they say they are. (Holland et al., 2001, p. 3).

In summary, future institutional practice could capitalise on the revealed strong and resilient VE learner identity. This might enable a greater sense of choice and agency which might, in turn, positively influence engagement with English learning. These learners are in a relatively new and specific set of circumstances: a hybrid, culturally uncertain world of learning that combines

compulsory GCSE with VE. They are the pioneers of this world- surely it is up to them to decide how to settle it. In other words, allow learners to engage on their own terms.

8.5 Implications for Policy

The construct of Figured Worlds does allow insight into the individual's ability to engage on their own terms: to improvise and self-author (Bandura, 1989; Cain, 1991; Collinson & Penketh, 2013; Hatt, 2007; Holland et al., 2001; Rubin, 2007; Urrieta, 2007; Urrieta et al., 2011). However, as well as learner agency, Figured Worlds also encompass social, institutional and political structures and constraints. Within the constraints of current VE policy, there are limits to changes that could be wrought. Accordingly, this final section sets out implications for policy that could be considered.

English policy regarding the VE and the FE sectors is dominated by employer requirements and economic needs (Wolf, 2004). Policy and theory have created discourses regarding VE that convey angst and anxiety. In the review, much that has been written about VE in academic and political realms, specifically in an English context, was preoccupied by a sense of inferiority (Atkins & Flint, 2015; Grubb, 2005; Norton, 2012b; Shreeve, 2019). VE is often regarded by policy-makers as second best, with poorer outcomes than academic education (Edge, 2014; Smith & Polesel, 2010; Winch, 2012b). VE also has a lower profile in academic research and thinking (Hodgson et al., 2015; Jones, 2015; Winch, 2012a). If VE in England is considered at all, it is most often compared unfavourably with other VE systems in other countries, such as Germany (Brockmann et al., 2008; Brown, 2001); or it is regarded suspiciously, as a tool of social oppression, churning out a narrow skills based curriculum for occupations of lower social standing (Billett, 2014; Rose, 2012; Silver & Brennan, 1988).

This study set out to redress the balance by focusing on the experience and identity. Using the concept of Figured Worlds, what has been revealed is that the GCSE retake, intended by policy to enrich and enable learners, has been co-opted by the participants as a cultural artefact of meaningless assessment. It neither enriches nor enables. Instead, the participants' discourses have positioned the GCSE retake as the villain in their Figured World. At the risk of stretching a metaphor, in the Figured World of the VE learner retaking GCSE, the learners are the pioneers and settlers, the GCSE is the lying villain, and VE is the honest and heroic sheriff, espousing the authentic values and attitudes that matter.

A significant factor for the casting of the GCSE as a villain was the fact that the GCSE examination is used as a benchmark and label of success or failure at Key Stage 4. This labelling, and any associated social stigma, are then carried into post-sixteen study and reinforced because of the retake policy. The retake policy, despite its good intentions regarding economic success, positions GCSE as a barrier to success, potentially impeding progress to higher levels of learning and employment. However, as described above, the experience of retaking GCSE has not damaged participants' attitudes to learning, but rather, it has reinforced a strong, agentic VE learner identity. The fallout and damage wreaked by failing GCSE, described powerfully by many participants in this study, in reality was a defining motivator for an embrace of the transformative potential of VE.

The implications of these findings on policy are profound. What has been revealed is a system that is accidentally creating conditions for the construction of a positive VE learner identity. The participants have constructed a Figured World in a hybrid, culturally uncertain space (Urrieta et al., 2011). The identity capital (Côté, 2005) acquired has not been through a carefully planned, reflexive curriculum that intends to build a strong learning culture (Dyke et al., 2007; James & Biesta, 2007;

Jarvis, 2004). Policy has not considered the role of VE as a transformative, human learning experience.

The transformative potential of learning and identity formation cannot and should not be left to chance. The findings have underlined the fact that the outcomes of VE are seldom described in terms of identity formation (Guenther, 2011). Instead, in the FE sector, emphasis is placed on skills and knowledge, and outputs such as qualification achievement and employment outcomes (Hodkinson et al., 2007). The outcomes of VE are more likely to be described in terms of what a person can do with their new skills and knowledge, as opposed to the influence VE has on personal and social identity (Billett, 2014; Billett & Somerville, 2004; Guenther, 2011). Similarly, the GCSE retake policy has been driven by a desire to improve skills, without due regard of the impact of learner identity.

In 2020, the implementation of T-levels begins (Foster & Powell, 2019). These 'Technical-Levels' are intended to be the gold standard of VE, on a par with A-Levels. In tandem with T-Levels, there are also plans to introduce a transition year for students who are not yet ready to access a level 3 programme (Straw et al., 2019). The requirements regarding English and maths for the proposed T-Level transition year are as follows:

'Employers are clear that English and maths are crucial employability skills and they are imperative to higher level study. English and/or maths will be an important part of the T Level Transition Programme for those who need to continue to study these in order to achieve their Level 2 by the end of their compulsory education or training. As the T Level

Transition Programme will be a type of 16 to 19 study programme, the 16 to 19 maths and English condition of funding will apply.’ (DfE, 2019b, pg.10)

Fast-forward into the future beyond 2020, and the counterparts of the participants in this study (who were primarily studying at levels 1 and 2) would likely be following a T-level Transition Programme. The T-Level reform is intended to be a significant shift for VE, ensuring parity of value and esteem (Foster & Powell, 2019). However, as with previous policies regarding VE, the emphasis is again on employer requirements and associated economic outputs. The focus is on what people can do, rather than what they can become. For the VE learner retaking GCSE English, nothing changes.

The findings of this study have revealed that a focus on learner identity might benefit VE reform into the future. This study has produced a small yet encouraging evidence base that suggests the potential for the formation of a strong, agentic VE identity that positively affects attitudes to learning is there for the taking. However, the emerging design of T-Levels and the T-Level Transition Programme persists in duplicating the conditions of funding, disregarding the acquisition of identity capital, and continues a policy focus on economic and employer concerns. It might be argued that this is signposted by the abandonment of the terminology of ‘vocational’ in favour of ‘technical’, which emphasises the acquisition of skills rather than membership of a vocation that is entwined with people’s lives and identity.

As long as policy continues to insist that GCSE is the benchmark of success, many VE learners will continue to be cast into the long shadow of GCSE failure. As long as policy continues to focus on the purpose of the GCSE as a rigorous standard or benchmark; an enabler or barrier for progression and

a lever for economic productivity rather than a human learning experience, a VE learner identity will be an accidental side effect.

This dilemma is neatly summed up by the A level and GCSE examination controversy in the Summer of 2020 which pitted an algorithm against individuals (Davies, 2020; Luckin, 2020). In search of data consistency in the extraordinary and disruptive year of the Covid-19 pandemic in which examinations were cancelled, the algorithm was an attempt to inject historical trends into estimated results to ensure year on year consistency. In order to work, the algorithm could only be applied to larger cohorts, most commonly found in the FE sector. The ensuing outcry when it was discovered that these students were potentially disproportionately affected led to a government U-turn, and the reinstatement of centre assessed grades estimated by teachers. In this instance, the standards of assessment and individual human concerns turned out to be mutually incompatible. Interestingly, in 2019/20, the context of the pandemic and the impact on examinations and learner well-being has made some policy makers begin to rethink GCSEs. For example, a paper from one group of conservative MPs suggests that GCSEs cause stress and unhappiness and should be replaced by a system which allows children more time to explore which subject they want to study until eighteen through A-Levels, T-Levels or apprenticeships (Adams, 2020).

This study is small, with a focus on a few learners. However, it shines a light on VE learner identity. The T-Level system is still being developed, and the full fifteen pathways will not be available wholesale until 2025. There is an opportunity now, in the design of T-Levels and the T-level Transition Programme, to place the VE learner identity at their heart, rather than employer imperatives. There is an opportunity to design a transformative learning experience, which inducts learners into membership of a vocation (Wenger, 1999). Within these expert, vocational communities, the learning of English: the human ability to communicate and explain with meaning,

emotion and precision could be embedded, not only into relevant vocational contexts, but into the VE learners' experience and identity formation. Therefore, generic functional skills or the GCSE would not be a feature of post-sixteen study. Instead, T-Levels could highlight the inherent virtues of vocational education- a **vocation** that is entwined with a person's agency and identity; and **education** for the whole human being.

If this shift was made, there would be implications for the GCSE system at Key Stage 4. If the condition of funding were removed for sixteen to eighteen year old learners, an argument could be made that the GCSE English (and maths) would cease to be a benchmark of performance for life. Instead, it could be a measure of attainment at a certain age- a point in time. A measure that is useful because it could inform what an individual's study programme might need to include after the age of sixteen, but not a millstone of the 'not learning' that GCSE retakes can become, or the stigma for life if the individual does not achieve it.

In summary, the Figured World that was revealed in this study was defined as hybrid because it encompassed both vocational and academic education. English education policy has often considered that these categories mean that vocational education is placed in a position without parity of esteem or worth. However, education should not be defined and split into vocational versus academic. There are only two types of education- good or bad. The contention of this study is that the defining characteristic of good education is a human learning experience. If the learners are the pioneers and settlers of this Figured World, their experiences and identities should be the key defining influences to ensure that all elements of post-sixteen study, are 'good education' including the study of English and a vocation. This shift would create a transformative and meaningful human learning experience that capitalises on and enables learner agency and identity.

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Appendix 1: Ethical Approval Form

University of Reading
Institute of Education
Ethical Approval Form A (version May 2015)

Tick one:

Staff project: _____ PhD __Y__ EdD _____

Name of applicant (s): Kate Lloyd

Title of project:

What is the impact of compulsory Functional English and GCSE English retakes on sixteen-eighteen year old vocational students and their learning identities.

Name of supervisor (for student projects): Naomi Flynn

Please complete the form below including relevant sections overleaf.

	YES	NO
Have you prepared an Information Sheet for participants and/or their parents/carers that:		
a) explains the purpose(s) of the project	Y	
b) explains how they have been selected as potential participants	Y	
c) gives a full, fair and clear account of what will be asked of them and how the information that they provide will be used	Y	
d) makes clear that participation in the project is voluntary	Y	
e) explains the arrangements to allow participants to withdraw at any stage if they wish	Y	
f) explains the arrangements to ensure the confidentiality of any material collected during the project, including secure arrangements for its storage, retention and disposal	Y	
g) explains the arrangements for publishing the research results and, if confidentiality might be affected, for obtaining written consent for this	Y	
h) explains the arrangements for providing participants with the research results if they wish to have them	Y	
i) gives the name and designation of the member of staff with responsibility for the project together with contact details, including email. If any of the project investigators are students at the IoE, then this information must be included and their name provided	Y	
k) explains, where applicable, the arrangements for expenses and other payments to be made to the participants	Y	
j) includes a standard statement indicating the process of ethical review at the University undergone by the project, as follows: 'This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct'.	Y	
k) includes a standard statement regarding insurance: "The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request".	Y	
Please answer the following questions	Y	
1) Will you provide participants involved in your research with all the information necessary to ensure that they are fully informed and not in any way deceived or misled as to the purpose(s) and nature of the research? (Please use the subheadings used in the example information sheets on blackboard to ensure this).	Y	
2) Will you seek written or other formal consent from all participants, if they are able to provide it, in addition to (1)?	Y	
3) Is there any risk that participants may experience physical or psychological distress in taking part in your research?	Y	
4) Have you taken the online training modules in data protection and information security (which can be found here: http://www.reading.ac.uk/internal/imps/Staffpages/imps-training.aspx)?	Y	
5) Have you read the Health and Safety booklet (available on Blackboard) and completed a Risk Assessment Form to be included with this ethics application?	Y	

6) Does your research comply with the University's Code of Good Practice in Research?	Y		
	YES	NO	N.A
7) If your research is taking place in a school, have you prepared an information sheet and consent form to gain the permission in writing of the head teacher or other relevant supervisory professional?	Y		
8) Has the data collector obtained satisfactory DBS clearance?	Y		
9) If your research involves working with children under the age of sixteen (or those whose special educational needs mean they are unable to give informed consent), have you prepared an information sheet and consent form for parents/carers to seek permission in writing, or to give parents/carers the opportunity to decline consent?			N.A
10) If your research involves processing sensitive personal data ¹ , or if it involves audio/video recordings, have you obtained the explicit consent of participants/parents?	Y		
11) If you are using a data processor to subcontract any part of your research, have you got a written contract with that contractor which (a) specifies that the contractor is required to act only on your instructions, and (b) provides for appropriate technical and organisational security measures to protect the data?			N.A
12a) Does your research involve data collection outside the UK?		N	
12b) If the answer to question 12a is "yes", does your research comply with the legal and ethical requirements for doing research in that country?			N.A
13a) Does your research involve collecting data in a language other than English?		N	
13b) If the answer to question 13a is "yes", please confirm that information sheets, consent forms, and research instruments, where appropriate, have been directly translated from the English versions submitted with this application.			N.A
14a. Does the proposed research involve children under the age of 5?		N	
14b. If the answer to question 14a is "yes": My Head of School (or authorised Head of Department) has given details of the proposed research to the University's insurance officer, and the research will not proceed until I have confirmation that insurance cover is in place.			N.A
If you have answered YES to Question 3, please complete Section B below			

Please complete **either** Section A **or** Section B and provide the details required in support of your application. Sign the form (Section C) then submit it with all relevant attachments (e.g. information sheets, consent forms, tests, questionnaires, interview schedules) to the Institute's Ethics Committee for consideration. Any missing information will result in the form being returned to you.

A: My research goes beyond the 'accepted custom and practice of teaching' but I consider that this project has no significant ethical implications. (Please tick the box.)	N
Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.	
B: I consider that this project may have ethical implications that should be brought before the Institute's Ethics Committee.	Y

¹ Sensitive personal data consists of information relating to the racial or ethnic origin of a data subject, their political opinions, religious beliefs, trade union membership, sexual life, physical or mental health or condition, or criminal offences or record.

Please state the total number of participants that will be involved in the project and give a breakdown of how many there are in each category e.g. teachers, parents, pupils etc.

40 sixteen-eighteen year old Further Education students mandated to retake English

Give a brief description of the aims and the methods (participants, instruments and procedures) of the project in up to 200 words.

