Learning on and off the job: vocational education and training in the UK food and grocery retail buying occupation.

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Copyright Statement

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Abstract

This thesis sheds new light upon a socially significant, complex and multi-dimensional occupation largely hidden from public view. UK food and grocery retail buyers influence our consumer choices, what we eat, our finances, and the wider environment from which the products they select and buy on behalf of UK food and grocery retailers originate. Little has been written about their occupation and the vocational education and training (VET) which educates these key employees in a sector of the UK economy estimated to be worth £190.3 billion (IGD, 2018).

This thesis analyses factors of on and off the job learning that might inform occupational knowledge, standards, and competencies for the education and training needs of UK food and grocery retail buyers. It draws from the perceptions and lived experiences of a unique sample of thirteen practising and former buyers from top 10 UK retailers. Documentary analysis further supports a research design including an original conceptual framework combining human capital theory with conceptualisations of on and off the job learning (Sfard, 1998), performance (Appelbaum, 2000), and pedagogy (Nind, et al., 2016) used to thematically analyse data from semi-structured interviews.

Key findings reveal the differing relevance of on and off the job learning to buyer performance which evolves over the working lives and changing career statuses of buyers. The findings extend from participant perceptions that depict contradictory notions to conventions of post-16 education and qualifications yet paradoxically suggest, post-16 qualifications may become a necessity for future entry to the buying occupation. The common ground of a two-year period of, "learning to survive" initial buyer training is defined by participants and linked to notions of self-interest, achievement (McClelland, 1961) and expectancy (Vroom, 1964) that may underpin early-career buyers' motivation not to choose off the job learning activities, and which may shape enduring on the job learning mindsets. Further key findings expose a highly competitive occupation fuelled by perceptions of the relative economic status of different product ranges buyers buy and which may be viewed as a proxy for buyer competency. Contrasting ideas of the buyer as an enthusiast and the buyer as caretaker of the product ranges they buy are also advanced as indicative notions of what makes a good buyer. Additionally, the use of social learning methods by retail organisations to offset mid-career buyer learning motivations, largely dismissive of off the job learning is advanced alongside evidence of why attaining managerial status as a buyer is marked by greater levels of buyer engagement with off the job learning opportunities.

This thesis identifies extensive opportunities to better understand, accelerate and enhance buyer learning, especially in the areas of corporate social responsibility and pre-entry occupational knowledge and curriculum development. It introduces a conceptual framework that may offer a useful method for investigating VET in comparable competitive, fast-moving occupational environments. This thesis also makes the case for greater cooperation between competing individual, organisational and state actors to further develop and support occupational knowledge and learning across the working lives of UK food and grocery retail buyers.

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BERA	British Educational Research Association
BRC	British Retail Consortium
CIPD	Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development
CoP	Communities of Practice
CSR	Corporate Social Responsibility
EIA	Environmental Investigation Agency
FE	Further Education
FMCG	Fast Moving Consumable Goods
GCA	Grocery Code Adjudicator
GSCOP	Groceries Supplies Code of Practice
HE	Higher Education
HR	Human Resources
IDBR	Inter-departmental Business Register
IT	Information Technology
IGD	Institute of Grocery Distribution
KSAOs	Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other characteristics
L&D	Learning and Development
ROI	Return on Investment
PSP	Purposive Sample Planner
SHRM	Strategic Human Resource Management
VET	Vocational Education and Training
VUCA	Volatile, Uncertain, Complex, Ambiguous

Chapter One: Introduction

Section 1. Buying and the retail context an occupational overview of the UK food and grocery buyer

> Still today, I'm not quite sure that my family understands what I do! It's almost like a hidden role within retail. You don't think of a person being behind the shelf as it were.
>
> (Josh, UK food and grocery retail buyer, 2018)

Mostly hidden from public consciousness, "behind the shelf as it were" there is a community of people who practise the art of retail food and grocery buying in the UK. These people influence our consumer choices, what we eat, our finances, and the wider environment from which the products they buy on behalf of UK food and grocery retailers originate. This then raises intrigue which has led me to question why, to the best of my knowledge, so very little has been publicly researched or written about their occupation. In particular, on the subject of the vocational education and training (VET) and learning pathways that informs and educates those who have been described as the, "brains" (Co-operative Group, 2017) behind the UK retail food and grocery sector: The UK food and grocery retail buyer.

In this chapter I will first introduce the broad UK retail context in which food and grocery buyers operate. This then leads to a definition of what is meant by the term, groceries and in so doing I locate the UK food and grocery buyer within the strategic context of the UK food and grocery retail environment. Examples of primary and secondary sources of data obtained from semi-structured interviews, corporate documentation and UK Government policy have been used to then depict a contemporary representation of the UK food and grocery buyer and explain how the buying occupation fits within the broader context of the UK grocery retail process and supply chain. I will then advance the social importance of the UK retail grocery buying occupation as a subject of VET and learning research. This preludes an introduction to the origins and inspiration for this research and the research questions, which through the perceptions and experiences of UK retail buyers themselves, have sought to identify and better understand factors of on and off the job VET and learning which might inhibit or enhance the performance of UK food and grocery buyers.

The retail context: a unique role in the fabric of British social and economic life

The background of this research is contextually bound to the UK's food and grocery retail sector. Grossing estimated annual sales valued at £190.3bn and with a growth trajectory forecasted to reach £218.9bn by 2023 (IGD, 2018) food and grocery retailing in the UK is undoubtedly big business. But, its influence and impact in the prevailing social conditions of the UK venture far beyond economic measures. Indeed, the British Retail Consortium (BRC) claims that more generally retail, "is making a massive contribution to the very fabric of our society" (BRC, 2018, p. 2), a claim not without some justification. The retail centric nature of the UK provides a significant stimulus to the UK employment market, a factor which offers us a prime example of its social force. Collectively, retailing is the largest private-sector employer in the UK and can, for many people, mark the first steps into the world of work. Indeed, many of us can relate to stereotypical, but familiar notions of that first Job, stocking shelves and serving customers on the shop floor or on the checkout at the local grocery store. So, retailing performs an important social service to the employment prospects of the UK workforce and is a palpable feature of daily life for all the three million people the sector employs in the UK (BRC, 2018, p. 1). Even if we are not occupationally employed within the vast ranks of its workforce, the food and grocery retail sector in the UK is a tangible social phenomenon, most commonly experienced by the masses of the UK population as consumers, from whom it is hard to conceal that many of our own day to day product choices and social habits can be traced to the doors of leading food and grocery retail outlets which carry household names like: Tesco, Sainsbury's, Asda and Wm Morrison. Whether we now choose to shop online, in store, late at night or early in the morning it is not difficult for us to think of at least one point in our daily lives when our thoughts and deliberations do not turn to the routine, or pleasure of acquiring our food and grocery supplies.

Beyond a nation of shopkeepers

So accustomed is the UK population's relationship with food and grocery retailing, over simplistic notions that depict the UK as a nation of shopkeepers fail to fully express grocery retailing's socioeconomic influence. Of course, the once traditional visit to the local grocery store or supermarket now encompasses the progressive convenience of a click on the internet which, according to Rhodes (2018, p. 11), "has not resulted in a simple substitution of physical shopping for online shopping" and has helped fuel the growth of an interconnected supply chain of: manufacturers, consumer brands, agriculture, farming and the fisheries, supply chain transportation and logistics, warehousing, construction, media, and information technology. All of these connected functions and more, play an integral role in an immense and complex web of commerce and industry that keeps the UK's food and grocery sector 'open all hours'. And, all of which are in most part, reliant on a relationship that hinges on the food and grocery retail sector's creativity and success in providing the channels, formats, mechanisms and services which provide for the ever-changing needs of UK consumers.

At this point I have resisted temptation to offer a lengthy foreword account of the structure, history, culture and potential direction of the UK food and grocery retail sector, choosing instead to provide relatable insight throughout the following chapters and pages of this thesis. This I hope, will serve to provide a useful and contextual running narrative throughout. Furthermore, and as I will later define, the scope of this research, cannot adequately allow for a discussion of the changing complexities and discourse associated with getting food and grocery products into the shopping baskets and homes of the UK consumer. I propose, this would be better addressed by complementary or specific research into the adequacy of the operational processes and practices of the sector. Recognition is given therefore to the limits in which this research can apply credit to many of the agents and the vast operational network associated with the UK grocery retail sector as a whole.

In focussing on food and grocery buyers therefore, my intent is to not discount or in any way understate the contribution of the army of grocery retail's employees, their related occupations or the sectors consumers for whom I have the utmost respect. Rather, it is my intent to single-out and raise awareness of a retail occupation that can be found, situated at the very centre of grocery retailing in the UK and to straightaway introduce you to the subjects of learning this research seeks to better understand: retail food and grocery buyers and the retail grocery buying occupation. First, to avoid repetition and enhance the syntax throughout this thesis, where I refer to 'buyer' or 'buyers' without further statement or clarification, I mean this to reflect a collective term for, UK retail food and grocery buyer[s].

What do we mean by Groceries?

Before I go on to give an overview of the buyer and the buying occupation, I will first define what is included in the term, groceries. In so doing, connecting buyers and their occupational activities to the specific strategic retail sector in which they operate on behalf of, and in alignment with their respective organisational trading structures, resources, corporate and commercial objectives and values. My chosen definition draws from The Grocery Supplies Code of Practice (GSCOP) (2009). GSCOP is a legally binding code of compliance imposed by the UK Government relating to how the top ten UK food and grocery retailers should manage supplier relationships. It is a definition that has also been adopted by some retail analysts to define and categorise the constituent parts of the UK food and grocery sector:

> **Groceries** means food (other than that sold for consumption in the store) pet food, drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic, other than that sold for consumption in the store), cleaning products, toiletries and household goods, but **excludes** petrol, clothing, DIY products, financial services, pharmaceuticals, newspapers, magazines, greetings cards, CDs, DVDs, videos and audio tapes, toys, plants, flowers, perfumes, cosmetics, electrical appliances, kitchen hardware, gardening equipment, books, tobacco and tobacco products and **Grocery** shall be construed accordingly;
>
> (GSCOP, 2009, p. 3)

A closer look at the above definition signposts the diversity of product categories which are represented and noticeably, those which are not. Exclusions to the definition represent what may be considered the, bolt on product categories traditionally stocked by independent retail sectors and signifies the growing diversification and progression of product ranges in recent times of UK food and grocery retailers.

UK food and grocery retailers select, develop and produce ranges of category related products of variable specification, quality and price for resale across what the UK's largest food and grocery retailer, Tesco succinctly describe as a, "range of channels – from small shops to large shops and our on-line business" (Tesco, 2018, p. 12). Tesco's rather concise description underplays a multiple system of store formats and channels designed to commercially profit by providing consumers with groceries matched to serve the perceived needs of meticulously researched demographic profiles of differing communities within the geographic setting of the UK. Tesco are not alone in operating a multi-format, multi-channel strategy. Indeed, all the top 10 UK grocery retailers employ multi-channel formats and occupy multiple retail locations on a regional or national scale synonymous with the commonly used term, multiple retailer. Store formats range from smaller local convenience stores typically merchandising approximately 4000 cross category selected products to larger and more extensively merchandised superstores of approximately 60,000 sq. feet of selling space that feature ranges often totalling more than 17000 products. The current dominance of this traditional brick-based retailing format prevails but, the emergence of online retailing channels in recent times suggests a growing trend in the retail landscape which is turning away from bricks to clicks and which will signal further significant change in grocery retailing over the coming decades.

The UK retail food and grocery buyer: an occupational overview

Often referred to as 'traders', buyers are central to product sourcing, selection and buying of food and grocery products for resale in and across the multi store formats and channels previously introduced. Generally operating from within the central office trading function of their respective organisation, grocery buyers work cross functionally and are an integral part of a wider decision-making unit or team which forms part of the commercial engine room of the multiple retailer. As I will uncover in the following pages, the occupational profile of a buyer varies according to the trading structure, resources and culture of the employing organisation and, according to the seniority, status and accountability designated to any buying role.

Nonetheless, to help set broad parameters from which to provide and proceed with a general basis of understanding of the occupational role and accountabilities of the buyer, I have again drawn from GSCOP (2009) which provides two key definitions that distinguish between buying operational and managerial responsibilities from which this research will extend:

a. **Primary Buyer** means, in relation to any individual Supplier the employee within the Retailer's Buying Team who are responsible from time to time for the day to day buying functions of the Retailer in respect of that individual Supplier.

b. **Senior Buyer** means, in relation to any individual Supplier, an employee or employees within the Retailer's Buying Team who manage the Primary Buyer or Primary Buyers for that Supplier (or is otherwise at a higher level than the Primary Buyer(s) within the management structure of the Retailer)
(GSCOP, 2009, p. 4)

It is acknowledged that the GSCOP definition is broad and does not account for all the terms used and referenced in this thesis which will denote the different statuses and job titles given to buyers and senior buyers that can be associated with general stages in their career. It is important to emphasise these distinctions early because this thesis examines the VET and leaning pathways of buying from pre-entry to the occupation and throughout each career stage of the working lives of buyers. At points in this thesis therefore references will be made that denote different buyer status rather than their general role or responsibility as set out under GSCOP. The following table is given below to identify the specific terms used to denote buyer status linked to the general career stages of the buying occupation.

Table 1.0 Buyer status and general occupational career stages

Buyer status	General career stage	Comments
Potential buyer status	Pre-entry to occupation	This status may include candidates with some or no previous retail experience and some or no previous post-16 qualifications.
Trainee buyer status	Initial period of training to becoming a buyer	Under the GSCOP definition, trainee buyer status is incorporated under the Primary Buyer definition. Assistant buyer is also a common status linked to this career stage.
Buyer status	Post-initial training	As defined under the GSCOP definition. The term, trader, is often used interchangeably at this career stage.
Senior buyer status	Managerial	As defined under the GSCOP definition. There are various job titles that will be used in this thesis that are associated with this status and career stage: Trading manager Trading director Senior trading director Group commercial director Group trading director

The commercial expert

To further depict the buyer and the UK food and grocery retail buying occupation I have utilised secondary data sources acquired through investigation of UK retailer organisational literature and, primary sources obtained from statements provided in semi-structured interviews conducted with buyers, senior buyers and retail strategists in the conduct of this research. Which taken together, reveals a mosaic of the strategic and day to day activities and routines useful in formulating what I submit to be a broad contemporary representation of the buying occupation and useful as a guide to the remainder of this thesis, one that largely portrays buyers as:

> The commercial expert for a group of products in relation to product knowledge, supply base, industry matters and competitor position.
>
> (Sainsbury's, 2012)

According to Tesco:

> Buying is about planning, developing, sourcing and selling a great range of products that our customers want to buy. We work closely with our supplier partners to make sure that our customers get our products at the right price, value and through a range of channels – giving them the choice they want and need. A buyer's job is to consider all the factors when making decisions, including customer demand, market trends, competitor ranging and activity, plus financial implications.
>
> (Tesco, 2019)

As such, buyers are pivotal retail employees, found behind the planning and delivery of joint business and category objectives and accountable for category profit and loss. They take primary responsibility for leading negotiations, steering commercial trading relationships and formulating and managing supply agreements with suppliers of grocery products. Significantly, buyers are assigned authority to initiate the spending of money on the inventory of goods for resale on behalf of grocery retail organisations making them, "important people for their employers" (Lewis & Arnold, 2012, p. 452). The economic importance attached to the buying occupation is underlined by a participant in this research, Kate a senior retail strategy director at a top 10 UK retailer who explained:

> If an organisation is not getting as good buying terms as its competitors, it's structurally disadvantaged. So, it is vital that you are performing at least at the rate of the market, otherwise you are going to struggle
>
> (Kate)

A duty to uphold codes of practice

Thus, buyers are integral, hands on agents whom, by the authority vested in them to buy, effectively control large proportions of the cost base of retail organisations and embody the economic power of the UK grocery retailer with both national and global supply bases. That is not to say buyers are not bound to comply with guidelines laid down in respective corporate governance, trading practice policy and obligations to UK Government regulations linked to GSCOP (2009). Indeed, all designated UK grocery retailers have a duty to provide grocery buyer training on the requirements of the code, “at least once each calendar year” (GSCOP, 2009, p. 8). Transgressions of the code can be reported by suppliers and, non-compliance can be subject to monitoring, adjudication and enforcement of code related penalties by the Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA).

Publicly at least, the buying occupation is portrayed by UK retailers as a conduit aspiring to ethical, fair and transparent trading practices and relationships with suppliers. An occupational approach which is evident in much of the corporate information researched and typified by the example given below:

> Our buyers spend their days spotting trends, working on global deals with Walmart, and creating strong partnerships with the suppliers they find. Not only does it improve the relationships we have with our suppliers, it means we can negotiate the best deals, making savings that we can pass on to our customers.
>
> (Asda, 2019)

Buying and selling

The available corporate literature obtained and discussed in the following chapter, makes it plain that striving to attain lower costs is undoubtedly a primary objective closely associated with occupational buying activity and corporate economic performance. However, images of buyers arm wrestling with suppliers to get the best rate is perhaps considered to be a kind of blunt tactic and a more nuanced picture of the contemporary grocery buying occupation is evident, one which emphasises the value of, “managing the downstream cost of doing business” (Sainsbury’s, 2012). Thus, placing occupational emphasis on mastering broader occupational subtleties linked to improving efficiencies by driving cost out of the end-to-end process of getting grocery products from supplier to customer. These cost attentive buying activities transfer economic impacts to the UK consumer. Most notably in the form of retail selling prices consumers pay at the checkouts and is one example by which the socioeconomic significance of the occupation can be advanced. More broadly so, if we consider the wider effects of rising and falling retail prices on the consumer, food and grocery suppliers, manufacturers and ultimately the UK economy.

Managing the relationship between cost of goods and the retail selling price is therefore a routine but important buying activity, essential in attaining corporate pricing strategies that achieve competitively priced products for consumers and targeted sales and profit performance levels for the retailer. This is not an easy occupational balance to achieve, particularly so when we consider and, as this retailer points out, “products don’t sell themselves” (Sainsbury’s, 2012).

Buyers must therefore balance sourcing, selecting, developing and managing cost related buying activities with mutually supporting, selling activities that will optimise trading intensities and customer satisfaction. Selective range assortment, structured and competitive pricing, effective product merchandising, strength of promotional offer and supporting marketing events and activities provide typical examples of occupational selling activities and tactics bound to occupational practice. All require significant levels of customer and competitor insight and analysis, careful planning, coordination and execution in consultation cross function. Accordingly, Information Technology (IT) can be found to be increasingly intertwined with buying practice and process and, as I will later discuss, the growing levels of computerisation and the rise of, cyber physical systems (Avis, 2018) suggest an increasing emphasis on the importance of data generation and analysis that informs the complex relationship between corporate and category objectives with consumer and social issues and trends.