1. title of project

What is the impact of compulsory Functional English and GCSE English retakes on sixteen-eighteen year old vocational students in Construction and Hair and Beauty and their learning identities.

2. purpose of project and its academic rationale

From 2015, students who had not achieved C-A* GCSE English were required to retake during post sixteen study. The pass rate in 2015/sixteen for post sixteen year olds was 22.8%. The lowest pass rates were for students following vocational study programmes in Child Care and Construction. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of those subject to this policy and deepen understanding of their learning identities to suggest ways forward for pedagogy or policy. Due to its focus on vocational students, the study will seek participants from a large Further Education College at which 56% of the cohort are mandated to retake English.

3. brief description of methods and measurements

The project will be an ethnographic and qualitative study of these two groups of students. It will be focused on how to bring the learners' voices to the fore. The proposed creative visual research methods will invite the research subject to participate in the making of the data. Crucially though, the proposed study will not take these voices as *heard*, but will use narrative analysis as its hermeneutical framework. In simple terms, the proposed research will present stories.

A pilot study in June 2017 will provide tablet computers on loan to 5 vocational students undertaking English study. They will be asked to take up to 10 photographs each to demonstrate their thoughts and feelings about being in English lessons at College, improving your English and taking tests and examinations in English. The students will then be invited to a facilitated informal group discussion about the photographs, testing a hypothesis that students may feel more comfortable to express themselves in a peer group. One consideration to test will be whether students are kept within vocational groups at this stage. Following the pilot, adjustments will be made to the methodology accordingly. A ethnographic study will then begin in September 2017 with a groups totalling around 40 vocational students. They will each be issued with a tablet computer on loan and asked to produce print outs of images from the Internet. The search engine settings will ensure all images used are available for use and amendments. The students will participate in a course page on the VLE and upload photographs for sharing and comment amongst the group. Each set of photographs will be followed by facilitated group sessions in which the students will be invited to discuss the images they have made. These sessions will be recorded. Four students will then be invited to attend an elicitation interview to discuss the images sourced by the student groups. The photographs and transcriptions of group discussions and the elicitation interviews will then be

used as artefacts in narrative analysis to describe, analyse and deepen understanding of the students' learning identities through the year.

4. participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria

Students will be asked to self-select through a written invite in tutorial. Inclusion criteria will be age, vocational subject and the requirement to study English due to GCSE attainment at key stage 4. The invite will make clear that the decision to participate or not will not affect college assessments in anyway. In order to seek 20m participants the invite will be sent to tutorial groups in sequenced phases until the required number has been found.

5. consent and participant information arrangements, debriefing (attach forms where necessary)

Student data will be obtained with the consent of students and College Chair. Data will be kept securely and no sensitive personal data will be kept. Participants will opt-in and give informed written consent. All records will be coded. The use of photographs will be subject to individual consent..

6. a clear and concise statement of the ethical considerations raised by the project and how you intend to deal with them.

Legal Issues

There are legal considerations that relate to the making and use of images such as privacy and these will be considered in full detail and made clear to participants as part of informed consent.

The Role of the Researcher and Relationship to Participants

A key consideration for this study is that the researcher is the Principal and Chief Executive of the College.

Accordingly, clear boundaries and timescales will be set that will help establish a safe space for the research process, particularly important for a collaborative process., Leitch (2008) considers narrative analysis as a creative method of understanding and engaging with visual research. Within small scale studies she remarks that creative methods such as image making can 'safely mediate communication between children and adults, lowering the power differential' (Leitch, 2008, p. 48). The methodology will also attempt to mitigate the potential power dynamic by using group discussions in familiar surroundings so that students are with peers and are comfortable.

Participants may feel compelled to participate. This will be managed through ensuring the participants are volunteers from a wide field and all participants will be informed that they can withdraw at any point.

Sampling

A key sensitivity is that the sample of participants will be chosen because they have 'failed'. The students in this study will have had no choice in participating in the GCSE retake- this is mandated. Informed consent, including the ability to withdraw, will be an important issue throughout the duration of the study and careful consideration will be given to how the

participants are approached and how the aims and possible benefits of the research are explained.

Informed Consent

Further to the sensitivities detailed above in the section on sampling, in research involving participant generated images, peculiar ethical issues regarding consent may emerge. If the images are included in publication, consent must be negotiated with the participant, but what of a person in the image? Does the image identify them, does it potentially cause harm? There is also the issue of institutional consent as image based research materials might have the potential to damage reputation.

The risks of these issues will be mitigated through careful guidance to participants and consent will be sought image by image from participants and the institution.

Confidentiality

The consent form will make confidentiality clear. At all times the participants will be referred to in code. In addition, the location of the college will be hidden.

Whilst data collected pertaining to the topic of research will be confidential other issues that might be uncovered will need to be dealt with, for example safeguarding. This will be an absolutist stance to protect from harm that incorporates professional and legal obligations.

Intellectual Copyright vs. Confidentiality

A facet of informed consent within visual research is ownership of the image, and this problematises confidentiality and anonymity. Legally, images belong to the maker, therefore informed consent may involve participants signing over ownership. Away from legal considerations, images are also extremely emotive. Might particular images be more personal than others and therefore their ownership is considered more important by the participant? Therefore consent will be sought image by image. Images that are found via internet search engines will be sourced using settings to ensure that all images are labelled for reuse with modification.

7. estimated start date and duration of project

June 2017-January 2019

Appendix 2 Chair of the College Consent Form

Institution information sheet

FAO Chair of Governors, XXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXXX

What is the impact of compulsory Functional English and GCSE English retakes on sixteen-eighteen year old vocational students in Construction and Hair and Beauty and their learning identities.

Project Researcher: Kate Lloyd

From 2015, students who had not achieved C-A* GCSE English were required to retake during post sixteen study. The lowest pass rates nationally were for students following vocational study programmes in Child Care and Construction. The purpose of this study is to illuminate the experiences of those subject to this policy and deepen understanding of their learning identities to suggest ways forward for pedagogy or policy. Due to its focus on vocational students, the study is seeking participants from your College as every year around over 50% of the cohort are mandated to retake English.

What is the study?

The study is being conducted as part of my taught Doctorate in Education at the University of Reading. It is a 50,000 word thesis that is not intended for publication. It aims to explore the experiences of young vocational students who have to continue studying English in order to inform teaching practice in the future.

The project will be a qualitative ethnographic study. It will be focused on how to bring the learners' voices to the fore. The proposed creative visual research methods will invite the research subject to participate in the making of the data.

A pilot study in June 2017 will provide tablet computers on loan to 5 vocational students undertaking English study. They will be asked to take up to 10 photographs each to demonstrate their thoughts and feelings about being in English lessons at College, improving your English and taking tests and examinations in English. The students will then be invited to a facilitated informal group discussion about the photographs, testing a hypothesis that students may feel more comfortable to express themselves in a peer group. One consideration to test will be whether students are kept within vocational groups at this stage. Following the pilot, adjustments will be made to the methodology accordingly. A ethnographic study will then begin in September 2017 with a groups totalling around 40 vocational students. They will each be issued with a tablet computer on loan and asked to produce print outs of images from the Internet. The search engine settings will ensure all images used are available for use and amendments. The students will participate in a course page on the VLE and upload photographs for sharing and comment amongst the group. Each set of photographs will be followed by facilitated group sessions in which the students will be invited to discuss the images they have made. These sessions will be recorded. Four students will then be invited to attend an elicitation interview to discuss the images sourced by the student groups. The photographs and transcriptions of group discussions and the elicitation interviews will then be used as artefacts in narrative analysis to describe, analyse and deepen understanding of the students' learning identities through the year.

Does the College have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether the College participates. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project by contacting the Researcher, Kate Lloyd 01189713452

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team listed at the start of this letter. Neither you nor the College will be identifiable in any report resulting from the study.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take part. It is also important that the views of students are listened to by people working in education. I anticipate that the findings of the study may be useful for the College in developing practice in teaching English to vocational students.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking the College to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be assigned a code letter and will be referred to by that letter in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. In line with the university's research policy on the management of research data, anonymised data gathered in this research may be preserved and made publicly available for others to consult and re-use. The results of the study will be presented within my thesis and potentially at national and international interviews, and in written reports and articles. I can send you electronic copies of these publications if you wish.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, we will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact my thesis supervisor Dr Naomi Flynn naomi.flynn@reading.ac.uk

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it to poplarcottage4@btinternet.com

Research Project:

What is the impact of compulsory Functional English and GCSE English retakes on sixteen-eighteen year old vocational students in Construction and Hair and Beauty and their learning identities.

Participant Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of College Chair: _____XXXXXXXX_____

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to the College hosting this research study

I do not consent to the College hosting this research study

Signed: _____

Date: _____1st June 2017_____

Appendix 3: Participant Consent Form

Participant information sheet

What is the experience of individual vocational students who are mandated to study English post-sixteen?

Project Researcher: Kate Lloyd

I would like to invite you to take part in a research study into the impact of compulsory English study. From 2015, students who had not achieved C-A* (9-4) GCSE English were required to retake during post sixteen study. You are a student currently studying English at College. We are interested in your thoughts and feelings about your English lessons and work in order to produce a piece of research that will make recommendations for teaching practice and policy.

What is the study?

The study is being conducted as part of my taught Doctorate in Education at the University of Reading. It is a 50,000 word thesis that is not intended for publication. It aims to explore the experiences of teaching in different vocational areas.

You will take part on a group workshop of students to find internet images to illustrate their thoughts and feelings about studying English while at College and you may then agree to participate in a small group discussion and then an individual interview. At every stage you can decide not to continue in the study.

The images that have been collated as part of this work the workshops will be used as prompts in the interviews.

Why have I been chosen to take part?

You have been invited to take part in the project because you are a current student who is studying English alongside your main programme.

Do I have to take part?

It is entirely up to you whether you participate. You may also withdraw your consent to participation at any time during the project, without any repercussions to you, by contacting the Researcher, Kate Lloyd katelloyd1972@gmail.com

As a young person over the age of sixteen you are able to give your consent to participate in this research independently of your parent or guardian. However, if you wish your parent or guardian to know you are able to give your consent that an information sheet can be sent to them.

What will happen if I take part?

You will be invited to participate in a workshop, a small group and/or a one to one conversation with the researcher. This conversation will be audio recorded so that the researcher can transcribe notes.

During the conversation we will discuss the images that other students have collected to describe their experiences of studying English at College. You may be asked some or all of the following questions.

Group and Individual Interviews

- *Please choose the pictures that you think say the most about studying English*

- *Tell me about this picture.*
- *What is in the picture? – e.g. a person, a building, a landscape etc.*
- *What does this photo represent to you?*
- *How do you think the student was feeling when they chose this picture?*
- *Is there anything else you want to add? It doesn't have to be about the photo*
- *Tell me about yourself (family)*
- *Tell me about learning English at school and at college*
- *Tell me about these images- why did you choose them?*

What are the risks and benefits of taking part?

The information you give will remain confidential and will only be seen by the research team listed at the start of this letter. Neither you nor the College will be identifiable in any report resulting from the study.

Participants in similar studies have found it interesting to take part. It is also important that the views of students are listened to by people working in education. I anticipate that the findings of the study may be useful for you in your personal development.

What will happen to the data?

Any data collected will be held in strict confidence and no real names will be used in this study or in any subsequent publications. The records of this study will be kept private. No identifiers linking you or the College to the study will be included in any sort of report that might be published. Participants will be assigned a code letter and will be referred to by that letter in all records. Research records will be stored securely in a locked filing cabinet and on a password-protected computer and only the research team will have access to the records. The data will be destroyed securely once the findings of the study are written up, after five years. The results of the study will not be published and will be read only by participants in the study and the research team.

What happens if I change my mind?

You can change your mind at any time without any repercussions. During the research, you can stop completing the activities at any time. If you change your mind after data collection has ended, we will discard your data.

Who has reviewed the study?

This project has been reviewed following the procedures of the University Research Ethics Committee and has been given a favourable ethical opinion for conduct. The University has the appropriate insurances in place. Full details are available on request.

What happens if something goes wrong?

In the unlikely case of concern or complaint, you can contact naomi.flynn@reading.ac.uk

I do hope that you will agree to your participation in the study. If you do, please complete the attached consent form and return it to the researcher.

Thank you for your time.

Research Project:

What is the experience of individual vocational students who are mandated to study English post-sixteen?

Participant Consent Form

I have read the Information Sheet about the project and received a copy of it.

I understand what the purpose of the project is and what is required of me. All my questions have been answered.

Name of participant: _____

Main Course of Study:

Please tick as appropriate:

I consent to participating in an interview

I consent to the interview being audio recorded

I consent to an information form being sent to my parent/guardian

Signed: _____

Date: _____

Appendix 4 Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by Researcher (Achievement)

“If I want to have a good job, I have to get the GCSE” (Goal picture)

“It’s for smart people. I don’t want a smart job, I don’t want to work in an office” (Medal picture)

“You’ve got to keep going because I want a job”(Mountain picture)

“I have to go to classes because I have to unless my teacher nags me” (Family and house picture)

“My attendance is a bit rubbish” (Family picture)

Appendix 5: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by Researcher (Happy)

"I get very annoyed because other people don't want to do it"

"I am very happy to be learning English"

**Appendix 6: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by
Researcher (Bored)**

"It's a joke"

"I have no idea what they're talking about"

"It's just so boring"

"We have to do it, but I don't want to"

Appendix 7: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by Researcher (Scared)

"It makes me brain dead"

"My brain hurts"

"It's like torture"

**Appendix 8: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by
Researcher (Repetitive)**

"I've retaken it twice now, I'm not going to pass"

"It's frustrating"

"It's impossible, so what's the point?"