Grocery buying and Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR)

The big issues and trends prevalent within the local and wider socioeconomic, political and environmental spheres play a crucial role in the way retailers go about their business. Environmental campaigners, Greenpeace (2019) are amongst the most outspoken and high-profile critics of UK supermarket chains, for example in challenging the role they are perceived to play in the plastic pollution problem facing the environment with headlines claiming:

> Supermarkets contribute a minimum of 59 billion pieces of single-use plastic to our plastic pollution problem each year. We investigated which supermarkets are working towards reducing their impact and which ones are not.
>
> (Greenpeace, 2019)

The joint survey and report produced by the, Environmental Investigation Agency (EIA) and Greenpeace (2019) titled; *Checking out on plastics A survey of UK supermarkets' plastic habits,* leaves readers in no doubt that they believe UK supermarkets need to do more to help reverse plastic pollution. Indeed, the Greenpeace website (2019) publishes a league table which they claim ranks the UK's leading supermarket's plastic policies. I am not suggesting food and grocery buyers are the responsible agents for the type of environmental issues Greenpeace pose but, more than most, buyers have a big say in what supermarkets stock on their shelves and how they are packaged. Thus, a considerable degree of occupational emphasis is placed on understanding the ethical and environmental responsibilities connected with the supply of food and grocery products and its wider social impact.

Of course, the plastic pollution problem provides a highly topical example and further analysis of Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) reports obtained from most of the top 10 UK retailers reveals the much broader extent of political, economic, social and environmental issues they face. Indeed, research by, Souza-Monteiro & Hooker, (2017, p. 658), "*Comparing UK food retailers corporate social responsibility strategies*" concluded, "CSR strategies are increasingly being used by food businesses to not only improve firms' goodwill and reputation but also as competitive tools" (2017, p. 671).

These reports reveal the wide-range of initiatives carried out by UK grocery retailers across environmental, community, employment, public health and safety, animal welfare and fair-trade related issues. Public scrutiny and emphasis on such issues directly influence and inform the way food and grocery buyers buy. For example, the UK's fourth largest multiple grocery retailer, Wm Morrison (2019 p. 11), make clear their corporate support to British Farmers and, Asda (2019) emphasise their commitment to reduce food waste, "by 20% by 2025 and halve it by 2030".

As the Co-Operative group point out, their grocery buyers:

> Know they can buy products that have a positive impact on people in their community and further afield. And being the brains behind such worthwhile purchases is why our buyers love their jobs.
>
> (The Co-Operative Group, 2017).

Buying food and groceries for UK retail organisations carries not just a commercial responsibility but perhaps more importantly a social responsibility. As I have explained, the relationship between the UK food and grocery buyer, corporate performance and the wider socio-economic and environmental context is an evident feature of an occupation that increasingly matters.

Buyer routines

The previous pages have so far introduced the broad purpose and consequences of the buying role. To introduce the reader to a general picture of the typical activities, routines and responsibilities of a food and grocery buyer the following table (1.1) is given. Buyer's routines are numerous; therefore, details are not given as a universal representation but have been extracted and adapted from a combination of job specifications and corporate information obtained from three of the top four food and grocery retailers in the UK.

Table 1.1. General routines and tasks of a buyer

Routine daily/weekly tasks and activities	**Periodic tasks and activities as appropriate**
Review product sales performance and product wastage (daily and weekly)	Attend trade fairs and related industry conferences
Attend and contribute to meetings with other functions and colleagues.	Visits supplier production facilities and factories
Review sales and profit forecasts and progress	Conduct product quality reviews.

Review inventory availability and stock levels.	Provide insight, commentary and analysis for other functions.
Review cost of goods and product cost base	Conduct business and category planning
Communication and negotiation with suppliers including review of supplier performance	Review commercial news, new products, trends and share insight with other functions
Monitor and analyse sector market share performance against competitors	Plan category budgets, forecasts and action plans.
Forward plan product promotional activity	Plan and action supplier business relationship strategy
Conduct comparative product sampling	Plan and undertake product range reviews
Visit competitor stores	Undertake customer insight research and panels
Visit own organisation's stores	Drive own brand product innovation and development - Identify range gaps
Monitor category retail pricing against competitors	Review and analyse merchandising space needs and trading intensities
Seek regular cost savings and enhanced buying terms	
Review and action on supplier service levels	

The introduction and background so far given reveals a multi-dimensional occupation. The nature and character of which requires the development and use of a complex set of knowledge, skills and abilities that equips buyers for the demands of their role. It follows then, that taking steps to better understand the relationship between what is learned and how it is learned, has the potential to further inform the relationship between VET and learning and individual and organisational performance. As I have now introduced the broad occupational context and made known the relationships and associations that situate this research within the boundaries of UK grocery retail buying VET and learning, I will now proceed to explain the origins of inspiration that have been instrumental in bringing about this study.

Section 2. Inspiration and research aim

Inspiration for this research

The strands of inspiration running through this research will be offered in turn. But first, I must signify the influence of my personal biography and credit twenty-three years of working practice as a UK retail grocery trader dating back as far as 1992 as a contributory factor which ties this study to the UK grocery buying occupation. That is not to say I have taken inspiration from myself or have fallen for any inflated assumptions made about my own occupational judgement. Rather, it is to say, had I not been a buyer, it stands as probable that this research would also not exist. I submit therefore, to have taken inspiration from my interest in the occupation itself, and from the opportunities afforded to me over those years to participate in, observe and experience first-hand, the occupational practice of the buyer.

The Methodology chapter contains rationale for the epistemological contribution of my occupational knowledge and experience. So, I will move on by simply emphasising my desire to act on my previous occupational and intellectual curiosities and to explicitly, "open up inquiry" (Schon, 1991, p. *viii*) to better understand the research questions that have inspired and challenged my desire to make a scholarly contribution to the development of UK food and grocery retail buyer occupational knowledge. Inspiration that as you will read, can undoubtedly be traced to triggers from my own occupational experiences and to which I have attributed a scheme of thinking that, Quine (2011, in Cottingham, P. 130) might consider to be linked to a personal quest to make sense of the, "disordered fragments of raw experiences".

Some may conclude that such motives indicate a degree of, "sentimental attachment [and] romanticism" (Braverman, 1998, p. 4) to the resonance I share with my past occupational experiences as a buyer. Here I will assert that in this instance such claims of sentimental attachment or personal involvement would constitute an uneven interpretation of bias that would discount the, "Impersonal motives" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 82) and the, "appreciation of conceptual components" (Leshem & Trafford, 2007, p. 94) and wider reading and reflection that contribute to the conceptual and ethical approach employed and share an equally instrumental role in the conception and development of this research.

An implicit past and explicit aims

> For many, retail provides a first step into the world of work and for many more, it provides long-term roles and opportunities to climb the career ladder.
>
> (BRC, 2017)

The BRC's assessment given above depicts the UK retail sector as a career of opportunity and has a close resonance with my own working experience. Indeed, looking back to the start of my own career in the UK food and grocery sector I was a stereotypical example of the one in six people under the age of 24 estimated by the BRC to enter the retail sector with few or, "no formal qualifications" (BRC, 2017). Yet, the prevailing, "shop floor to top floor" (Pickervance, 2010, p. 1) retail environment the BRC portray did indeed lead me to a long-term role and opportunities to climb the career ladder in the food and grocery retail buying occupation. With few academic credentials or formal educational qualifications, the sector's approach to learning and career development undoubtedly provided me with the platform to prosper and build a fruitful career as a food and grocery buyer. For this I am grateful. Yet, the passed on social and cultural attitudes and values towards learning and development

I experienced in the UK retail sector portray a perspective on employee education and occupational performance that is contrary to notions as highlighted in the UK Government's Post-16 Skills Report (2016) which are pre-occupied with the avoidance of entering the workplace without the success of obtaining, well regarded qualifications and credentials, that according to Boles (In Post-16 Skills Report, p. 5) "will drive up productivity" . This discourse fascinates me.

Though I was a buyer possessed of few formal academic qualifications at the start of my career, possibly quite naively at first, I noted many of my buying colleagues and peers had qualifications which ranged from the then 'O' levels to HE degrees. To me there seemed to be those who brought with them varying levels of prior education and academic credentials and those, like me, who did not. Throughout the course of my career I was exposed to and became increasingly aware of the contrast between the different forms of learning I received and between the different educational pathways some of my colleagues and I had taken, much of which will be discussed in the following pages. Hence, my interest in VET and learning emerged and now inspires my research interest in the contrasting notions of VET and learning and their potential impact on performance in the workplace, as a buyer.

Here I will again, point to the UK Government's Post-16 Skills Plan Report (2016) which is used to emphasise these contrasting notions and link my former occupational and current research interests to a wider strategic UK government perspective. The UK Government's plan aims to reform education and skills and enhance UK economic prosperity through an outwardly human capital influenced, "intuition that education is a determinant of economic success" (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2011, p. 6).

Notwithstanding the equal footing (2016) the UK Government claims to place on both academic and technical learning pathways the plan might conversely be accused of intensifying ideas of credentialism by prompting contentions that qualifications, "are proxy measures for the expertise (expressed as skills) employers are looking for when they recruit new workers" (Guile & Unwin, 2019 p. 19). Thus, potentially over-estimating the perceived correlation between academic and vocational qualifications and the raising of workplace productivity. For some:

> The main problem with credentialism is that companies do not want information on school work, but on abilities and performance in the context of working life.
>
> (Becker, 1993, p. 20)

As Cairns (2011) points out, the context of working life and learning has become, "inextricably linked and reinforcing" (Cairns, 2011, p. 73). A trend previously summarised by, Fuller & Unwin (2005, p. 24) who share the position taken by those who:

> reject any notion that learning that takes place in specialist educational institutions is inherently superior to learning that takes place in settings such as the workplace or the home.

Indeed, according to Billett (2017, p. 51), “the requirements for effective practice are shaped by the circumstances in which they are practiced” which acknowledges notions of situated learning attributed to Lave & Wenger (1991).

The discourse evident between these contrasting educational ideas is highly relevant to this thesis because it exemplifies explicit critical context indicative of a complex relationship between what I will for now, introduce and later explain, as on the job and off the job concepts of learning and VET. Thus, emphasising the association that can be made between education systems as a way of improving individual and organisational performance. I am not here suggesting a bias or rejection of either view. Nor do I claim that these contrasting notions of learning and education can easily be reconciled or should be blended to generalised proportions. Indeed, I will provide additional critical context in the following pages which will further debate and introduce theoretical and conceptual drivers of this research.

Past and present: the aims of this research

It is this contextual backdrop which shares a resonance with an implicit knowledge and awareness of the significance of on and off the job learning in the buying occupation I gained from the early stages and throughout my career as a food and grocery buyer and trader. Moreover, I cannot deny that my thinking was influenced by what I sensed in practice and which resonated with notions offered by Fuller et al., (2004, p. 3) who submit:

> Those employees whose knowledge and skills remain tacit are more likely to have their competence underestimated and their contribution to the organisation undervalued.

This idea represents an undercurrent which can be found flowing beneath contrasting ideas of education, training and learning I have introduced. Contemplating these ideas raised questions in my mind about the part education, training and learning play(s) in individual and organisational performance which I have ever since found fascinating and to which I had often sought an unrealised clarity.

Recognition that inspiration for this study is relatable to my own experiences of VET and learning as a practicing buyer and which could be described as, “theorising from practice” (Berman & Smyth, 2015, p. 131) must therefore, be given. But, it has been my express desire to go beyond implicit recognition of these concepts. In the main, by way of explicit investigation and systematic empirical research that will be further explained in the Methodology chapter and is responsive to my search for further clarity of the relationship between learning on and off the Job as a buyer and performance as buyer.

Here I will state the explicit aims and objectives of this research:

To provide a rich source of data drawn from the perceptions and experiences of UK food and grocery retail buyers and wider occupational literature,

to:

Identify and better understand factors of on and off the job VET and learning which may inform the development of occupational standards, competencies and knowledge for the education and training needs of UK food and grocery buyers and, make a scholarly contribution to the development of food and grocery buying occupational knowledge in the UK.

I have now introduced the broad areas of research interest and motives which link to my past and now inspire my starting point as a researcher in the field of VET and learning and which I submit, seeks to raise inquiry to better understand the relationship between buyer learning, VET and occupational performance. As I will later discuss in the following chapters, this research relies foremost on bringing together the perspectives and experiences of UK food and grocery buyers and secondary data drawn from their organisations and wider bodies of literature by employing a systematic, empirical methodology to answering the research questions. Before moving on to introduce the central research questions I will first define what is meant by UK grocery buyer learning and VET in relation to this study:

> the implicit or tacit process of acquisition and modification of Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other characteristics (KSAOs) (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011) of UK grocery buyers facilitated in formal or situated (lave & Wenger, 1991) educational settings.

Section 3. The research questions

Central research question

Table 1.2. Central research question

Central Research Question	
1.	What is the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer?

My intention was to formulate a central research question that would best, “express the essence” (Mason, 2018 p. 14) of this study and would be responsive to the investigation of the broad areas of research interest previously introduced as inspirational. This question is pivotal in that it provides orientation from which further supplementary and themed questions have been developed. The question’s design is purposefully open-ended to avoid inferential hypothesis and foster inclusivity towards the diversity of people and settings of the UK food and grocery buying occupation. The following three supplementary questions stem directly from the central research question. Taken together, they form a mutually supporting and complementary nucleus from which questions used in the research protocols of this study emanate and are tightly bound. The subsequent pages explain the founding principles that inform the purpose and development of each question.

Supplementary research questions

Table 1.3. Supplementary research questions

Supplementary Research Questions	
a.	What do grocery retail buyers learn on the job?
b.	What do grocery retail buyers learn off the job?
c.	How do people become grocery retail buyers?

Question a. What do grocery retail buyers learn on the job?

> If learning is about increased access to performance then the way to maximise learning is to perform, not talk about it.
>
> (Hanks, 1991, in Lave & Wenger, p. 22)

Billett (2004, p. 113) reminds us that, “work sites are the prime source of the knowledge required for work”. This question then, provides a route to examine the content and composition of work-based processes and productive activities learnt either tacitly or explicitly by the active participation of grocery buyers in on the job workplace practices and labour processes. In defining ‘participation’ as a guide to what is meant by ‘on’ the job learning this study takes on a term defined by Sfard (1998, p. 6) to be, “almost synonymous with taking part and being a part”. Sfard’s term is beneficial in the context of this research because its metaphorical expression for learning on the job gives recognition to situated and socio-cultural characteristics associated with learning within the domains of the workplace. This builds on notions offered by Lave & Wenger (1991, P. 31) who advance learning as, “an integral and inseparable aspect of social practice”. Indeed, Becker, (1993, p. 20) points to the socialising significance and applicability of participatory learning within a community of practice, referring us to notions that posit, “Workers and their employers get bonded together in large part because of the on the job learning and training”.

The principle nature of this question therefore searches beyond notions of occupational or vocational learning as being, independent of context and which according to (Hager, 2009, p. 22), “Underpins common attempts to specify occupations in terms of a list of competence statements”. Thus, advancing notions supportive of, expansive participatory workplace learning and knowledge transfer (Engeström, 2001) which takes account of fluid, transitory and multi-directional concepts of learning. Furthermore, recognition is given to the historical and changing context of the workplace and the transitionary nature of new and old processes, people, technologies, practices, skills, and competencies that may be seen to coexist within the context of participatory learning within the workplace.

Question b. What do grocery retail buyers learn off the job?

In contrast to notions of learning as participation the investigatory emphasis of this question turns to identifying the composition and content of off the job buyer education, training and learning. By this I mean, education, training and learning which occurs in formal scholarly education institutions or work settings and which is, "typically, associated with the pursuit of qualifications" (Fuller et al., 2004, p. 3). To encourage pursuit of the broadest possible representation, the investigatory scope of this question does not place restriction on definitions of what might constitute qualifications, skills or standards of occupational competency within the buying context. Rather, emphasis is placed on acknowledgement that off the job education, training and learning does occur and provides those learners with externally derived and acquired forms of knowledge, skills and competencies potentially practical and meaningful in meeting, "the varied needs of employers, learners and the economy" (Berragan, 2018, Ofqual keynote speech). It is the purpose of this question to therefore, better understand the extent, value and credentials of acquisitional education, training and learning associated with food and grocery buying.

Again, I turn to Sfard (1998) and her conceptualisation of learning as, acquisition which implies learners can acquire, "certain capabilities to fulfil vocational tasks" (Gruber & Harteis, 2011, p. 229). Thereby, emphasising the potential significance of, learning to know (Lave & Wegner, 1991) and how theory might influence practice and its relationship to performance within the grocery buying occupation.

Question c. How do people become grocery retail buyers?

The previous two questions help to direct attention to distinguishing characteristics of participatory and acquisitional forms of learning. This is helpful in distinguishing the know-how of buyers and understanding the productive activities and characteristics that can be tied to performance and will be discussed in detail in the following chapters. But, as I have already stated the chosen metaphorical expressions are employed, not to make binary distinctions that may extenuate tensions, "between seemingly conflicting metaphors" (Sfard, 1998, p. 10). To the contrary, conceptually distinguishing constituent parts of on and off the job learning and their relationship to performance within the grocery buying occupation provides a basis and theory of learning from which to better understand the relationship between the two. This question seeks to better understand how people become grocery retail buyers and provides a mechanism that brings together the prevailing occupational mix of learning, education and training with what Becker (1993) has described as, "complimentary elements between learning and work and learning and time" (Becker, 1993, p. 51). This accounts for motivation, progression, development and the transition associated with mastering the art of retail buying, becoming a retail grocery buyer and its significance to occupational performance.

Furthermore, this question recognises that buyers do not act alone and is therefore positioned to better understand how buyers, their learning and performance relate to others and the social and organisational characteristics of their environment. Therefore, value can be found in potentially uncovering the uniqueness of the buying occupation and its environment through identifying the social and organisational relationships between factors that include, amongst others: preparatory education and training, accessibility to learning, levels of prior knowledge, modes of entry into retail buying, competencies and standards, learning settings, training and education strategies and pedagogical techniques.

Chapter Two: Conceptual framework and literature

Conceptual framework and adopting a critical stance: concepts responsive to this research and their interconnection to the research design

The previous pages have introduced the contextual background, research aims, the research questions and some of the contextual conceptualisations that underpin the research questions. In so doing, I have hinted at the broader bodies of knowledge consulted and can be found, "within the context of larger theoretical, practical or social domains" (Yin, 2015, p. 79) from which this study grows. I will now proceed to credit the explicit theoretical components selected and combined to form my critical stance from the, "conceptual threshold" (Wisker, 2015, P. 64) between my engagement with theory, the literature and the research questions and, which has produced what Leshem & Trafford, (2007, p. 99) consider to be an, "integrating function between theories that offer explanations of the issues under investigation".