"It's pointless"

"I don't need it anyway"

"It's just doing the same things again"

"It just goes on and on"

"It makes me feel stupid"

**Appendix 9: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by
Researcher (Angry)**

"I don't want to do it"

"It's too complicated and not worth it"

**Appendix 10: Images Generated in Participant Workshops Grouped by
Researcher (Not Learning)**

Appendix 11 Group Interview 1: Transcript



Martha: Motor Vehicle Level 1 student



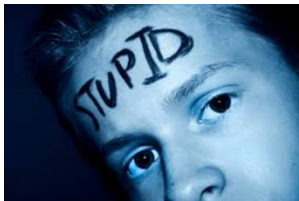
Fred: Motor Vehicle Level 2 student

Claire: Hairdressing level 2 student




Peter: Bricklaying Level 2 student

David: Painting and Decorating level 2 student

Researcher	Right. I'm recording. What pictures have you chosen?
Martha	<p>I chose kind of a prison.</p> 
Fred	<p>I can describe it here, it's so hard to pass GCSE because you don't know exactly how to change some words or to know something. Have to change it to the normal way. And also, you can make so many mistakes in the writing and also speaking. So it's not a funny way when you're just not passing GCSE. You are just stuffed.</p>
Martha	<p>Right now, it's my first now. Last time, when I did the exam it was in the Year 11 a couple of years ago and I was in there before. So that's my second time, when I'm just doing the GCSE here for the third time. I think that the person chose that picture because he was thinking that he has no choice or something. And he can't go forward or just move forward and just going back something. He's just stuck in a one lonely place.</p>
Peter	<p>Just like English [laughter] Also, everyone knows like when you go to prison. If you come to college and you go to English, people know that you have failed. You can't get out of it. Lots of people do though. That's why they don't go to classes. They get away with it. I don't care. But some people might. They might feel shameful. Like if you've done something wrong. Like a crime. It's also like being punished for doing something bad.</p>
Claire	<p>I also chose these because I think my teachers lied.</p> 

	<p>At school , like they all said you must get GCSEs to be successful, but I'm not smart, and I don't want a smart job, like in an office. I haven't passed GCSE and I'm doing Ok- I have a job and I want to be a manager [crosstalk] and I can be without my GCSE. I'm a hairdresser and I'm a mum. My kid is happy. GCSE isn't for me.</p>
Peter	<p>I chose these as it's-- it makes people stressed.</p> <div style="display: flex; justify-content: center; gap: 20px;">   </div>
Claire	Yeah.
Peter	If they're under pressure in exams and then lessons, there'll be more stress
Claire	You just want it all to go away, or you want to go too
Peter	Feeling like really stressed under pressure. And it was too much information for them. This one would represent-- it's too much information. And they can't really think properly anymore. Brain explosion! [laughter]
Claire	<p>You keep going around. Go round and round and round until... bang</p> <p>Not being funny though, some people get really angry. I get pissed off with [crosstalk] people in my class because they mess about. Gets in the way, Behave like kids because they don't want to be there. The teachers do nothing and it doesn't help. They don't care. It isn't fair if you are there to try to pass. It makes you feel like walking away, like this picture.</p>
Peter	English makes you angry! [laughter]
Martha	<p>I chose this one because, for two years, I was in my first primary school.</p> <div style="text-align: right; margin-right: 50px;">  </div> <p>And then secondary. I didn't get much help and I was off-track. I didn't get as much help. I got some help, but I didn't really have anything that helped me learn English to work and pass my GCSEs.</p>
Researcher	And why that one in particular? What does that represent to you?
Martha	<p>My mind's blank.</p> <p>Yeah. Sometimes, yeah.</p>
Researcher	And what do you think the student who chose those pictures-- what do you think they were thinking?
Martha	They didn't get much help. They didn't think of what to write for their exams.

Peter	Everybody might label them. They might not be stupid, but they can't pass the exam.
Claire	Stereotyping
Fred	I also chose Football. <div> </div>
Researcher	Why that one?
Fred	Because I do feel under pressure. Because there's someone attacking you.
Martha	No, I think that's a really good picture.
Fred	Like they have to be that guy that's attacking them. By going forward and ahead of them. And the position that's in, I'd try and tackle him. So then the other one's blocked. You're not going forward, you're staying in the middle. Feeling under pressure, because now they have to do the [GCSE?] again. To become the champion.
Martha	[inaudible] the ones who just passed the GCSE and the teacher said that they are most normal, not like us or something. And they pass and so they want me to do it again so I can pass I don't know. I [inaudible]. She said people who don't pass, don't do well [crosstalk]. It is help for them, like, they have to read English. And they get more scared, and they're thinking, should I do it again or not? I don't know.
Fred	People who pass first time, it's all right for them. They don't care if they never do it again. They don't really care. But people who don't pass, it is hard for them. It's difficult for them. They don't win. The others get to win, and they don't care.
Martha	Yeah.
Claire	Yeah.
Researcher	Yeah. Okay. David, I'm going to bring you in. So, tell me. You've chosen this picture. So what do you think?
David	No, Because I really don't have an opinion. <div> </div>
	Yeah, I don't really mind.
Martha	All right [crosstalk] I think they chose these because they wanted to pass. They have to do it themselves. Teachers for example in my situation is not helping each other. For example, in my situation, I was asking about the dictionary or just

	asking my friend to help and the teacher was like, "No, you cannot talk". I was like, "Can I ask for help?", "No". I can feel freedom when you're passing the exam
Peter	Happiness
Researcher	And what do you think the person who chose that in the first place, what do you think they were thinking when they chose that photo?
Martha	I think that they will choose it because it's, when you learn something which is completely new for you, it's just making you happy because you knew it.
Peter	This picture is success. If in English, you learned a lot and you passed the exam, [there's just?] success which you've reached your goal and you've really did so hard. Now you're free and you don't have to do it again. I will do it. I will learn more. If I'm doing GCSE I will learn more.
Researcher	Can you describe these other pictures that you have chosen to me? What can you see?
Fred	 <p>Maybe they can't pass English and they need help so they're asking for help and it's really difficult for them. They need more help than other people to pass the GCSE English.</p>
David	I don't mind
Fred	<p>A lot of people talk about, once you've finished and once you've passed GCSE english you're free. If you don't it's like this.</p>  <p>A dead end. Yeah. Because for me, a dead end every time I do class. Because I'm not relearning much that will help me in my [GCSE?] because it's so different now.</p> <p>It's not the same curriculum, I think.</p>
Claire	 <p>It is. I'm doing the same stuff, that's like this</p>
Researcher	Okay. And what do you think-- the students who chose this picture, what do you think they were thinking when they chose it?
Peter	They were probably getting the same result each time they retook. Yeah.

	<p>It needs to change. I would change the marks. Get lower.</p> <p>If you get a grade three, you would pass. That would be helpful. You don't need to improve much, and [be stressful?].</p>
Martha	<p>Instead of an exam, do like coursework or something that all adds up to a final mark.</p> <p>To put more of what you learned to test, I guess, than doing the exam.</p> <p>You don't even have opinion, [crosstalk] people.</p> <p>To make it easier for people to understand. Some people don't really understand the questions sometimes. And that's why they won't interpret it right. And they fail the exam.</p> <p>It would be fine if someone would change the text to much easier ones.</p>
Peter	<p>Change it from the old literature The 19th century, for example. Like what I had to do last year.</p> <p>I don't know. It was from the last GCSE last year. It was a text about, I don't know, the guy was cutting something [inaudible] and there was scratching, cracking or something like that. I can't remember. That was the hardest part. To know the techniques. What he used to write them.</p> <p>They are things are that irrelevant</p>

Appendix 12: Group Interview 2: Transcript


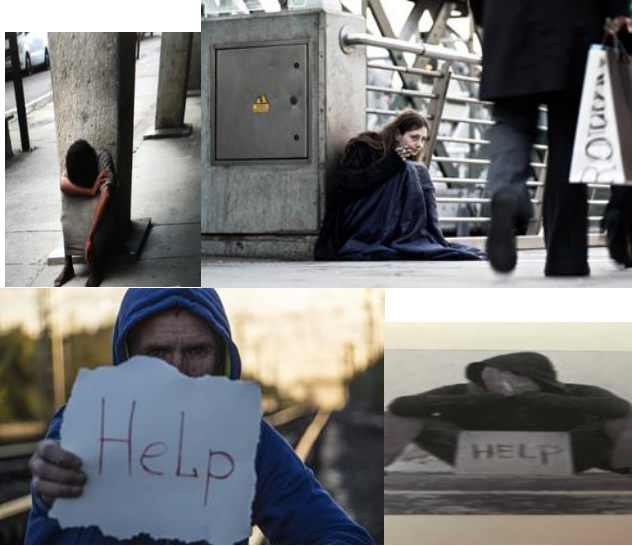
Eric: Plumbing Level 2 student




Simon: IT Level 2 student

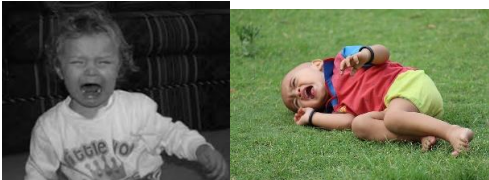

Andrew: Carpentry Level 1 student

Trevor: Plumbing Level 2 student

<p>Researcher</p>	<p>Let me go here then. Right. Okay. So put that in the middle. Right. So I'm interested in you and your experiences on retaking English. We've got some pictures in front of us that you have chosen that might be helpful.</p> <p>Now, do you want to just explain what these images represent to you?</p>
<p>Eric</p>	<div> </div> <p>It doesn't just mean when you're in school, it means when you're at home as well, it follows you like a horror film bad guy, what you can go through when you're doing your English tests because some people aren't as good as others. So it kind of entraps you and expose you and so, it just, oooh, it's like when is you're doing tests, when it comes down to a test, it can be the thing on your mind all the time and it would just consume you. It can get you depressed, or agitated, or scared. And there are [inaudible] representative of who they are.</p> <div> </div> <p>I think it can happen for-- I think it depends on you as a person, because it comes down to some people's minds where they can just go over it but, for me, I would say yeah, I think it can consume me, especially when it comes down to your test days and it just can affect you when you're at home as well, just before you're about to go to sleep and it's the last thing on your mind.</p>
<p>Simon</p>	<p>Yeah.</p>
<p>Andrew</p>	<p>I knew that I wasn't going to pass from just the get-go. And I just knew. I tried, obviously, but I just knew even if I tried, I wouldn't pass, so. But, yeah. I like that college gives you another opportunity and they teach you in a better way than schools. It just seems like it's never going to end like this.</p>

	<p>It just goes on and on. It feels like it will never end.</p> 
Simon	<p>I chose these because there is a person who has a card with: Help, so it looks like some student that don't know about subjects may need to ask the teacher for help.</p>  <p>Classes can be helpful. If the class is behaving well, then it's helpful. No. But some students don't listen, they disrupt the whole class. Yeah. Well, I was going to say, people just go there to turn up, just to get attendance to stay. They don't actually do anything. They just go there, just to stay. [crosstalk] if that's all right?</p>
Eric	<p>I think it's because you're forced to and you don't get to choose. It's someone telling you, you have to do it. And especially our generation, we're not used to that. We're just raised in bubble wrap. And so when you are forced to and you don't want to be there, you're going to just turn up your attendance so you don't get kicked out, and you're going to just do whatever you like. You're not there to focus. You're not there to learn. You're just there to be a nuisance, to be honest. So if you did have the choice, it can help people that actually want to get somewhere in life. Not just people that just want to come there and just mess up your future, for their sake of not being there.</p>
Researcher	Tell me about English
	<p>Yeah. I don't care if it was harder than it was, I'd still turn up. I will still try and do my best.</p> <p>I think it's all right, personally. The teachers are very supportive here because if it's a smaller class, like mine is, the teacher can attend to student at a time, and there's not really much disturbance from other students.</p> <p>I think it's a little bit better because it's a little bit easier. And if I pass this, I think it will also give me and other people confidence to do the actual GCSE test and to be able to pass that.</p>

<p>Andrew</p>	<p>I want to pass but probably I won't. These are my pictures.</p>  <p>It's just about myself, I think. About my motivation. It's always, I get few marks into pass. Like I got D and close to C. It's upsetting me. Yeah. Two years in a row. I also chose this one.</p>  <p>I actually like more of like so if you actually had passed it, it opens up the world just to more things. So many more options. You don't really like-- if we just doing construction, we can go to our office job and do something else. We don't need to just do construction. If we get English and maths, you can do anything, really. So it's like, if I passed that I would do a lot more things, instead of just doing one thing. I think it just opens up more.</p> <p>Yeah. I like construction. I want to do carpentry, really. It just interests me. And I also like computers and stuff like that. So if I really wanted to do something that took two years, if I got the English and maths, that would help me as well against other people in interviews and stuff like that.</p> <p>Yeah, [crosstalk].</p> <p>So that's why I want to get actually English and maths.</p>
<p>Trevor</p>	<p>Plumbing. All the money's in plumbing. My dad is working as handyman, so a few times I've spotted, too, some plumbing. Yeah.</p> <p>I'm already earning more than my mom. I'm working for my uncle. I get a buzz out of that in a way that I don't get a buzz at some of the things that I do at college. That's why I chose this picture as well</p>  <p>I think sometimes at college, they treat us like kids. Like I said, that is annoying, but I don't care, I guess. If it was to be better, I think we would do things that were more to do with what we want to do. Do you know what I mean? I think if we did things that were to do with our jobs if we did things to do with what we wanted to do. I don't know. To be fair, sometimes that's what happens. But</p>

	I guess it's more difficult with English. It's more difficult to make things linked to plumbing if that's what you want to do. It's easy. I'm doing math as well and it's kind of easier with math. I don't mind doing math so much because I have to do that and I have to know that for the job that I'm doing. I think sometimes just doing the English classes, it's just like deadbrain. I think that's probably what I think.
Researcher	Okay. And tell me about English and Plumbing
Trevor	I don't know. To recognize the tools [laughter].
Eric	There's a lot of writing in plumbing as well, after you've done the job and just before the job. And if you can't read what your job is or you can't read the numbers, especially, you might muddle it up and then mess up, I think.
Andrew	I'm interested in Plastering and bricklaying. And then next year, I'm probably going to do the same to get myself a bit better at it a little more. And then if I completed that, I might do plumbing as well to have another subject I'm good at as well.
Researcher	What about these photographs? 
Simon	I would say it's more of a teacher thing. If there is a nuisance in the class-- I don't know, some teachers would rather keep the person who is disrupting the class in the classroom to try and make him work, but sometimes they don't feel like. The person is just not interested at all. So I feel like they should be removed sometimes, just because they have no ambition to actually do it. So I think that's a point, but, yeah.
Eric	To add on. I think when a student goes and messes up and then a teacher kicks him out, I reckon it's just going to be a recurring event. And if I was in that position and I went there and I just messed around and I got kicked out, I could either go home or do whatever I want, so I was just going to keep doing the exact same. Just keep getting kicked out. I think they should be put in a different room, not as a punishment, but sort of, as the same time, to do the exact same work, but on their own or other people without disturbing. So if they're going to disturb anyone, they're disturbing each other so then, it doesn't affect people such as people that want to do their work.
Andrew	 I think, it's just a second chance with this picture. I was looking at it as part of a family, and I reckon if you people with poor backgrounds or from hard areas and stuff like that, and if you didn't get a second chance to redo it and you was really determined, I think it's just good that you have it because then, you can do it as much you like until you pass it, and it will affect you and your family in good ways because you'll have a better job, most likely, and [I don't know?].
Simon	I was thinking about Andrew here, how he said that he failed two years in a row and got so close. That would really annoy me. I don't know. I don't think I would be able to carry on myself from that, just generally just get on my nerves. I've done it so many times in a row and then I just kept failing. It felt



	<p>like I would never do it. So maybe something from there like a college could help you if you failed. They could put extra work on, do extra lessons with you or something like that, just to get that extra edge on it.</p> <p>I mean the really frustrating thing for you is that through those two years, your English must have improved.</p>
Andrew	Yeah
Simon	And it's just about the exam, isn't it?
Andrew	Yes.
Simon	It's just about that test. So through that two years, have you-- I mean, obviously, doing the exam is frustrating. How have you found the lessons?
Andrew	That depends on the class. If the class is behaving well, then, it's okay. If not, then, it's not point for me learning or trying to learn because no one listens. Everyone keeps talking and I can't even concentrate on my work.
Eric	<p>Can I say one more thing?</p> <p>About the English targets. So if the year above us does really well, it's going to be harder for us to get them marks because the number of marks you have to get goes up. So then I see that as not equal. It's not equality, because they have a test that is easier than ours, but why do you have to change the marks? Because we're all at the same school. We're all doing the same work—</p> <p>But I don't see why it has to go up when we're doing-- even if we did the exact same test, we're still going to the same schools and everything. I just see it as bad now because in the country, only two people, in my year, got all As. No one else did. But in the year above, it was many more people because the barriers were down.</p>
Andrew	They have changed the grades now. They say you have to pass to have a good life, but they can't even understand the grades. I can never get it but I know I might need it .It makes you more successful. It just makes you feel like a kid. It makes you feel like this
Simon	It just confuses employers, it looks like. What does a six mean, a B or it's just like--
Andrew	<p>It makes you feel like a child</p> <p>. I can never get it. I know I might need it. I think I know I might need it. That's what people tell me, that's what my teachers tell me. I guess that's why we're being made to do it. I've done it twice now.</p>



Appendix 13: Group Interview 3: Transcript

Isabelle: Level 1 Health & Social Care student

Daljit: Level 2 Carpentry student

Asha: 2 Childcare student

Researcher	<p>Right. Okay, so that should be working now. Brilliant. Thank you. Right. So as a starter then, can we have a look at these pictures you have chosen. So, Isabelle let's start with you. Why did you choose that picture?</p>
Isabelle	 <p>Because he looks tired. And there's the thing. I often get a bit confused or-- whenever I read I sometimes forget what the story is about and I often have to read back again. You know when you read back again you often get a bit bored and then you feel tired. So yeah, it makes me feel tired and bored.</p> <p>We learned about Macbeth. The Sign of Four. Animal Farm. We learned about books and yeah.</p>
Daljit	 <p>I think I'm dreading to go to English because I've done it for so many years. I keep on failing. And like what Isabelle said, when I keep on reading it, I get confused and when I do work, the teacher says it's always wrong and yeah.</p> <p>I think it's both the teacher, the exams. Going in there, sitting down, reading something, and writing about it I find difficult to do.</p>
Isabelle	<p>He's getting tired. See, he's dreading now he's getting-- he's being tortured to do it. Tortured because you're made to do it</p>
Daljit	<p>I like Construction, carpentry. It's like I'm out doing hands-on things. And then it's not always just sitting down. You get to move about so you're being active and doing more stuff than sitting and reading all day.</p>
Asha	<p>He look like nervous by exam or job. kind of how he do exam if he didn't learn? So he then nervous. Or about job. If he reject his job [inaudible] so he can't get another job. So nervous and confused.</p>

	<p>Well, it makes us tired and unhappy. Because if we keep on-- if we have to keep on reading again and again, if we can't write any answer, then time is out. We don't have any more time to do our exam and then-- if we don't have enough time to do our exam then no grades. Then we have to start English again and again.</p>
Daljit	<p>So there's that kind of sense of I'm just going round and round in circles. This image is quite good at showing how people react to that. You don't feel like you're getting anywhere. Yeah?</p>
Daljit	<div style="text-align: right;">  </div> <p>So there's that kind of sense of I'm just going round and round in circles. You don't feel like you're getting anywhere. Yeah? Yeah, I think that. I chose this. I think every time I fail, I can't do it. In the lessons, I keep on saying I can't do it and then I can't do any work. Because in my mind, I'm saying I can't do it.</p>
Researcher	<p>What about this image?</p> <div style="text-align: right;">  </div>
Asha	<p>Well, when I started college, when I went every day, they asked us questions like, if you passed your GCSE like math or English. I told them I didn't pass with my English and then when I started college I was surprised to see that my timetable said that I didn't have any English. Then in a parent's evening, my teacher asked me that, "Do you have any English?" And I said, "No." And then I just started my English and they said that I didn't get to do the-- I can't remember what's it's called, when you start college you do a few English--</p> <p>Yeah, to see how well I learned. I didn't get to do that</p> <p>No, but that test meant nothing. Because from my secondary school, I got a D in English and that makes me go GCSE.</p> <p>That's all, really.</p>

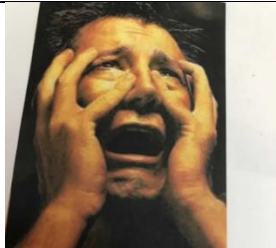

Appendix 14: Group Interview 4: Transcript

Henry- Multi-Trade Level 2 student


Joseph- Electrical Installation Level 1 student



Betsy- Business Level 1 student

Reena- Child Care Level 2 student

Researcher	Let's start with these pictures. How do they relate to GCSE English?
Henry	<p>I did BTEC Travel and Tourism level two for a year, and I managed to pass it. But then I decided I wanted to do something more practical, so I came here to do construction.</p> <p>Yes. I retook my English twice last year and failed both times. I was two marks off one of mine, and they didn't tell me the other one. I got it remarked, and it was still two marks off.</p> <p>Yes.</p> <p>One of those things [laughter].</p>
Joseph	<p>In English, I was like two marks off as well.</p> <p>Yeah. I never got remarked, but in maths, I've got [inaudible] level two.</p>
Betsy	<p>Yeah, maths, I got a two. I was quite close to a three. And then in English, I got three, so I was one mark off of passing.</p>
Reena	<p>In my English, I got a three. I just missed a four. And in maths, I got a two, [like a medium?] two.</p>
Researcher	You've got three images there.
Henry	<div style="text-align: right;">  </div> <p>The first one I picked seems to be a man screaming, and the reason I picked that one is because it's quite frustrating how I need to constantly retake my English because my grade wasn't good enough. After all the times I've done it, I'm kind of starting to get a bit frustrated. Which brings me to the next one, it's this constant sort of anxiety that I feel every time the exams come round because I feel I'm going to fail again ever since the first time.</p> <div style="text-align: right;">  </div> <p>And then the final one is boredom because it's really difficult to make something you were spending most of your entire life learning interesting again.</p> <p>I think it's because it conveys their emotions, how they feel about lesson, really. It's a real struggle trying to get through and do it every time and trying to pass this time around you could. Yeah.</p>


	<p>Because it just gets repetitive, the same thing over and over again. Every year, you have to relearn the same exam scheme, the same sort of exam paper and everything, and reusing the ones you've already done, if you're retaking, as baselines. We're trying to learn how to redo something again, so for it to be a potluck whether you get an exam paper that agrees with you or not.</p>
<p>Betsy</p>	<div> </div> <p>This is mine. The first one, that opportunity, that I believe that everyone deserves a second chance. If you make one mistake, you should be able do the same thing again with no one judging you.</p> <div> </div> <p>This one is like-- second one is basically like traveling or relaxing. Everyone should not stress about everything, and relax and do what you got to do. And then third one, I'm not entirely sure, to be honest with you. No, I just picked it [crosstalk].</p> <div> </div>
<p>Researcher</p>	<p>Okay. Well, let's start with that you've got. Why do you think someone chose those images in the first workshops?</p>
<p>Betsy</p>	<p>Because they've already failed once, and even if they failed the second time, they will still get up. Now for time two, make that better. That make sense?</p>
<p>Joseph</p>	<p>Just because once you do the same thing again, it's a bit easier here than school. But it's just that same thing, relearning old--</p> <p>Yes. You do things you things you know, but then you improve on some. And then some it's just like it stays the same, so in that sense, yeah.</p>
<p>Reena</p>	<div> </div> <p>I've got these two here.</p> <p>Well, but this girl here, she looks quite bored. So just moody, really. That's just kind of how I kind of felt for you do something in school. I just felt like it was quite boring, that moody stage kind of thing.</p>

	<p>Yes, school in general. But the GCSEs added a lot more, yeah, stress and moody, boring stuff. Yeah. I'd say for all because they're all just quite long. I don't know. It's just I kind of feel like that's how I felt. I don't know. Just a bit bored all the time at school in that moody place, and it's not fun. Yeah. Maybe not moody, but more bored in a way. Yeah.</p>
Researcher	What about this one?
Joseph	 <p>Well, I don't know. I just think I've got to pass it, bang it out because, yeah, try obviously, I didn't pass. I've just got to go harder this year.</p> <p>I mean, obviously, I'd rather not be coming here, but.</p> <p>No, I'm giving my honest opinion. I'd rather not be coming to English for two hours, but I've just got to do it. So that's the mindset of what I have, just to go hard. And I say to myself that I'm going to do it. It's got to be positive. Yeah.</p> <p>It's different to my other lessons. The electrical installation.</p> <p>I'm like perfect with that. I love it. I'm rather keen on it, so. It's more practical. It's more fun, in a way. You're reading English, reading books and annotating and all that stuff. In electrical, you're wiring up or learning practical skills. That's quite good. Yeah.</p>
Henry	<p>Yeah. Yeah. I changed track to do a practical course, and I'm loving it compared to what I used to do because while as before, I didn't feel like I was making any progress. I'd get somewhere, and as much as I'd focus on it a lot, all I had at the end of the day was a piece of paper that just said what I'd written. Whereas with construction, I've built stuff. I've been able to progress. I can see what I've done, and I've gotten better. And just seeing that physically in front of me, compared to just seeing it on a screen or printing it out and handing it to someone, feels a lot better. I've actually done something, a little bit.</p> <p>Yeah. With that, you get the grade, whereas what you're doing with English, you're building up and just getting that one specific piece of paper that says you've passed. Whereas construction, you now have all these skills that you have right in front of you that you could use at any time, anywhere you need, in any sort of practical situation. Say your boiler breaks and you've been doing plumbing. Fix it yourself. Whereas with English, it's like at any point, I can go out and read a book and improve that. But I haven't really got anything other than to say, "I've read this book and enjoyed it." That's it.</p>
Researcher	You want to tell me about those?

Joseph	 <p>I mean, kind of the help bit. I just prefer to not deal with [inaudible] and the help. And then I kind of feel like I need quite a lot of help, when the brightest kids or whatever need a lot of help, so I chose that. Yeah.</p> <p>I just need help. I needed to catch up on so much, where I missed out a lot. So I needed a lot of help for GCSEs. Yeah.</p> <p>Doing Electrical Installation I feel like I'm fully-- yeah. Could do it on my own. Don't need no help or nothing.</p> <p>I think I want to go onto level two, and then try and get an apprenticeship. [inaudible] maybe could go onto level three, see how it goes. Not sure.</p> <p>Yeah. Sort of skilled, but it's just the thing that I took a liking to. Yeah.</p> <p>I mean, I'm interested. Mostly my dad. He's not an electrician, but he's self-taught. And he messes around with all electrical stuff and controls and he wants them and stuff. And he sells them to all his mates. That's what I wanted to get involved in. It's just the best trade, really. I've worked with electricians. I've worked with laborers. Electrician all the way, 100%, every time. Yeah.</p>
Researcher	And what pictures have you got here? You want to just tell me about that?
Henry	 <p>I looked at it for the pointless reason because obviously I'm been in education since primary school, went to secondary school, and I felt like I've done all that time - what's it like, 10 years - all them years just to be told you've got everything failed so I felt like it was all pointless. The whole 10 years was all for nothing. Just to fail. All that just to fail.</p>
Researcher	You all are nodding about that..
Henry	<p>I got my GCSE, and then I think got three from level two [travel tourism?], but that was it. It was opening my results and just seeing I'd failed everything except maths. That hurt.</p> <p>It's like a wound that you can't really feel unless it happens to you, and it's like oh. It was the experience of going home and telling my mum that I'd failed again. I'd wasted 10 years for nothing, and then I'd failed again. It's like these pictures.</p>