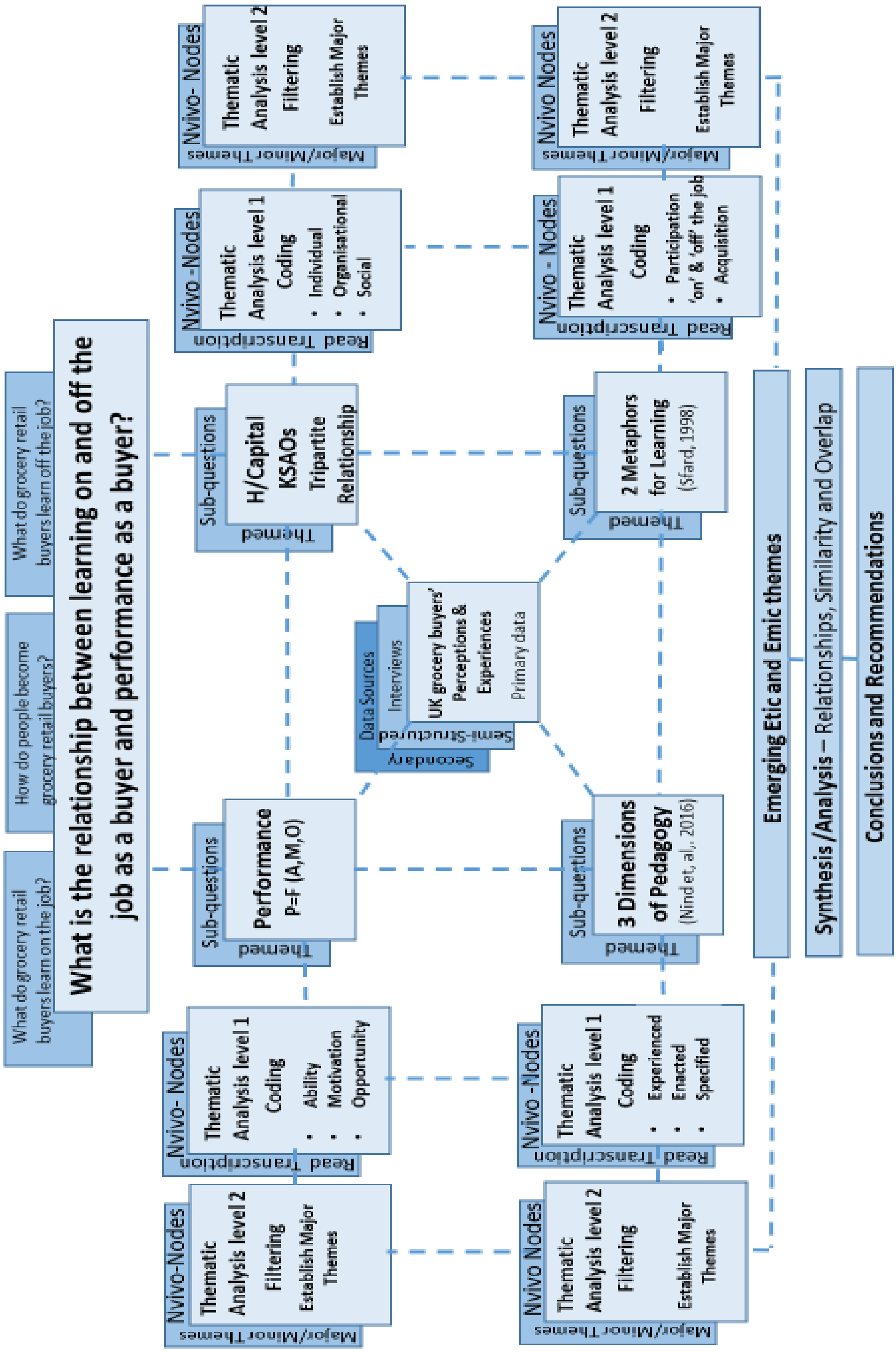
Providing a review and critical analysis of the key theoretical concepts from my engagement with the literature at this juncture rests on the following rationale:

a. To straightaway identify and introduce the conceptualisations and their theoretical traditions and origins that are responsive to the research questions and provide the, "scaffolding" (Wisker, 2012, p. 132) from which I have established interconnections between the research design components, including; fieldwork, specific questions and protocols, data analysis and contextual conclusions.
b. To take account of notions that might question my subjectivity, researcher bias and insider judgement as, "a component of the actual process of understanding" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 98).

Furthermore, I will then locate the contribution this research makes in relation to the corpus of existing knowledge I have linked to the topic of UK grocery buyer VET, learning and performance. Value and an original contribution to knowledge is proposed through bridging the gaps between what is later advanced as a cross disciplinary and broadly disparate body of existing works of literature with to the best of my knowledge a unique study focused on furthering the knowledge of training and education in UK food and grocery buying.

As a point of departure from which to advance through the following pages, I will first introduce a visual model of the conceptual framework I have created and employed in this research (Fig. 1.0).

Fig. 1.0. Conceptual framework



The model illustrates the relationships and interconnections between the research questions, theoretical concepts, integrated design components and methods critical to this study. In the methodology chapter, I will later explain how each component of the model responds to the other. However, emphasis here falls first on identifying and introducing the specific conceptual influences that have formed my critical stance adjacent to which this research is positioned.

As can be seen, there are four (4) key theoretical conceptualisations which are prominent within the conceptual framework model. These are identifiable under the following headings:

- KSAOs and tripartite relationship.
- Two metaphors for learning, Sfard (1998).
- Three dimensions of pedagogy, Nind, Curtin & Hall (2016).
- P=F (A, M, O), Appelbaum, et al., (2000); Boxall & Purcell (2003;2016).

Table (1.4) below, is given to provide a brief introduction and synopsis of the theoretical origins of each conceptualisation selected and constructed to reach beyond participant anecdote by providing a conceptual and methodological approach that responds to the research questions through a multi-dimensional conceptual lens drawn from widespread engagement with the literature. The significance and relationship of each theoretical concept to the study will be discussed in detail in the following pages and aims to emphasise how the inclusion of each conceptualisation contributes to a distinctive and unique design scheme.

Table 1. 4. Conceptual framework: synopsis of theoretical origins

Theoretical origins.	**Theoretical concepts used in the conceptual framework of this study.**	**Brief conceptual synopsis.**
Human capital theory	KSAOs	KSAOs is the acronym given to abbreviate notions of individual or collective knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics advanced by, Ployhart & Moliterno (2011).
	Tripartite concept of Intellectual Capital.	Intellectual capital is defined by Baron and Armstrong (2007, p. 6) as, “the stocks and flows of knowledge available to an organisation. These can be regarded as intangible resources which together with tangible resources (money and physical assets), comprise the market or total value of a business”. Intellectual capital comprises of a tripartite concept consisting of the following elements: • Human capital: the KSAOs of individuals within organisations.

		• Social capital: According to Nahapiet, (2011, p. 79) social capital, "is about the value of social connections and relationships". • Organisational capital: "The institutionalised knowledge possessed by an organisation that is stored in data bases, manuals etc. Emphasis here is placed on a conceptualisation that individuals do not act in isolation and therefore buyer VET, learning and performance depends on multiple factors.
Learning theory	Two Metaphors for Learning	Sfard's (1998) conceptualisation posits learning as participation and learning as acquisition. Sfard's metaphorical approach provides the conceptual foundations from which this study examines notions of buyer on and off the job VET and learning.
Pedagogical research theory	Three Dimensions of Pedagogy	Nind, Curtin & Hall (2016) This theory has been incorporated to the conceptual framework to provide methodological emphasis that extends beyond teaching and learning and provides a route to discovering, "what people perceive to be meaningful, important and relevant as they engage in teaching-related activity and develop competence and expertise" (Nind, Curtin & Hall, 2016, p. 9). Set within the context of pedagogical research Nind, Curtin, and Hall (2016) emphasise the necessity of examining three interrelated socio-cultural dimensions of pedagogy: • Pedagogy as specified • Pedagogy as enacted • Pedagogy as experienced
Performance and motivation theory	P = F (A, M, O)	The AMO theory, Appelbaum et al., (2000); Boxall & Purcell (2003;2016) advances a conception that performance is a function of Ability (A) plus Motivation (M) plus Opportunity (O). This theory is expressed as the mathematical formula, P=F (A, M, O).

Concept mapping, the literature and adopting a critical stance

Before I go on to discuss the distinct significance and interconnections between each of the theoretical concepts given, I must first explain the value attached in this study to the role and utility of concept mapping in facilitating the exploration of texts and literature essential in making the judgements and decisions in adopting my critical stance.

According to Novak & Cañas, (2006, P. 11):

> A good way to define the context for a concept map is to construct a *Focus Question*, that

> is, a question that clearly specifies the problem or issue the concept map should help to resolve.

Incorporating this Novakian principle provided a supplementary technique to aid the classification of my written notes, transcriptions, records and to generate deeper conceptual understanding and, "frame, analyse and synthesise information" (Campbell, 2016, p. 74). A combination of pen and paper sketches, modelling with sticky notes and computer software programmes were extensively used to connect and record explicit theoretical concepts from the literature with my tacit cognitive ideas. In effect, concept mapping was employed as a practical tool for the creation of a working visual repository and reference system that has aided the formulation of my critical stance and the conceptual framework I specified to link my research questions, methods and aims.

The iterative nature of employing a concept mapping technique is bound to methodological deliberations which imply that a, "concept map is never finished" (Novak & Cañas, 2006, P. 11). Notions of an unfinished product can be considered a limiting feature of a method from which to generate notions of definitive knowledge. Nevertheless, I argue for a technique that facilitates an openness of inquiry which fosters creative exploration and integration of concepts as a practical means of finding ways to better understand the problems presented by the research question, which Paul, (2012, p. 58) argues, "recognises the constructivist nature of human knowledge in contrast to a purely positivist epistemology". I will now extend on the brevity of my earlier synopses given in table (1.4) and discuss each of the theoretical concepts in further detail.