	<p>It's weird because I thought it would make me-- when I first saw the grades I gotten and saw I got nothing, I felt like, "Oh, I can't even be able to do that." [inaudible]. It's going to be pointless when I fail it again. Now that I'm actually doing it, I feel like I want to try to actually get it. Do you know what I mean?</p>
Joseph	<p>I want to just because I want to be able to progress more in electrics. I want to get to level two [inaudible] finish it. I can't do that unless I pass because I need the grade. So if I had to do it without the electrics, I probably would have been like [inaudible] to leave here. But the fact that I actually have to get it to do what I actually want to do, it's making me have to do even more, actually. You're sort of forced into it in a way. Unless you're really thinking about being an electrician, then you're sort of forced into it because you got to get it to be able to do it</p> <p>I just think it's a waste of time [inaudible]. What I'm doing in English has gotten nothing to do with what I'm doing in electrics in life. I don't see why if I've done it just to learn English and math. [Just because I failed something else?] I can't do a high level in electrics. Really, it's got nothing to do with it. I mean like I'm not going to be writing an electrical quotation in a sonnet [inaudible], now am I [laughter]? Do you know what I mean? So I just think it's a waste of time.</p>
Reena	<p>You need like the very, very basics. The whole thing of writing and reading, yeah. [inaudible] maybe that's [inaudible].</p> <p>But learning about Shakespeare and all that [inaudible]. A lot of the stuff you learn in maths anyway [inaudible] you won't use it later in life. You forget, and adults will tell you that.</p>
Betsy	<p>Yeah, my mum don't draw an equation of what shopping to get. She just buys at the till. She's not doing bar graphs and [inaudible].</p>
Reena	<p>[inaudible] you're right. It's like a letter or email. You don't need most of the stuff you learn.</p> <p>Even the rest of your life [inaudible] each other. All this [inaudible] you don't even need it for like personally. I don't know no one [inaudible] unless you're [inaudible] you're doing as a career, no one really has that [inaudible] you're not really going to do algebra. That's what I don't understand. [inaudible]. Just learn--. [inaudible].</p>
Joseph	<p>It just depends on the person, I feel like as an electrician, so you have to think about the benefits of that so we're going to do math and English, but the course could only have what we need mainly and then it could be a bit quicker in that sense [inaudible].</p> <p>It's like you could be really good at electrical, and you could have all the properties of being an electrician, but you can't pass math and English, and that means you can't get to the next level, so you can't actually become an electrician, but you still have all the skills. Because math and English don't benefit whatever you're doing in any way really. Do you know what I mean?</p>

Henry	<p>I feel that it shouldn't be-- I [inaudible] 10, 11, maybe 12 years' worth of work should all come down to two exam papers that when you do them, if you fail, you failed it, and you have to try all over again. All that time working up to that just feels like it's wasted when you read that piece of paper that just says, "You didn't get high enough mark in this." So that's horrible. It's almost like opportunities have been taken away from you when you read that because it's such a vital thing that's been made out to be that it just breaks you almost. It's because you've been told you're no good. That's it.</p> <p>You've been told all your life it's such a vital thing, but even through your school, they're always telling you it's the most important thing. It makes you feel like-- You need your math and English. [crosstalk] in English. But speak the language [inaudible]. Not [inaudible]. [inaudible] no, you can't get a job in it, but it's standard. Yeah, after [inaudible]. So especially when you read that, it just brings you back down to earth, and it just grounds you. You won't be successful, like these photo.</p>  <p>You just think, "Oh." [crosstalk] you've failed from your family or you failed [inaudible]. And you've got my sister who's opposite me. She's As across the board. She can do it, she can be successful, I can't [inaudible].</p>
Betsy	My sister as well.
Henry	<p>She's getting all As, and it just feels like, "Ah." Yeah. The only C my sister got on one of her reports last year, which I [inaudible] homework because our skills wanted to give it to her. Yeah [inaudible] like that. And it's compared to me, who was getting all Cs and stuff [inaudible], I was like, "Oh." Well, even the whole concept of talking about it, it just makes you look so crap-like what people ask: 'I got four Ds and Cs. What did you get?' They think you can tell what type of person he is. But my grades aren't me that much because they can't do what I can do. Do you know what I mean? [crosstalk] really. You see some people you think, "Oh, the shit they're doing" Useless. And they're like- you see some with 10 GCSEs: 'oh, they're going to be a business person, doctor', and most of the time it's not even like that. But people can ask [inaudible]. Even people that do go to [crosstalk]—</p>
Joseph	<p>Most of the people, when they're working, then you got the new GCSEs and they're [inaudible] always say it was a bit different back then.</p> <p>GCSEs aren't that important [inaudible]. They won't help you in life [crosstalk]. [inaudible] given to writing stuff down [crosstalk]. What's geography? It's not a work skill.</p>
Henry	So I'm going to come over, and we're going to go to a construction job in the future, and need to know, "Africa's that way."

	Right. I mean, depends what kind of work you do, really. I mean, if your work is writing or calculating, maybe you would need math and English for that. But for certain stuff, I don't think you should. [crosstalk] just do the course you know what I mean.
Reena	Just enough to read. [Reading, writing?][inaudible]. When you sit down to a job and meet someone, to be formal [inaudible]by speaking. [crosstalk] You don't need that if you're, let's say, writing an email to someone, you don't need to [add on the?] punctuation [inaudible] and that stuff I think is over reacting [inaudible]. [inaudible] punctuation. [crosstalk]
Henry	Yeah, to make sense, you need punctuation.
Betsy	No.
Reena	[crosstalk] What elements of [inaudible] punctuation do you think you have to learn that are just not [inaudible]. I think all of it really is, full stop, is good to know. Nothing else. Full stop [inaudible].
Henry	It's good to know but it's also, you've learned a lot of pointless stuff after [inaudible] I think that's helpful. I think that's helpful.
Joseph	But maybe not, but Shakespeare's not helpful?
Betsy	No.
Henry	It all depends on what someone thinks. Everyone things differently. Obviously, like just now, I thought it's all right that they didn't [inaudible]. It all depends on what someone thinks. It's like the other day when I had to look up what a dynamic verb was, when am I ever going to, in a sentence, realize that I'm using it rather than just say it.
Reena	What's a dynamic verb?
Henry	I don't know. I had to Google it, I swear. I went looking for 20 minutes to find out what it was [laughter].
Researcher	Is there anything else?
Henry	I feel that [college?] is more focused. This year, compared to what I did for [GCSE?], it was so chaotic. I had, I think was, seven or eight different subjects I was all trying to learn at once, all trying to get it down on a piece of paper. Yeah, so much more free time. You have to remember everything at once, whereas this year we're focused into two things, my construction course and my english and it's so much calmer. It makes me feel so much better knowing that part of time is spent devoted to this subject that I need to learn and the other time is doing something that enjoy, that I really get along with and I actually enjoy coming here for. It's like this explosion

	<p>Before, when [we were doing GCSE, everyone [was saying?], "Make [sure you pass. It's?] stressful so keep working". And you overthink about it and you forget the concept of it cause [you're?] stressing a bit too much. You think, "I'm going to fail, I'm going to pass", whatever.</p> <p>[inaudible][as always?], it's the same [feel?] every time, like feeling your gut-wrench. You feel like you're going to throw up. It's such stress. I don't want to fail again, I don't want to go back to my parents and say, "I've messed up again. I've got to do it all over again". Take another year out of my life and try to do something I enjoy but instead having to just go over my english again.</p>
Joseph	<p>Just to make sure at this point [crosstalk]. Just want to pass it really. I just want to pass it. Don't want to be doing it. Yeah, just need it gone so we can just focus on what we're actually doing.</p>
Reena	<p>Yeah, what you want to do. What we want to do.</p>
Betsy	<p>I hope I pass this time around.</p>
Henry	<p>Fingers crossed!</p>

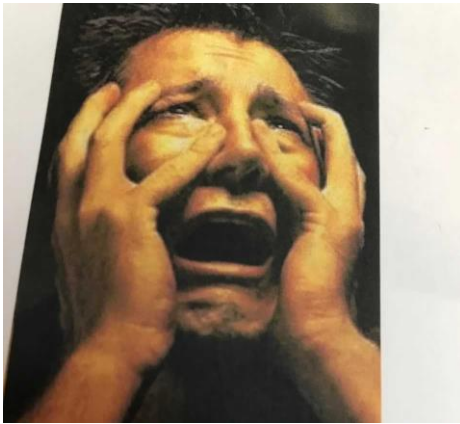
Appendix 15 Interview with Henry: Transcript

Well, just choose from it. Yeah. But yes, I think it was.

Yeah. And then there was one more, I think, of a guy looking angry. Might have been that one.

Okay. Brilliant.

I think it's those



Those. I'll put that in between us. Okay. So are you comfortable if I ask you a few questions about yourself?

Definitely.

Okay. And tell me about your family?

Quite lovely people. They've raised me well. I've sort of been raised to be very polite and very sort of talkative of my opinion and to be able to share very much. And yeah. I've got a younger sister as well who's been raised the same way. I've got an older brother. It's quite a stable family life. My parents don't live together but they are still together, so. As much as it's complicated to explain, it's easy to understand for me because it's always been that way.

My dad works in Westminster. At the moment, he's just changed jobs. So now he's on the noise team just sorting out sort of if they get complaints if it's noisy. Whereas before, he used to do checking licences for different places. [inaudible] for if people have [shop carts?] or something out and they didn't have a licence for that, then he'd be able to sort of get it taken

away if they didn't sort of remove it from site. And my mum is a carer. So she works with a lot of old ladies or people with disabilities. So I've met quite a lot of them because I'm quite good at talking to people, and it's nice to keep them company.

So your dad works for the council?

Yes.

Yeah. Okay. And has he always done that?

For as long as I can remember, yeah.

Yeah. And how about your mum?

She started working at-- doing recently. Not too recently. It's quite a few years back now. But she hasn't been doing it for as long as I know, because she used to have to stay at home to sort of look after my sister when she was quite young, and obviously, when I was going to school when I was in primary. So it was only, say, about maybe five years ago, estimating, that she started working as a carer. So she hasn't been doing it long, but she's doing it long enough to sort of make a connection with people.

Okay. And tell me about your brother and your sister?

My older brother is 10 years older than me.

Oh, gosh.

And he's got a different dad, but I still see him as my full brother because he's just an amazing person. He's very out there. He talks to anyone. He bounces between jobs recently because he either works as [chefs?] in different places, whichever pays the most. What else does he do? No, yeah. He volunteered at a reptile shop for a couple of years while he was living in Worthing. He also-- what was I going to say? Ah, and he also works at the zip line in Bristol Zoo.

Oh, okay [laughter].

Yeah. He gets around quite a lot. And then my younger sister, who is 12, is currently in secondary school, or in year eight, I think it is. And she's currently doing really well. A lot better than I was at her age. Honestly. She's a lot more academic.

Tell me about your school.

I was a very shy kid. I didn't like talking to anyone I didn't know. I would completely sort of shut people out, and if-- what's the word for it? If anyone sort of really come up to me, I'd sort of almost shun them away because I didn't want to be a bother or interact with new people. But over time, that sort of changed as I got older. But in my very early years, I didn't talk to many people. I was very shy and all my friends were sort of people who I'd always known and were very close to me from a very young age.

I found it easy for the most part. My only problem was my handwriting. So a lot of the time, I had teachers who couldn't understand what I'd written. And for the longest time, I was in a lower set for maths because they couldn't read my handwriting. And then one year, I think it was a teacher who had always dealt with students with terrible handwriting, she read my work and went, "Why is he in this class? He can do a lot better than this. He's already finished the work." As much as he was-- as much as I was slow at doing it, she'd see the work and go, "No. This is better than most other people." So she moved me up a class. And ever since, I've been pretty good at maths, which is why it was the only GCSE I got. But yeah.

So why do you think your handwriting was difficult to read?

It was quite messy. When I was quite young, I'd always do stuff my own way. And because of it, I never really learned the way most people did. So for example, when they used to give you those exercises where you draw a single letter or something like that, three on a line, I wouldn't listen. And I'd draw 20 or so As, all really small, across this massive line. So when everyone else has got eight or nine done, I'm still there drawing the same letter repeatedly in this tiny little writing. And yeah. It was just because I didn't listen really. If I'd paid more attention, I think I might have a lot better handwriting than I do now [laughter].

I think I was very much sort of wanting to do my own thing. I wanted to be special. I was one of those kids where I was sort of-- as much as I didn't interact with people, I wanted the attention but never knew how to get it. So because of it, I'd always do stuff my own way.

I didn't really watch too many TV programs. I used to watch a lot of old DVDs my brother had. Oh, and VHSs, as well, which my sister wouldn't even know nowadays [laughter].

No. No. Nobody would. No [laughter].

No. But I used to watch old movies. It was quite a sort of-- a lot of stuff that was originally made in Japan and brought here, so a lot of anime sort of things. So for example, I used to watch stuff like Pokemon and Digimon and Yu-Gi-Oh! All because it was very much sort of my brother had it, so I watched it sort of through excess and really got into that kind of thing.

And do you think that influenced you at all?

I think so. It gave me a lot more to talk about to a lot of different people. Whereas a lot of people sort of focus down on these sort of quite young programs, and I was watching stuff that was a lot more aimed for an older audience. So I think it sort of matured me a lot quicker.

I think I just like to stand out quite a bit, to be honest. I like being the centre of attention. And when I'm not, I like being able to support people and sort of have people notice me. I like being recognised for my achievements rather than sort of disregarded because of my failures. So because of it, I always try and be a good friend. I always try and sort of make people happy and keep them uplifted. Because if I don't, then who will?

I don't think I knew how to express myself. I had a lot of opinions and I talked a lot to people that I knew. But when I was younger, it was just trying to find a way to find an outlet for it. If you talk to my mom and my dad, they'd tell you that I talk their ears off [laughter]. You wouldn't believe how much I spoke at home when I was younger compared to when I was at school because I was always described as very quiet, very shy. But then I had sort of glimpses of being very outgoing and very overdramatic like I am today. So I think it was just trying to find myself and sort of opening up to people is what I needed to do. Yeah.

Tell me about secondary school then.

I think I struggled a bit at secondary school because I used to get bullied when I was younger. And it was all because of different trivial reasons. I have quite large feet, so I used to get bullied for that. Or it'd be just different things like I was slower than other people or I wasn't as athletic. So I used to get sort of picked on being out of place in a way. But over time, it stopped affecting me. And that's, I think, partly to blame why I'm so outgoing now is because, at a young age, I realised, why should I care what other people have to say about me when I

could just be me? And I think that really helped when-- even at one of my-- a person who bullied me for about three years, one day, we found a common interest because he was being bullied, as well. And once we found that, we were as thick as thieves; still are today. He went from being someone who I'd dreaded seeing every day to someone who I'd look forward to hanging out with. And with my education, it was like he would help me in lessons. He'd help me sort of understand work that I didn't, and I'd help him. So it was very much that sort of thing of meeting people and getting them to help you out. Especially because when I was younger, I was a bit shy of asking teachers. So yeah.

So tell me about your school work. Tell me about English at secondary school.

English. It was one of the subjects I didn't take much notice of. I was so involved with other things or involved with my friends that I didn't pay much attention to certain lessons like English. And I think I struggled because of that. Because I didn't pay much attention to it, in my later years I was quite behind compared to everyone else. So when I finally knuckled down and tried working on it, it was just too late.