Human capital theory, KSAOs and the tripartite relationship as conceptual origins of this study

The central research question places focus upon the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer and implies a link between the role and effects of learning and VET as a key contributor to individual and organisational performance. Indeed, according to the UK Government's Department for Business Innovation and Skills (DBIS) Post-16 Skills Report (2016, p. 11),

> We face a major challenge: the pressing need for more highly skilled people, trained effectively, to grow the economy and raise productivity, and ensure prosperity and security for individuals.

The statement echoes with disputed but influential economic capital concepts first attributed to economist, Adam Smith (1723-1790) who wrote, "The acquired wealth of nations derives from the acquired abilities of people, their education, experience, skills and health" (Smith, in Armstrong & Taylor, 2014, p. 68). Drawing together contemporary DBIS perspectives with the economic capital traditions of Smith, it is difficult not to recognise the widely contested influence of neo-liberalist human capital thinking which attach assumptions that includes labour as a factor of production in much the same way as land, capital equipment and enterprise contribute to the economic problem. This then provides a starting point from which to explore the significance to this study of human capital concepts and perspectives which posits, “education and training are the most important investments in human capital” (Becker, 1993, p. 17) and, which evidently inspires a UK government economic and educational policy openly, “committed to boosting productivity by investing in human capital” (Gov.UK, 2016).

The notion that productivity and performance can be boosted by investing in the skills and knowledge of people can, in the contemporary context trace origins to the pioneering efforts of human capital theorists T W Schultz (1902-1998) and G S Becker (1930-2014).

Published in 1960, *Capital Formation by Education,* Schultz (1960) proposed:

> to treat education as an investment in man and to treat its consequences as a form of capital. Since education becomes a part of the person receiving it, I shall refer to it as human capital.
>
> (Schultz, 1960, p. 571)

The term human capital has ever since provided the stimulus for theoretical development and highly contested discourse which has evolved far beyond what Becker (2012) reflectively tied to motivational origins of economic rationalism and attempts to calculate, “rates of return on investments in education for different groups” (Becker, 2012, p. xiii). Thus, notions of human capital are now extensive, diverse and as Ployhart et al., (2014, p. 375) point out, inhabit and include social, intellectual, organisational and strategic contexts. According to, Spender (2014, p. 189)

> What human capital means is a matter of situated practice, constrained by employment and contract law, institutional, religious, and professional mores and so-on – complexities matched by the difficulties of analysing the consequences of human capital’s application.

It is beyond the scope of this research to warrant attempts to ubiquitously distinguish a conceptualisation which can completely account for the situated nature of contemporary human capital theory. As Ployhart et, al. (2014, p. 372) emphasise, “there is no ‘Rosetta Stone’ that translates the views of human capital”. Nevertheless, at its core human capital thinking is motivated, at least in part, “by a desire to evaluate proposals to improve the quality of the workforce through schooling, training” (Becker, 1993, p. 25). Not surprisingly then an individual’s knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs) are recurring features of definitions found in the literature, for example; Coff and Kryscynski, (2011, p. 1430) define human capital at the individual level as, “the individual’s stock of knowledge, skills and abilities that can be increased through mechanisms like education training and experience”. The relationship between human capital, the individual and the firm is also identified by Crook et, al, (2011, p. 444). For them, “the term human capital refers to the knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) embodied in people”. The Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development

(CIPD) also take a similar but more contemporary strategic human resource management (SHRM) viewpoint that uses the term human capital to describe, “people at work and their collective knowledge, skills, abilities and capacity to develop and innovate” (CIPD, 2018).

Defining human capital as knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics: KSAOs

In keeping with the underpinning essence and the recurring features of human capital definitions, I have drawn upon a conceptualisation which is given to define human capital for the purposes of this research to be:

> A unit level resource that is created from the emergence of individuals’ knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs)
>
> (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011, p. 127-128)

Turning specifically to this conceptualisation of human capital rests on the perceived importance of KSAOs as a crucial factor to individual and organisational performance and on the potential utility of integrating such a theoretical basis in my conceptual framework from which to explore, answer and analyse the research questions. Before going on to explain however, I must first clarify my position on theoretical perspectives of human capital orientated in attempts to establish economic value of human labour or KSAOs which for example, might be measured in terms of return on investment (ROI).

Measuring the economic value of human capital is not my aim. I remain to be convinced that human capital as here defined, can be comprehensively measured and distinguished along similar lines to what Piketty (2014, p. 46) describes as, “Nonhuman Capital”. For example, money, factories, machinery and property. And, I have not read past Schultz’s own assertions without gaining the benefit of a perspective which recognises, “since it [human capital] becomes an integral part of the person it cannot be bought or sold or treated as property under our institutions” (Schultz, 1960, p. 571). Furthermore, I hold similar apprehensions held by those who, in the traditions of neoclassical economic discourse submit, “turning to humans as a form of capital is in line with the exhaustion of natural resources for profit” (Moghtader, 2017, p. 44). Additionally, any attempts to gain economic advantage from human capital thinking requires prior acknowledgement that, “it is incorrect to assume that investment in human capital is the only source of competitive success (Fuller, et al., 2004, p.1) and as Blaug, (1972, p. 19) contests to assume, “all education everywhere and in any amounts constitutes investment”. Indeed, Avis (2017, p. 183) also reminds us of the limitations of attaching economic rationalism to education in the face of recent and continued, “economic turbulence allied to underemployment, unemployment and over qualification”.

KSAOs as a practical approach to ordering thinking and data analysis

Yet, despite the apprehensions I have presented, investment in human capital may very well lead to enhanced occupational performance. I choose therefore, not to overlook those ideas which defend the, "economic aims of education to be, "as legitimate as any other" (Winch, 2002, p. 102). Rather, I advance the selection and integration of human capital led notions of KSAOs in this study as a conceptual means to order my thinking, methodological planning, execution and data analysis.

Regardless of the underpinning economic and socio-ethical disquiet associated with human capital theory, thinking systematically about KSAOs may help to reveal the most salient occupational characteristics and competencies of the UK grocery retail buying occupation. With that comes the prospect of revealing a representation of those occupational KSAOs buyers must learn and draws parallels with perspectives which are said to be, "particularly helpful when considering occupational practices and what comprises competent performance at work" Billett (2017, p. 48).

Here then, argument is made for the inclusion of KSAOs as a theoretical derivative of human capital thinking because its contribution is crucial in providing an integral theoretical lens within the conceptual framework of this study valuable in reaching the research aims rather than validating the human capital hypothesis, "that education increases productivity" (Burton-Jones & Spender, 2012, p. 6).

Defining KSAOs

So far, I have not distinguished between the component elements of KSAOs. Indeed, my endeavours to distinguish between the subtleties and nuances of KSAOs from within the literature did not pass, "without repeatedly getting embroiled in definitional issues" (Eraut, 2001, p. 16) or, by being constrained and, "contaminated by interest and power" (Moore, 2006, p. 28). Thus, my dilemma led me to proceed with what should be considered, homogenised definitions generally orientated to assist in distinguishing the work-related vocational context of the UK food and grocery retail buying occupation. Exception is made to non-buyer specific KSAOs which may inform a proportion of overall occupational judgement and performance. As Avent (2017, p. 129) points out, "a clear understanding of algebra, say, is useful in many different contexts". I propose therefore, that the narrowness of each of the following individual definitions provides the starting point and guidance for further contextual and conceptual expansion throughout this thesis.

Knowledge:

I will discuss the wider epistemological issues concerning occupational knowledge and questions of truth further within the methodology chapter but here I draw from, Brymer, Hitt & Schijven (2011, p. 121) in depicting buyer knowledge which for the purposes of this study:

> May be either explicit or tacit and reconstituted through action and practice and is defined to consist of buyers, theoretical, practical, procedural and personal understanding of the UK retail buying occupation.

Skills:

Here I will precede the following definition by citing, Eraut (2001, p. 111) to emphasise that, "the term 'skill' is given a wide range of meanings". To condense the term and orientate towards depicting the skills of a buyer I have drawn from and combined definitions posited by Collins & O'Brien, (2011, p. 428) and Bathmaker (2013, p. 98) which define skills for the purposes of this thesis to mean:

> A buyer's occupational, "proficiencies developed through learning and experience" summarised to consist of work place practice skills such as, "technical skills (e.g. using a piece of equipment) and the skills and attitudes required in the work place [alongside] generic transferable skills of various kinds" which include:
>
> - non-technical skills (communication, planning, reporting, analysis and others),
> - generic skills,
> - personal learning and thinking skills,
> - generic employability skills,
> - employability skills,
> - cognitive skills and
> - generic concepts.
>
> (Bathmaker, 2013, p. 98)

Abilities and other characteristics:

To precede the following definition, I will begin with a quote from Nonaka, et al., (2014) who attach the significance of human agency to give an aggregated view on ability in the occupational context.

> Bureaucracy defines authority and responsibility in a clear chain of command to ensure uniform operation, even though the people occupying these positions have varying levels of ability.
>
> (Nonaka, Toyama & Peltokkopi, 2012, p. 462)

As buyers possess varying levels of ability and operate in a volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) (CIPD, 2015, p. 3) environment I have deduced from Nonaka, et al., (2012) that any definition of abilities and other characteristics links to anticipated performance outcomes that must not rely on, "assessment of skill alone" (Winch, 2016, p. 568). Indeed, in his own articulation of professional "know-how", Winch (2016, p. 559-560) suggests that associated occupational abilities and other characteristics require adaptability within the prevailing occupational context which is tied to factors of repeatability, stability, variability, intentionality, explicability and evaluability.