And what particular aspects of English did you find less interesting or more difficult?

It was probably to do with-- I think I struggled more with language than I did with literature. It was writing rather than reading. I can read and I can speak as well as I can, really, but when it came to finally putting it into words and writing on a piece of paper, I really struggled with that. It's almost like there's a wall there between what I want to say and what I can write. Because I never quite know how to put it into words. I could say it, but I could never write it down, and I really struggled with that.

Tell me about GCSEs then. Because when we did the focus group you talked a lot about GCSEs, particularly, your memory of opening the envelope.

Yeah. Opening the exam results. Yeah. It was one of those things. It was through GCSE, I was so sort of scatterbrained with all the different subjects because I think I was doing, I think, eight different subjects at the time.

I'm a very single-minded person. Once I focus on something, I do really well at that one thing and shut everything else out. So trying to focus on eight different things throughout the day, throughout the week, every single day was quite sort of stressful on me and I didn't know how to cope with it. I think that's why I did so bad because I didn't know how to focus on doing everything rather than just one thing.

I don't have anxiety like a lot of my friends do, but I felt what it would feel like if I did when I sat down there. It was that moment you sit in that chair, you realise this isn't childhood anymore. You're about to go and become an adult. This result determines what you get when you're older and how it affects what you do in life. And it was one of those things where it hits you all of a sudden as you sit down in that chair. And it's almost like you shut everything else out and you don't hear them talking. You just hear the word, "Start." And you open this paper and you don't understand a single word [laughter]. You think, "I can do this. I can do this." And you open it up and you're like, "I have no idea what's going on anymore [laughter]." So you just go with it and you try and wing it.

And tell me--

At least, that's my experience of it at least.

It's like these pictures



I'd always been led to believe it was by teachers. They'd always say that once you get the result, it will impact your future life. It will determine what jobs you do in the future, how well you get paid, how sort of financially stable you'll be. They make it sound like everything rides on just your skills in those subjects alone rather than expanding out and telling you about other courses and careers you can do. They focus very much on maths, English, and science, or at least, their own subjects. But they mainly push those three. And as someone who wasn't very good at any of those other than maths, it was very difficult to understand why I was going to do-- why I felt I was going to do so badly in life compared to how I'm actually doing now. And so I still look back on that and I'm confused, because I can't understand why they told me it would go so badly, and yet I'm doing so well now that I've left school and gone to college instead.

Okay. Well, tell me about that transition then

Yes. I did sixth form for a year. I absolutely hated it.

Why?

It was a completely coursework-based subject I did. It was travel and tourism, level 2. And the way it was set out, I didn't take it seriously at the start. As I began to sort of work harder, I realised that there was no chance in changing what I'd previously done in the course. So then it was playing catch-up the whole year through.

Oh, okay. Interesting.

And it was almost like I didn't take it seriously because it was almost like an extra year at school. And I thought, "Oh, this doesn't matter. Next year, I can do something different if I don't enjoy this year." But it was just stressful. It was something that-- I didn't realise I'd be so stressed out about something I did not care at all about [laughter]. It was almost like-- you know when you're stressed about something pointless? It was as much as I can understand, this might help other people with their careers, it just wasn't for me. I knew that I was never going to do anything related to travel and tourism. I've never been interested in planning holidays or making itineraries.

So why did you do travel and tourism?

They forced me to. They were like, "Do you want to retake your English?" And I was like, "Yes. I want to retake my English here." And they went, "Okay. You've got the choice, because you don't have high enough grades to do A-Level, between these two BTECS. You can either do sport or travel and tourism." And I said, "Which one is more IT-based?" Because I thought that's something that I'd want to do later in life. And they said, "Travel and tourism." And then when I got there, and the only thing it had to do with IT was researching holidays and typing stuff out. And it felt tedious. Every day would drag on. It may have been 8:40 to 3:10, but my God, did it feel like a century. Every lesson was just stressful. My girlfriend would have panic attacks over deadlines where we would be so stressed out about trying to get this work all in on time. I had quite a few people that I know almost give up on the course completely

because it was tearing such a sort of big impacts in their life, making them doubt themselves a lot.

And how was it retaking English?

They only gave us, I think, it was two or three 50-minute lessons a week. I didn't understand why it was such a short period of time to learn so much information. As I started English over again and for doing the re-takes, I thought it would be a lot more focused. It would be a lot more-- you focus on the skills rather than the exam paper. And all it was is they teach us about the exam papers and previous ones rather than teaching us the subject itself. They tell us how to answer the questions rather than how to use our English skills to answer the questions.

Okay. Okay. So then you finish the first year of sixth form at school. What's behind your decision to do something else? What do you want to do as a career?

It was purely based on the fact of I wanted to do something more practical than spend an entire year sitting behind a keyboard typing away. And it felt like torture just watching the whole world go by as I did nothing to impact it at all. And then I thought to myself, "I could do something at maybe a college or maybe even another sixth form that is a lot more my sort of style." And I'd done a bit of work for my girlfriend's dad building sort of their summer house. And that's what made me think, "I could go into construction, and then after that, choose a trade." Because that's going to help me in life way more than anything else. And even if I don't do a career in construction, I now have those skills. As much as I can get myself a cheaper holiday [laughter], I can also now wire a plug. I can do some plumbing. I can build something out of wood, like carpentry. So I feel those skills help me a lot more than ones that sixth form tried pushing me to get. As much as basic maths is okay, it's like, "I'm never going to use algebra to pay my bills. And I'm never going to use--" as much as you may write a letter or you may write some of that out, a lot of time it's email nowadays rather than actually writing a handwritten letter.

No. You rarely ever use it. They encourage you to use the computers more today than they ever did before. It's one of those things. It's the phrases like, "I don't know this," and they tell you to google it, don't they? Yeah.

So go back to the pictures that you picked then. So you make that decision. You come to college. And did you know you were going to have to do your English again or was that a surprise?



Yes. I had a deep down feeling that I wasn't going to escape it that easily.

I know it was going to come back to haunt me.

And how did that make you feel?

Bored and—*[points to picture]*

Bored. And—



--stressed out.

Yeah. Yeah.

Yeah. I felt that, hopefully, this year, I wouldn't feel those emotions again, that it would feel a lot calmer and that I'd ease into it. Especially, because I'm doing a different exam paper this year. So it's something completely new. But at the same time, I don't feel those same emotions as I did before, or at least, not as badly because it's a lot more focused. Whereas before, I was doing pointless subjects in sixth form. For example, we did, I think it was a task for-- can't be sure of what it was, but it was-- no, it was origami I had to do for a few weeks. Or film society. And what else was that? Oh, and debate society was probably the only good one because it helped me speak my opinion a bit more, like I am now. But I was wondering, how is origami going to help me in careers when I could be doing my English work right now? Or I could be doing revision when instead, I'm stuck here watching Star Wars [laughter].

Yeah. I haven't felt as stressed out at all this year because I know that I've got the time to work on myself. I know I can work on making myself better at English. And I don't have many pointless lessons anymore. I've got construction. I've got English. I've got [inaudible], which is very sort of calming and relieving because it lets me explore a subject I've an interest in because we're doing the VR one, and tutorial, which is helping me in life, sort of teaching me skills, similar to what they do for [inaudible] in secondary school. Like, learning for life. Yeah. So yeah. I find these subjects a lot more focused and a lot better because I've got more time to work on them. I feel I can always come to my teacher whenever, whereas before, they were quite busy with GCSE students that were doing them that year. They would sort of shun you to the side. At college, they're always willing to come and talk to you about your grades to help you and to support you.

Okay. And how do you feel about retaking the exam this year? Different exam board you say, though, so it's easier.

Yes. Whereas before I did AQA, I think we're doing Edexcel this year.

It'll be Edexcel, yeah.

Yeah. So there's a part of me that's a little bit worried about that. But at the same time, I feel that if I've learned anything sort of in the past month I've been at the college, that I'm going to do a lot better this year. I'm a lot more focused. I've knuckled down. I'm actually doing revision at home, which before, something that as much as they pushed, because they sort of almost forced me to do it, I would do it, but only sort of maybe half do it and then realising

like, "I'm completely bored and have nothing else to do." But this year, I'm a lot more into it. I'm a lot more-- I'm a lot more confident about doing the exam this year, to think about it.

Good.

And even if I don't get it this time around, there's always another try. I can always just keep trying my best at it. Because that's what I did last-- for the very last one I did, I tried my absolute hardest. And I know the reason I failed is just because I didn't know the information. It's not that I didn't try hard enough. It's that I didn't get the subjects, rather than-- yeah.

I know you told me last week, and I can't remember. What grade did you [crosstalk]?

That's fine. Originally, for-- wait, for math or English?

English.

English, I originally got a two in language and a three in literature. And they let me retake my language. And both times, I got a three. However, the first time I retook it, I was two marks off of a pass. Got it re-marked, and I was still a fail.

No, not at all. And they'd actually moved the grade boundary up, as well. So if they'd kept it the same, I would have passed, along with a lot of other people in my class.

Yeah

But because they raised the grade boundary, I failed by a couple of marks.

What do you think about retaking at college?

I can understand why they're pushing it. It is an important skill to have in life, to do maths and English. But at the same time, I feel that-- well, I can understand it's important. I've always been led to believe it is extremely important, so I don't really know anything else other than that. I've never really been told any other opinions on it. So I'm not really sure what I could say to them because if they're sitting in front of me, I couldn't really say anything other than, "Yeah, I failed a few times. And I'm just going to keep trying until I get it." So maybe it's just that it's too difficult or maybe that I just don't understand it. It may be me. It may be them. It may be the exam paper. For example, a question last year, "How do you describe--" it was describing, I think, it was a surfboard in the text. And I was completely confused. I was describing an inanimate object, which is something I'd never considered doing for an exam paper. It's something I wasn't prepared for at all. Because I'd been constantly shown previous exam papers where it was completely different. Especially after they changed the mark scheme and a lot of things like that where they raised the grade boundaries and lowered them a lot. It was very sort of-- you can't predict at all what they're going to do.

Yeah. It's like a roulette wheel. You never know what you're going to get. And there's only a chance that you going to achieve in the end. So it is very stressful like I've got in this picture here.



It panics you because you don't know what you're going to get when you open that exam paper. Because it could be something you've never thought of in your life. It could be something about capital punishment. It could be about tax laws. It could be anything. And you just don't know. You just open it and you have to go with it. Yeah. They just prepare you for what they've previously done but not for any situation in the future that could come up.

Yeah. Okay.. Anything else you'd like to add?

Not really too sure, sorry.

No, no. That's fine. That's fine.

Appendix 16: Interview with Simon: Transcript

I think that was that.

That's right. Yeah. And as we were coming out, you were talking about what you do for work. So you work at [takeaway restaurant]. So how many hours a week do you do?

Probably like 37. But it's not forced. I wanted to do the hours. Yeah.

It's quite young to be in long hours, but I can handle it. I enjoy it, it's hard but I have a lot of responsibility. I work nights as well. I sometimes am in charge.. it depends... It's good fun but sometimes it's boring.

Yeah. It's a lot of hours on top of doing your course at college. Yeah. Yeah.

But it's pretty good. It gives me money and I can give some to my mum to help out.

Yeah? Okay. So in this-- In this interview are you okay if I ask you a few questions about yourself? And then we'll talk about English at college a little bit. Tell me about your family.

I live with my dad, and my mum, my sister. I've got a dog as well.

Cocker Spaniel.

My dad's an Engineer Manager, does lots of things for (redacted) UK.

It's like in cinemas and that. He basically manages the cinemas.

And builds the projectors and stuff. He's very expert in mechanics and technology for the digital cinema. He knows a lot.

Yeah. He's all around the country and stuff, so. He's important.

My mum, she doesn't need to work, but she's just started a job for caring for old people.

Yeah?

Yeah. [inaudible]. So, yeah. She's finding it all right, I guess. She likes it.

Yeah. Good. And you said you had a sister?

Yeah.

Younger or older?

Younger. She's 12.

And where did you go to school?

I went to [redacted] and then I transferred to [redacted] College.

How was school?

It was all right. I was pretty naughty.

What did you do?

I was just a really naughty kid back then. And nobody helped me there. But as I went to [secondary I [inaudible] a bit more help. And when I went into [redacted] for my last year of secondary, I kind of just changed a lot, got more mature, and wasn't really messing around any.

I was just rude to teachers, didn't do my work. I was probably the worst kid there.

Maybe tell me a bit about that.



Yeah. School was a bit of a dead end [*points to pictures*] because I think any help was what I needed, and some of the teachers-- they just kind of made up stuff about me. And that's why I got transferred. Yeah. I didn't really get help. Sometimes I would just not go to class. And they wouldn't do anything about it but just punish me. There was reasons on why I didn't go to my class, but they wouldn't really try to understand why and help me. It was a dead end because it wasn't for me.

And what would be a reason that you didn't go to class?

My anxiety, and because it's quite a big class. I used to struggle quite severely with anxiety in big classrooms. Oh, yeah.

Annoyed. I just didn't want to be in class. Yeah.

I had one-to-one sessions, and I could tell I was not fitting in. And it was smaller classrooms, which helped me, and I could actually do my work. I think I would've not gotten any grades in my GCSEs if I stayed at school. At least, there was something.

So I came here so I could finish studying IT, because I've already done level 1. But because of my GCSE grades, which I'm going to retake, I couldn't get in to the course I wanted to. So I have to start from level 2. Yeah. I want to do level 3 next year but I have to pass the GCSEs.

If I don't pass it will be really annoying 'cos I don't know what I will do next.

I just want to know pretty much everything about computers and I have always been the one that people will come to for help. Computers.

Yeah. I knew IT's a-- it can be a real thing-- when I was really young, probably five, yeah, I loved computers so I'd just pick things up very quickly. And that makes me glad. Yeah.

And what is it about computers that you find interesting? Do you want a career in IT?

Everything. I don't know really. I just find them interesting. Yeah. I know a lot about the tech world. I follow a lot of stuff. I'm just really knowledgeable about tech stuff. My Dad likes it as well, but I'm better than him. He asks me now for help with stuff.

Yeah.

I want to own my own company, and e-commerce. Online selling of digital games.