I am therefore drawn to education-based notions of ability as potential (Wallace, 2015) to influence buyer performance which is context dependant and have therefore compressed notions of buyers' abilities and other characteristics into the following definition:

> An individual's innate or acquired attributes that have the potential to influence occupational performance in relation to a variety of complex occupational measures, social conditions and situations.

KSAOs as a symbiotic concept: strengthening the concept

I must be clear that the definition of human capital and of KSAOs stated provide familiar but not universally accepted propositions which are imperfect and not free from critical context. For example, limitations can been applied to a potentially linear way of thinking about intangible capital assets which fails to adequately recognise human agency and the relationship, "with real-world sites in which patterns are non-linear and non-homogenous" (Marginson, 2019, p. 294). The (CIPD, 2019) also recognise that KSAOs are, "difficult to isolate from other factors" and which represents critical context this research actively seeks to engage through the medium of the conceptual framework and to which I will continue to address in turn. My given definition of KSAOs therefore, should be considered to comprise of symbiotic components and factors of learning rather than independent domains which work in isolation or preside in a continuum or hierarchy of importance. The logic behind this integrated conceptualisation of KSAOs challenges the idea of a linear taxonomy of learning and, "assumptions that mastering content must come before application" (Brauer, 2010, p. 83). This is important in the context of this research which is in-part, inspired by my personal occupational curiosities in thinking about contrasting perceptions and experiences of on and off the job learning.

In seeking to better understand the research question then, it has been crucial to ensure the methodological approach has not assumed buyer performance is a factor of any pre-set or presiding dominant attribute, domain or model of learning. Indeed, I am informed by Mulder (2017, p. 1100) whose synthesised conclusions relating to competence-based vocational and professional education cautions, "knowledge alone is not enough: skills neither". Mulder extends his rationale further by asserting:

> Although it is utterly important to acquire sufficient subject matter knowledge in vocational and professional education, there is the risk of treating the cognitive domain separately.
>
> (Mulder, 2017, p. 1100)

I understand, Mulder's conceptual interpretation to further claims of the interconnectedness of KSAOs. This posed the need to someway mitigate the risks of adopting binary or hierarchical assumptions which may attach dominant status to any component part. Conceptually therefore, inspiration was found from the wider social theory of John Rawls (1921-2002) which inspired my thinking to conceptualise each component of the KSAOs definition to a hypothetical "original position" (1999, p. 15). Rawls's ideas of distributive social justice speak of fairness and objectivity and have been used in this study to generate a, hypothetical "status quo" (Rawls, 1991, p. 104) between the component domains of KSAOs. My aim being to create a conceptual equilibrium that I have applied to generating and devising open research questions and methods of analysis that in-part, may mitigate generating leading assumptions on KSAOs amongst the participants. This hypothetical approach is resistant to assumptions of universality. That is to say, I have applied reason which asserts; it would not be appropriate to first overlay the applicability and precedence of KSAOs given to any individual perception or say, that of an airline pilot or primary school teacher to that of a grocery buyer.

Beyond KSAOs: Intellectual capital and the tripartite relationship

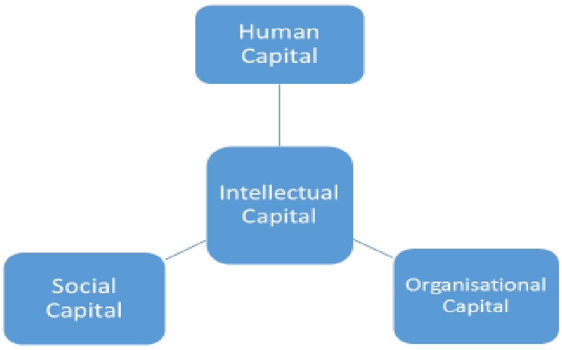
The unit of analysis in this research is the individual participants. It is they, who learn and possess human capital and individual KSAOs which are then enacted in the retail grocery buying occupational environment. However, buyers do not learn or operate in isolation, nor do retail organisations function without the human component. To learn and perform buyers must interact, cooperate and coordinate their actions with others and the prevailing social and organisational environment. It follows then, that any perspectives or experiential representation of individual KSAOs and subsequent notions of buyer on and off the job learning and performance which originate in this research must extend to include representations of their wider interactions and interdependencies. As Grant & Hayton, (2011, p. 421) point out:

> Human beings are different. Not only does their humanity make them heterogeneous and idiosyncratic, but their productive value is not simply an outcome of investment in education and training, and their productivity depends upon complex individual and social factors.

Indeed, (Syed et al., 2018, p. 3) suggest, "recent reviews question whether there is much value in empirically examining human capital as an independent construct". In searching for means to tease out factors that would inform the research question beyond notions of individual human capital, I have turned to a conceptualisation which links the potential flows of individual human capital and KSAOs possessed by buyers to those interactions, interdependencies and relationships with others, the organisation and wider social environment.

First attributed to J. K. Galbraith (1969) the historical origins of intellectual capital follow in the traditions of neoliberal economic schools of thought. Its development has been shaped into a multi-dimensional concept through a wide range of contributors, perhaps most notably, Bontis, (1998); Edvinson & Malone (1997); Stewart (1997); Youndt & Snell (2004). There are no ubiquitous definitions and, according to recent research by, Pedro, Leitão & Alves (2018, p. 2502-2503) notions of, "intellectual capital still remains disputable despite the general consensus about the importance of intellectual capital as a basis for value creation". Here I will represent the tri-partite relationship of intellectual capital as being formed to comprise of the sum and synthesis of three interrelated elements: human capital, organisational capital and social capital.

Fig. 1.1. The tri-partite conceptualisation of Intellectual Capital



The significance given to intellectual capital is succinctly described by, Baron and Armstrong (2007, p. 7) who claim:

> The tripartite concept of intellectual capital indicates that, while it is individuals who generate, retain and use knowledge (human capital), this knowledge is enhanced by the interactions between them, (social capital) to generate the institutionalised knowledge possessed by an organisation (organisational capital).

Murray (2018, p. 21) frames the tri-partite elements of intellectual capital as:

> Knowledge that is created and stored in those three capital components, such that knowledge embedded in one component of Intellectual capital can leverage the value of knowledge in the other components.

For the purposes of this research the distinctions between each of the three elements of intellectual capital draw from the following definitions:

Human capital

> A unit level resource that is created from the emergence of individuals' knowledge, skills, abilities and other characteristics (KSAOs)
>
> (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011, p. 127-128)

Social capital

> The structures, networks and procedures that enable those people to acquire and develop intellectual capital represented by the stocks and flows of knowledge derived from relationships within and outside the organisation.
>
> (Baron & Armstrong, 2007, P. 6)

Organisational capital

> Consists of the knowledge owned by the organisation rather than by the individual employees. It can be described as embedded or institutionalised knowledge that may be retained with the help of information technology on readily accessible and easily extended databases. It can include explicit knowledge and has been recorded on a database or in manuals and standard operating procedures, or tacit knowledge that has been captured, exchanged and, as far as possible, codified.
>
> (Baron & Armstrong, 2007, p. 14)

As Piketty (2014) points out, some economists have a propensity to apply the term, 'capital' liberally to any circumstances where enhancing organisational productivity, performance and economic wealth can be perceived. Indeed, research by, Pedro, et al., (2018, p. 2515) identified, "35 different types of capital" which included; structural, relational, innovation and image capital amongst the table of its classifications. Yet, perhaps such enthusiasm can be forgiven for attempting to place economic value to a concept that has developed in tandem with the rapid rise in technological advances and the growth in the knowledge economy. For, Powell & Snellman (2004, p. 199), "The key component of a knowledge economy is a greater reliance on intellectual capabilities than on physical inputs or natural resources". Concepts of intellectual capital are therefore entwined with logic which suggests, if, "intellectual capital is essentially a product of the human mind, firm employees can have a significant influence on innovation and the subsequent performance capability of companies" (Dabić, Lažnjak, Smallbone & Švarc, 2019, p. 525).

Like many sectors of the economy, food and grocery retail in the UK is bound up in the current realisation and ascendancy of technological advancements in information systems and the perceived growth of the knowledge economy. Inevitably then, what and how buyers learn on and off the job is likely to be tied up in such a socioeconomic shift from the industrial era to the technological. The tri-partite relationship of intellectual capital is therefore a developing concept but a useful concept that assists this research because it directs emphasis to account for shifts and interdependencies in the socioeconomic landscape and accounts for the individual, social and organisational factors that are likely to impact on buyer on and off the job VET and learning and performance.

Inevitably, my inclusion of the synthesis between human capital, social capital and organisational capital will draw comparison to the thinking of Bourdieu's forms of capital (1983). Yet, despite

Bourdieu's response to, Becker (1964) it is not my intent to depart from the scope of this study into the specific discourse of social struggles which I recognise are surrounded by what some have described as, "the folly of economic reductionism" (Bonanno, 2018, p. 387). My rationale for the selection of the forms of capital I present here, recognises utility in a model that helps me to think about the interconnections that exist between the individual, the organisation and the social and represent these factors in the design, conduct and analysis of this study.