Yeah. I do a little bit of that now, but it's not big. I run my own website. I sell digital games on there. It's really real, and I make money from it. I set it up by myself. I've got a big following and people like it.

What was your experience of doing English at school before you came here?

It was pretty hard because--



I always needed help, [*gave the interviewer the image above*] really, because I didn't really understand. Because you have to memorize everything about a certain story, or movie, or whatever, and I just found that really daunting, and annoying, and stuff because I'd have to revise quotes, and if I don't remember, then I get less marks.

I have got a good memory for images--

--and visual, but not necessarily a good memory for--

--words? I'm a bit like that, to be honest [*laughter*]. It's like--

Annoying. Yeah.

I don't know. I don't think so.

No? That's fine. Tell me about these pictures



I got this because sometimes this is how I feel at college. It just sometimes makes me really angry that I have to do things that I don't get. This makes me laugh, but it does show that I get-- I can't really explain it. I get angry. I sit in class sometimes and I just feel like kicking the chair. But that's funny, isn't it.

Sometimes I come, sometimes I don't, sometimes I go through lessons, sometimes I don't. The teacher's all right. One of the teachers that we have back in September was really rough, he was patronizing and stuff. Just talked down to us, really and made us feel stupid, made me feel stupid. But the teacher I've got now, she's all right. I don't like what we're doing. I don't really understand the point of it.



These are the pictures that I chose. Well, I find it better at college. It's more interesting things we write about. I don't really feel like it's a dead end or-- sometimes I need help to explain something. Sometimes I don't always get ideas when we're doing creative writing or something like that. But I feel like I can actually write stuff without help sometimes now, and—

I do feel like there's some point to it, but it's not learning. It's like just getting the grade so I don't have to do it again and again.

Tell me about doing English at College

Annoyed, but I should've studied a little bit harder before because I'm just under the pass mark, so yeah.

Not really. I'm not really sure I'm studying to help me because I'm not—it's doing some of the same things again, you know.

I want to pass so I can do IT but I don't see the point of repeating stuff I've already done.

Yeah.

Well, I feel like I'm not always [great for?] writing, like pencil, pen. I just find it easier to type up because then I can see what I'm writing and people can actually read it properly. Because when I rush things or I'm under stress, I don't write properly. And that's really annoying because I feel like I missed out on a few marks because of my handwriting in the exam.

So I used a computer in class because I don't like writing--

I mean, my handwriting's gone to pot. My handwriting used to be quite good and [you think?], no, it isn't anymore because I just type.

[I've learned how?] type really fast and I don't even have to look at the keyboard anymore.

So I just look at the screen and type away.

Yeah. Good.

[crosstalk]—

Anything else?

No.

Appendix 17: Interview with Martha: Transcript

Okay. So what I'm going to do is ask you some questions. Are you okay if I ask you some questions about yourself and about your life?

That's fine.

Yeah.

My name is [redacted]. I do Motor Vehicle at level one.

Yeah. Okay. And how long have you been at college for?

Five weeks now.

Yeah. And where were you before?

School.

Oh, okay. So tell me a little bit about your family.

I was born in Poland in Gdansk and I moved here when I was one.

We were going there like some of the years but not always.

I live with my parents.

My dad works night times. He drives lorries. My mum doesn't work as she has a little baby, so my brother.

And I've got four sisters.

Oh, my goodness. And how old are they?

One of them's 14, 10, 8, 3, and my brother, 1.

It was weird. Having a brother it's like all girls talk about their stuff. And we could talk [inaudible].

First year my sister was bullied because [inaudible] all my fault. It's gone on from me to her.

But now, it stopped. They've moved on. So, yeah.

We speak Polish at home but with my sisters I speak English

I don't find any problem with that. I think it's a bit of a problem when I speak to others. It's like I'm a bit shy to people to talk and I sometimes mess up with languages.

So when I ask a question, they [know?] what it mean-- how to explain it, that I say in [my own?] language sometimes.

In many schools I was not treated well.

Tell me about that.

I was bullied and stuff like that. I was not treated as I had hearing aids.

Okay. And tell me about that.

I was born deaf. And I have to be-- people have three tubes behind their eardrum. I have two. I was born like that. So they can't do operation on that. They can't do that.

It's like in my year's students, so. I was more worried on them instead of focusing on lessons.

Okay. And tell me about your experience of doing English lessons at school. Tell me about that.



I chose the prison picture. In English, in my other school, it was a bit messed up. As they teach there's more students which were talking in the background. And the teacher was more focusing on them than teaching the lesson. And she wasn't giving us enough detail about English like down here. She put us in boxes, and I wasn't good... she thought I was not good.

The most lessons I enjoyed was during math. That's one of my favorite subjects. The least was English and science.

And why was the least English?

English was the least as they weren't teaching us enough detailed things. I know that we'd [inaudible] the same thing. Still ain't helping me enough. It is being in a trap that you can't get out of. You have to do it at school. You have to do it here.

And tell me about doing GCSE English at school.

Doing the exams the things that we learned was way more different than it was in the paper.

It was to describe the story. [Write a?] story to describe. And in here, when I came here, they told us to write a story which describes. Not describe the picture like the school.

Yeah, okay. Tell me about these pictures.



This one was related to me as it's-- while I was doing English I was more worried that I'm going to fail it. And doing the exam I knew I was going to fail as [inaudible] questions harder. When I got my results I was so worried that I failed because I knew my English wasn't that good. So when I got my results I did not get a grade I wanted to do. But at least my success was the math. So I don't have to do math again here. So I don't have to concentrate on two.

And what grade did you get in math?

Four.

I mean, what do you think this picture looks like?

[inaudible] fear.

Yep.

Scared of something.

And is that something that you feel?

Doing English in the other school, yes. But not here.

And what's the difference?

Because here they explain and they give you more help. And there's less people in the class. And it's easier to communicate and having [inaudible].

I was not understanding the things they were talking about. There was quite [words?] which I didn't understand. Even though I asked what it means, I still didn't understand.

Okay. Tell me about some of the other pictures here.



Yeah. It's because of in school, you have too many lessons concentrating in one. So you have to concentrate in science, English, math, and so on, which is seven lessons. And it's too much information in my head, so I was all lost with science, English, and math. So that's why I started to focus more on math and English. But for English, it was quite difficult. So I started

to focus more on math [inaudible] when to do it again here. And I would do English again here so I could focus on one thing than millions of other things.

Tell me a bit about college. How are you enjoying your course?

Motor vehicle is fun. It's not a lot of jobs. There's some assignments we could do, but most of [inaudible] the book that we got. And if we read the book, we've got the answers to the questions. Sometimes it's [inaudible] but it's fine. And they [inaudible] what we do. And in practicals we do, like we're doing now so engineering things. We did [inaudible] in the past. Engineering, got a test today about it. So we did bit of metals, filing it down, cutting it. Now we're doing the [dual trim?]. Take out the [dual trim?]. So--

I like Motor Vehicle because it's my passion. That was my passion because I like cars. I was interested in what's inside cars.

My dad helps me sometimes. He [inaudible] the plate lights. My dad went to Poland not long ago. And I did the-- ask him if I could take out [inaudible]. So I took the whole steering wheel out, the [inaudible], and stuff like that. So you could check the cables to find things [inaudible] to make the brake light work. Now I've got to fit that back in so it's going to the BMW service right now, on the 23rd.

I was more interested when my dad was starting to help me, which he was doing [inaudible] driving it. I was more interested in [inaudible]. [inaudible] started doing cars, I was more interested in both.

And what does your dad think about you doing motor vehicle at college?

He thinks it's fine. It's fun.

And what does your dad think about you doing English at college?

I don't know.

That's fair enough [laughter]. And what do you want to do after you finish this course?

I want to be a mechanic, have my own company to make it more [inaudible], stuff like that. So do in all cars, all bikes, and everything.

So what's your next step after this course? Where do you hope to be in the summer? Where do you hope to be in September?

Once I pass level one, I'll go to level two. I want to finish all the levels and go to the higher [inaudible]. Do that for three years for the course. And then go off and do my work. Find a job at a [inaudible] then-- yeah.

Okay. That sounds good. And final thing. Anything else that you'd like to tell me about studying English at college? Anything that we haven't talked about? Anything that you would like to add?

I'm happy in here.

Good. Okay. That's great. Thank you very much. Let me just stop that

Appendix 18: Idealised Line and Stanza Representation of Henry's Story

SETTING

SUB-STORY 1: Younger Life

Stanza 1

4. *Quite lovely people. They've raised me well.*
5. *It's quite a stable family life.*
6. *My older brother's ten years older than me.*
7. *He's 'out there'.*
8. *And he's got a different dad, but I still see him as my full brother because he's just an amazing person.*
9. *And you've got my sister who's opposite me. She's A's across the board. She can do it, she can be successful, I can't.*
10. *And she's currently doing really well. A lot better than I was at her age. Honestly, she's a lot more academic.*

Stanza 2

11. *I was a very shy kid.*
12. *I would shun people*
13. *Shut them out*
14. *Didn't want to be a bother*
15. *My only problem was my handwriting. So a lot of the time I had teachers who couldn't understand what I'd written.*
16. *And for the longest time I was in the lower set for maths*
17. *'Why is he in this class? He can do better than this. He's already finished the work'*
18. *So she moved me up a class. And ever since I've been pretty good at maths*

SUB-STORY 2: Being Different

Stanza 3

19. *I'd always do stuff my own way*
20. *I never really learned the way other people did*
21. *(My handwriting) was quite messy.*
22. *When they used to give you those exercises where you would draw a single letter, I wouldn't listen*
23. *I wanted to be special.*
24. *I used to watch old movies*
25. *It gave me a lot more to talk about to a lot of different people.*
26. *I think it matured me a lot quicker*
27. *I think I just like to stand out quite a bit to be honest*
28. *I like being the centre of attention, and when I'm not I like being able to support people and have people sort of notice me*
29. *Because if I don't, then who will?*
30. *I had a lot of opinions*
31. *If you talk to my mum and dad, they'd tell you I'd talk their ears off*
32. *I had sort of glimpses of being very outgoing and very over dramatic, like I am today.*

CATALYST

SUB-STORY 3: Secondary School

Stanza 4

33. *I was so sort of scatter-brained with all of the subjects*
34. *It was so chaotic. I had, I think it was, seven or eight different subjects I was trying to learn all at once, all trying to get it down on a piece of paper.*
35. *I'm a very single minded person.*
36. *I think that's why I did so bad because I didn't know how to focus on doing everything rather than just one thing.*
37. *Every single day was quite sort of stressful on me and I didn't know how to cope with it.*

Stanza 5

38. *English. It was one of the subjects I didn't take much notice of.*
39. *So when I finally knuckled down and tried working on it, it was just too late*
40. *I struggle more with language*
41. *There's a wall there between what I want to say and what I can write*

Stanza 6

42. *I used to get bullied when I was younger.*
43. *All because of different trivial reasons.*
44. *I have quite large feet*
45. *Like I was slower than other people*
46. *Over time it stopped affecting me.*
47. *Why should I care what other people think about me?*
48. *A person who bullied me for about three years, we found a common interest because he was being bullied as well*
49. *Thick as thieves, still are today*
50. *He'd help me, and I'd help him*

CRISIS

SUB-STORY 4: Getting the GCSE Results

Stanza 7

51. *The whole ten years was all for nothing. Just to fail. All that just to fail.*
52. *It's like a wound you can't feel unless it happens to you.*
53. *It was the experience of going home and telling my mum I'd failed again*
54. *It's wasted when you read that piece of paper.*
55. *It's the same feeling every time, like feeling your gut wrench. You feel like you're going to throw up.*
56. *It's not childhood anymore, this affects what you do in life*
57. *It's almost like opportunities have been taken away from you when you read that.*
58. *It's because you've been told you're no good.*
59. *Oh, I can't even be able to do that.*
60. *It's pointless.*
61. *I feel like I'm going to fail again ever since the first time.*

Stanza 8

62. *Even the whole concept of talking about it, it makes you look so cr*p- like what people ask*
63. *They think you can tell what kind of person he is*
64. *You see some people you think, 'Oh the sh*t they're doing'.*
65. *Useless.*

SUB-STORY 5: Staying on at Sixth Form

Stanza 9

- 66. *I absolutely hated it.*
- 67. *They forced me to.*
- 68. *It was tedious*
- 69. *My God did it feel like a century*
- 70. *I had quite a few people I know almost give up on the course completely because it was tearing such a sort of big impacts in their lives, making them doubt themselves a lot.*
- 71. *And it felt like torture just watching the whole world go by*

EVALUATION

SUB-STORY 5: The importance of GCSE

Stanza 10

- 72. *It was that moment you sit in that chair, you realise this isn't childhood anymore. You're about to go and become an adult. This result determines what you get when you're older and how it affects what you do in life.*
- 73. *I'd always been led to believe it was by teachers. They'd always say that once you get the result, it will impact your future life.*
- 74. *I can understand why they're pushing it*
- 75. *It will determine what jobs you do in the future, how well you get paid, how sort of financially stable you'll be.*
- 76. *So I look back on that and I'm confused, because I can't understand why they told me it would go so badly, and yet I'm doing so well now that I've left school and gone to college instead.*

Stanza 11

- 77. *It's an important skill to have in life, to do math and English. But at the same time....*
- 78. *I didn't feel I was making much progress*
- 79. *It just gets repetitive, the same thing over and over*
- 80. *Just getting that one specific piece of paper that says you've passed*
- 81. *I haven't really got anything other than to say 'I've read this book and enjoyed it'. That's it.*
- 82. *when I had to look up what a dynamic verb was,*
- 83. *when am I ever going to, in a sentence, realise I am using it rather than just saying it.*
- 84. *All I had at the end of the day was a piece of paper that just said what I'd written*

RESOLUTION

SUB-STORY 6: Vocational learning

Stanza 12

- 85. *It was purely based on the fact I wanted to do something more practical than spend an entire year sitting behind a keyboard, typing.*
- 86. *I could go into construction and choose a trade.*
- 87. *I'd done a bit of work for my girlfriend's dad building*
- 88. *I changed track to do a practical course and I'm loving it.*

Stanza 13

- 89. *With construction, I've built stuff. I've been able to progress. I can see what I have done, and I've gotten better.*
- 90. *And just seeing that physically in front of me*

91. *I've actually done something, a little bit.*

Stanza 14

92. *You now have all these skills that you have right in front of you that you could use any time you need, in any sort of practical situation.*

93. *Fix it yourself.*

94. *I can wire a plug. I can do some plumbing.*

Stanza 15

95. *I've got the time to work on myself.*

96. *I don't have many pointless lessons anymore.*

97. *I'm a lot more focused.*

98. *Focused on two things- my construction course and my English and it's so much calmer.*

CODA

SUB-STORY : *Passing GCSE is a random chance*

99. *Fingers crossed!*

100. *So maybe it's just too difficult or maybe that I just don't understand it. It may be me, it may be them. It may be the exam paper.*

101. *Raised the grade boundaries and lowered them a lot- you can't predict at all what they're going to do.*

102. *And there's only a chance you're going to achieve in the end. It's like a roulette wheel, you never know what you're going to get*

Appendix 19: Idealised Line and Stanza Representation of Martha's Story

THE PAST

Stanza 1

1. *I was born in Poland in Gdansk and I moved here when I was one.*

SUB-STORY Being Bullied

Stanza 2

2. *First year my sister was bullied*
3. *In many schools I was not treated well.*
4. *I was bullied and stuff like that*

SUB-SUB-STORY Hearing Impairment

Stanza 3

9. *I was not treated well as I had hearing aids.*
10. *I was born deaf.*
11. *people have three tubes behind their eardrum. I have two*
12. *I was born like that.*
13. *So they can't do operation on that.*
14. *They can't do that.*

SUB STORY English at School

SUB SUB STORY: Too Many People

Stanza 4

15. *in my other school, it was a bit messed up*
16. *there's more students which were talking in the background*
17. *And the teacher was more focusing on them than teaching the lesson.*

SUB SUB STORY: Too many subjects

Stanza 5

18. *you have too many lessons concentrating in one.*
19. *So you have to concentrate in science, English, math, and so on, which is seven lessons.*
20. *And it's too much information in my head,*
21. *so I was all lost*
22. *But for English, it was quite difficult.*
23. *millions of other things.*

SUB SUB STORY: Unhelpful teachers

Stanza 6

24. *I was in primary school*
25. *I didn't get much help*
26. *And I was off track*
27. *And then secondary*
28. *I didn't get as much help*
29. *she wasn't giving us enough detail*
30. *they weren't teaching us enough detailed things*
31. *Still ain't helping me enough*

Stanza 7

32. *Asking my friend for help*

33. *And the teacher was like 'No you cannot talk'*
34. *I was like 'Can I ask for help'*
35. *No.*

SUB SUB STORY : Being stereotyped

Stanza 8

36. *She put us in boxes*
37. *and I wasn't good*
38. *she thought I was not good.*

Stanza 9

39. *Can't go forward*
40. *Stuck in one lonely place*

Stanza 10

41. *The ones who just passed the GCSE*
42. *And the teacher said that they are most normal*
43. *Not like us*
44. *She said people who don't pass don't do well*
45. *And they get more scared*

SUB SUB STORY Being worried

Stanza 11

46. *while I was doing English I was more worried that I'm going to fail it*
47. *And doing the exam I knew I was going to fail*
48. *Scared of something.*
49. *I was not understanding the things they were talking about*
50. *It would be fine if someone would change the text to much easier ones*

THE PRESENT

SUB STORY: Family

Stanza 12

51. *I live with my parents.*
52. *My mum doesn't work as she has a little baby*
53. *And I've got four sisters.*

SUB SUB STORY: Dad

Stanza 13

54. *My dad helps me sometimes.*
55. *He's a lorry driver*
56. *He works night times*

SUB SUB SUB STORY- Fixing a car with Dad

Stanza 14

57. *Plate lights*
58. *So I took the whole steering wheel*
59. *check the cables*
60. *make the brake light work*
61. *Now I've got to fit that back in*
62. *so it's going to the BMW service right now*
63. *on the 23rd*

64. *I was more interested when my dad was starting to help me*

SUB STORY: Polish

Stanza 15

65. *We speak Polish at home but with my sisters I speak English*

66. *I think it's a bit of a problem when I speak to others.*

67. *I'm a bit shy to people to talk*

68. *I sometimes mess up with languages*

69. *I say in my own language sometimes.*

SUB STORY: College

Stanza 16

70. *here they explain and they give you more help*

71. *And there's less people in the class.*

72. *And it's easier to communicate*

SUB SUB STORY: Motor Vehicle

Stanza 17

73. *Motor vehicle is fun*

74. *It's not a lot of jobs.*

75. *we've got the answers to the questions*

76. *And in practicals we do*

77. *So we did bit of metals*

78. *filing it down*

79. *cutting it*

Stanza 18

80. *I like Motor Vehicle because it's my passion*

81. *That was my passion because I like cars*

82. *I was interested in what's inside cars.*

SUB SUB STORY: Ambitions

Stanza 15

83. *Once I pass level one, I'll go to level two.*

84. *I want to finish all the levels and go to the higher*

85. *Do that for three years for the course*

86. *And then go off and do my work*

87. *Find a job*

Appendix 20: Idealised Line and Stanza Representation of Simon's Story

WORK

SUB-STORY- WORKING AT A FAST FOOD RESTAURANT

STANZA 1

- 27. *Probably like 37.*
- 28. *But it's not forced.*
- 29. *I wanted to do the hours. Yeah.*
- 30. *It's quite young to be in long hours, but I can handle it.*
- 31. *Yeah. It's a lot of hours on top of doing your course at college. Yeah. Yeah*

STANZA 2

- 32. *I enjoy it,*
- 33. *It's hard but I have a lot of responsibility.*
- 34. *I work nights as well.*
- 35. *I sometimes am in charge*
- 36. *It's good fun but sometimes it's boring..*
- 37. *But it's pretty good.*
- 38. *It gives me money and I can give some to my mum to help out.*

SUB-STORY- ADULT ROLE MODEL- DAD

STANZA 3

- 39. *My dad's an Engineer Manager*
- 40. *It's like in cinemas and that.*
- 41. *He basically manages the cinemas.*
- 42. *And builds the projectors and stuff.*
- 43. *He's very expert in mechanics and technology for the digital cinema.*
- 44. *He knows a lot.*
- 45. *Yeah. He's all around the country and stuff, so.*
- 46. *He's important.*
- 47. *My mum, she doesn't need to work, but she's just started a job for caring for old people.*
- 48. *She's finding it all right, I guess. She likes it.*

SUB-STORY- ADULT SKILLS- IT

STANZA 4

- 49. *I just want to know pretty much everything about computers*
- 50. *and I have always been the one that people will come to for help.*
- 51. *Computers.*
- 52. *I loved computers*
- 53. *so I'd just pick things up very quickly.*
- 54. *And that makes me glad.*
- 55. *I just find them interesting.*

STANZA 5

- 56. *Yeah. I know a lot about the tech world.*
- 57. *I follow a lot of stuff.*
- 58. *I'm just really knowledgeable about tech stuff.*

SUB-SUB STORY- better than Dad

STANZA 6

59. *My Dad likes it as well,*
60. *but I'm better than him.*
61. *He asks me now for help with stuff.*

SUB-SUB STORY- WORKING IN IT

STANZA 7

62. *I want to own my own company,*
63. *and e-commerce.*
64. *Online selling of digital games.*
65. *Yeah. I do a little bit of that now, but it's not big.*
66. *I run my own website.*
67. *I sell digital games on there.*
68. *It's really real,*
69. *and I make money from it.*
70. *I set it up by myself.*
71. *I've got a big following and people like it.*

LEARNING

SUB STORY- Behaviour at school

STANZA 8

72. *It was all right.*
73. *I was pretty naughty.*
74. *I was just a really naughty kid back then.*
75. *And nobody helped me there.*
76. *I was just rude to teachers*
77. *didn't do my work.*
78. *I was probably the worst kid there.*

STANZA 9

79. *last year of secondary,*
80. *I kind of just changed a lot,*
81. *got more mature, and wasn't really messing around any.*

SUB STORY- school

STANZA 10

82. *School was a bit of a dead end*

SUB STORY- teachers

STANZA 11

83. *because I think any help was what I needed*
84. *and some of the teachers—*
85. *they just kind of made up stuff about me.*
86. *And that's why I got transferred.*
87. *Yeah. I didn't really get help.*
88. *Sometimes I would just not go to class.*
89. *And they wouldn't do anything about it but just punish me.*
90. *There was reasons on why I didn't go to my class, but they wouldn't really try to understand why and help me. I*
91. *t was a dead end because it wasn't for me.*

SUB STORY- ANXIETY

STANZA 12

92. *My anxiety,*
93. *and because it's quite a big class.*
94. *I used to struggle quite severely with anxiety in big classrooms.*
95. *Annoyed. I just didn't want to be in class. Yeah.*
96. *I had one-to-one sessions, and I could tell I was not fitting in.*
97. *And it was smaller classrooms, which helped me, and I could actually do my work.*
98. *I think I would've not gotten any grades in my GCSEs if I stayed at school.*

SUB STORY- COLLEGE AND RETAKES**STANZA 13**

99. *So I came here so I could finish studying IT, because I've already done level 1.*
100. *But because of my GCSE grades, which I'm going to retake, I couldn't get in to the course I wanted to.*
101. *So I have to start from level 2.*
102. *Yeah. I want to do level 3 next year but I have to pass the GCSEs.*
103. *If I don't pass it will be really annoying 'cos I don't know what I will do next.*

SUB SUB STORY- Ability at English**STANZA 14**

104. *I always needed help,*
105. *because I didn't really understand.*
106. *Because you have to memorize everything*
107. *I just found that really daunting,*
108. *and annoying, and stuff because I'd have to revise quotes,*
109. *and if I don't remember, then I get less marks.*
110. *I have got a good memory for images--*
111. *--and visual, but not necessarily a good memory for--*
112. *--words? I'm a bit like that, to be honest*
113. *Annoying. Yeah.*

SUB STORY- Studying English at College**STANZA 15**

114. *It just sometimes makes me really angry that I have to do things that I don't get.*
115. *I get angry.*
116. *I sit in class sometimes and I just feel like kicking the chair.*
117. *But that's funny, isn't it.*

STANZA 16

118. *Sometimes I come, sometimes I don't,*
119. *sometimes I go through lessons, sometimes I don't.*

STANZA 17

120. *The teacher's all right.*
121. *One of the teachers that we have back in September was really rough,*
122. *he was patronizing and stuff.*
123. *Just talked down to us, really and made us feel stupid,*
124. *made me feel stupid.*
125. *But the teacher I've got now, she's all right.*
126. *I don't like what we're doing.*
127. *I don't really understand the point of it.*

STANZA 18

128. *I find it better at college.*
129. *It's more interesting things we write about.*
130. *I don't really feel like it's a dead end or—*
131. *sometimes I need help to explain something.*
132. *Sometimes I don't always get ideas when we're doing creative writing or something like that.*
133. *But I feel like I can actually write stuff without help sometimes now, and—*

STANZA 19

134. *I do feel like there's some point to it, but it's not learning.*
135. *It's like just getting the grade so I don't have to do it again and again.*
136. *Annoyed,*
137. *but I should've studied a little bit harder before*
138. *because I'm just under the pass mark, so yeah.*
139. *I'm not really sure I'm studying to help me because I'm not—*
140. *it's doing some of the same things again, you know.*
141. *I want to pass so I can do IT*
142. *but I don't see the point of repeating stuff I've already done.*

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143. *Well, I feel like I'm not always great for writing,*
144. *like pencil, pen.*
145. *I just find it easier to type up because then I can see what I'm writing*
146. *and people can actually read it properly.*
147. *Because when I rush things or I'm under stress, I don't write properly.*
148. *And that's really annoying*
149. *I feel like I missed out on a few marks because of my handwriting in the exam.*
150. *So I used a computer in class because I don't like writing--*
151. *I mean, my handwriting's gone to pot.*
152. *My handwriting used to be quite good*
153. *no, it isn't anymore because I just type.*
154. *I've learned how type really fast*
155. *and I don't even have to look at the keyboard anymore.*

Appendix 21 Extract of the Reformed GCSE English Specification

EXTRACT FROM THE REFORMED GCSE ENGLISH LANGUAGE SPECIFICATION

GCSE specifications in English language should enable students to: read a wide range of texts, fluently and with good understanding

read critically, and use knowledge gained from wide reading to inform and improve their own writing

write effectively and coherently using Standard English appropriately

use grammar correctly, punctuate and spell accurately

acquire and apply a wide vocabulary, alongside a knowledge and understanding of grammatical terminology, and linguistic conventions for reading, writing and spoken language.

GCSE English language is designed on the basis that students should read and be assessed on high-quality, challenging texts from the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries. Each text studied must represent a substantial piece of writing, making significant demands on students in terms of content, structure and the quality of language. The texts, across a range of genres and types, should support students in developing their own writing by providing effective models. The texts must include literature and extended literary non-fiction, and other writing such as essays, reviews and journalism (both printed and online). Texts that are essentially transient, such as instant news feeds, must not be included. The number and types of texts, and their length, are not prescribed.

(DfE, 2013)

Appendix 22 Presentation for Phase 1 Participant Workshop

Slide 1

What is the impact of compulsory GCSE English retakes on 16-18 year old vocational students, their learning identities and learning outcomes.

Thank you for agreeing to come!


Slide 2

In this session we will:

- Make our voice, opinions and feelings heard and understood through using photos and pictures and discussion
- Give our opinion on compulsory English at college

Slide 3


The Project will



- The project will:
- Ask you what you think and feel about:
 - *being in English lessons at College*
 - *improving your English*
 - *taking tests and examinations in English.*

Slide 4

Why? The Project's Purpose




- Everyone will have a different opinion, and will feel differently.
- The project wants:
 - To understand better how compulsory English lessons make you feel
 - To use that information to suggest different ways of teaching and learning
- YOUR OPINION MATTERS!

Slide 5

Group Rules

- In this session we will discuss our photographs and images together
- **What rules do you want to set so that everyone feels comfortable?**



Slide 6

Over to you:

- What do you think and feel about:
 - *being in English lessons at College*
 - *improving your English*
 - *taking tests and examinations in English.*