On two metaphors for learning

My outline of the supplementary research questions in the introduction chapter has previously announced how and why Sfard's (1998 p. 4), "two metaphors for learning" has been employed to conceptually differentiate between the two domains of on and off the job learning in this research. I will not fully repeat rationale already given but as a brief reminder; principally, I have tied Sfard's (1998) notions of learning as participation as a concept to better understand what buyers learn on the job and, Sfard's notion of learning as acquisition as a concept to better understand what buyers learn off the job. Incorporating Sfard's metaphor in this research also incorporates her guiding principles which caution, "too great a devotion to one particular metaphor can lead to theoretical distortions and to undesirable practices" (Sfard, 1998, p. 4). Sfard's caution is taken to mean that although the two metaphors for learning may seem to contrast, they should not conceptually standalone (Davis, 2018). By considering the two metaphors to be, in-part at least, conceptually interconnected, the principles of their use in this research aims to avoid what some consider to be the limitations of, "unfortunate binary" (Cairns & Malloch, 2011, p. 11) comparisons between on and off the job learning. Indeed, my rationale for choosing to follow such logic is furthered by, Guile & Unwin (2019, p. 1) who point out:

> Developing the expertise required to participate in work-related activities engages people in diverse forms of learning in a wide range of spaces throughout their lives. These spaces include workplaces, workshops, classrooms, community and domestic spaces (including forms of transport) and the natural environment, and increasingly through interaction with technologies, including the internet.

Guile & Unwin's words enlighten this research and have shaped my thoughts because they portray and emphasise the expansiveness and interconnected complexity involved in better understanding the relationship between on and off the job learning in the buying occupational context. My aims of identifying and evaluating factors of learning which might inhibit or enhance buyer performance have therefore, sought to encompass notions inclusive of the diversity of education and learning perspectives and activities that can occur both on and off the job and the potential they may have to influence buyer performance.

Of course, by taking this stance acknowledgement is given to the idea that learning is not necessarily independent of social context. I must therefore recognise my engagement with the influence of social learning theories posited by the work of, Marsick & Watkins (1990) who, "initially conceptualised informal and incidental learning in contrast to structured, designed learning in formal settings and workplaces" and proposed, "learning of individuals is integrally connected with and through the social units in which they are embedded" (Marsick & Watkins, 2018, p. 9). And, in particular, with the ideas of Communities of Practice (CoP) posited by Lave & Wenger, (1991) whose influence is well documented in the methodology and findings of this thesis. Yet, the adequacy of communities of practice is not taken wholly and without acknowledging its limitations. For example, the work of, Fenwick, Nerland & Jensen (2012) expands theorisations of social learning and communities of practice to account for sociomaterial perspectives which they claim, "includes tools, technologies, bodies, actions and objects" (2012, p. 6) and:

> helps to avoid putting human actors and human meaning at the centre of practice. It avoids treating material things as mere appendages to human intention and design, or as traces of human culture.
>
> (Fenwick, Nerland & Jensen, 2012, p. 6)

Thus, sociomaterial conceptualisations which go beyond cognitive perspectives of learning are also interwoven into my theorisation of the components of social participatory learning in this research.

Furthermore, I have looked beyond critique associated with what some have described as, "bounded fields of practice" (Fenwick, Nerland & Jensen, 2012, p. 5) and, as demonstrated with my inclusion of the previously discussed tripartite relationship of intellectual capital, I have not eclipsed concepts of the individual at the expense of social theorisations. As the conceptual framework and methodological approach presented in the following pages will demonstrate, steps have been taken to account for individual agency and the legitimacy of the unique learning histories, experiences and biographies (Bloomer, Hodkinson & Billett, 2004) of the participants featured in this research. In so doing, acknowledgement is given to notions that suggest some learners, in this case buyers, may acquire or learn similar or comparable buying KSAOs from knowledge, learning environments and education and training activities found outside of the interdependencies of associated workplace social communities of practice. This is significant because, as I will further explain in the methodology chapter, this research is based on the experiences and perceptions of multiple cases of individual buyers, none of whom are assumed to have achieved their place in the buying world by experiencing or perceiving learning in the same way. As, Bloomer, et al., (2004, p. 37) posit, "each of us can construct a different explanation".

This research therefore, has not aimed to scope and construct a conceptualisation which distinguishes superiority of one component of Sfard's metaphor over the other or can claim to bridge perceived contrasting conceptual gaps between binary comparisons of on and off the job learning and education. Rather, I choose to employ the conceptual orthodoxies of Sfard's metaphor and set them within diverse concepts of learning theory and the tripartite relationship of human, social and organisational capital contexts. In so doing, intent is to facilitate and account for contrasting notions of learning and the shifts in the conceptual thinking between the two metaphors to better understand the research questions.

Three dimensions of pedagogy

Eraut (2001, p. 19) reminds us that, "professional knowledge cannot be categorised in a manner that is independent of how it is learned and how it is used". Though no claims are made asserting the professional status of the buying occupation, Eraut's guidance steered attention to the potential value of including elements within my conceptual framework that could look beyond factors of what buyers learn on and off the job to also account for how buyers learn on and off the job and its relationship to buyer performance. By this, I am referring to the pedagogies of buyer on and off the job learning. To aid the understanding of pedagogy in the context of this study I have turned to a succinct definition given by, Kemmis & Green (2013, p. 111) understood to mean,

> A core of effective and traditional practices of teaching and training that have worked over time. Pedagogies are further embedded in programs and practices as assumptions that influence the design and delivery of teaching and training.

Rationale given here, is not based on examining vocational pedagogy in the buying occupation purely from a teacher-centred or organisational perspective. Indeed, though some buyers do have responsibility for managing others in the buying workplace and for aspects of buyer training and development, all buyers learn, and experience being taught in the process of becoming buyers. Primary intent therefore, was guided by uncovering an appreciation of buying pedagogies as seen from both practitioner/instructor and student perspectives. In so doing, my aim was to reveal additional layers of insight to better understand the research questions.

Kemmis & Green's (2013) definition of pedagogy is helpful in its concision but it shrouds multidimensional complexities which for, Grootenboer, Edwards-Groves & Choy (2017, p. viii), "can mean different things in different cultural contexts". Thus, attention also turned to a sociocultural method of investigating pedagogy, proposed by, Nind, Curtin & Hall (2016) whose work, *Research Methods for Pedagogy* (2016) advances their understanding of pedagogy built on what they describe as, "three key interrelated dimensions of pedagogy" (Nind, Curtin & Hall, 2016, p. 9).

Incorporating the structure of three dimensions of pedagogy resonated with my ideas and needs for this study which envisioned each dimension as a focus for my research protocol and as an investigative tool. As, Curtin & Hall (2018, p. 369) later explain, "Simply put, these interrelated dimensions describe the specified, enacted and experienced features of pedagogical practice". To explain the significance of each element in turn, specified dimensions of buyer pedagogy might conceivably include, stated national, institutional or organisational buying syllabus or, "accepted ways of teaching and learning in a given curriculum domain" (Nind et al., 2016, p. 10). Thinking along such 'specified' lines of enquiry prompted the need to better understand what pedagogies of buyer teaching and learning are or might be specified and what methods of teaching are or might be used in this context.

The interaction between what could be considered specified pedagogy and how it is enacted in the buying context is dependent on the interpretations, agency and actions of others and the dynamics of their circumstances and relationships. In the case of this research, such notions apply to those people who are responsible for enacting buyer on and off the job VET and learning. Here value was found because each participant in this research represents a unique case and might conceivably reflect contrasting views on notions of buyer, "pedagogy as enacted" (Nind et al., 2016, p. 10).

As earlier advanced, every buyer is involved in buyer learning, whether as practioner, instructor or learner. Drawing from buyers' experiences of teaching and training practices therefore stands to provide visibility of how pedagogy is received and, "experienced by the actors involved, particularly by the teachers/mentors/guides and the learners, all of whom are constantly decoding and interpreting what is happening, and how it is happening" (Nind et al., 2016, p. 11).

The three different but interrelated lenses, Nind et al., (2016) recommend and endorsed in this study are not included here or understood as a catch all approach to pedagogy. Rather, I have applied a way of thinking about pedagogic research to the conceptual framework to provide this research with a structured approach possessing the potential to disclose features of the, "Pedagogy at work" (Nind & Lewthwaite, 2017, p. 74) in the buying context and better inform the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer.

Performance

Thinking about the concept of buyer performance, my starting point was to first consider what is meant by performance. For, Folan, Browne & Jagdev (2008, p. 605)

> Performance is a fact of life. In work or in play, indeed in any activity where we input even momentary attention, performance can be felt or, at least, deduced if necessary.

The term performance then would seem to align across widespread multi-disciplinary contexts and link to notions that imply interconnected factors of behaviours, actions, and results that may or may not be perceived in the positive when set against individual or collective goals. Armstrong & Taylor (2014, p. 353) suggest, "performance is defined as behaviour that accomplishes results". Yet, Armstrong & Taylor's (2014) definition though useful, fails to recognise that in the workplace human performance may also interact with non-human elements. As discussed earlier, the prevalence of sociomaterial factors in the workplace mean that, "in the corporate world, people, machines, systems, departments and organisations are required to perform" (Schechner, 2012, p. 34).

Furthermore, the idea that performance can be felt or deduced is an aspect of its nature that implies any definition or measure of performance is subject to analysis and interpretation. The impact of such analysis and interpretation in the workplace context is potentially therefore, not without variability, complications or contestation. As, Billett, in, (Bloomer, Hodkinson & Billett, 2004 p. 25) vividly observed,

> I came to note, for instance, how individuals' performance is greeted in workplaces. Success for some is publicly and generously acknowledged. The success of others is dismissed as being low level, the product of luck or because they are workaholics (e.g. have no other life and are unworthy of recognition for their success). Equally, mistakes by some will be tolerated, even mused over, whereas a similar level of mistake (or even perception of incompetence by others) will be the basis for approbation, ridicule and a reason to exclude from participation.

Billet's words are influential here, because they warn that any attempts to define a generic or predetermined definition of performance for this study would likely be narrow and insufficient. As articulated by, Darwish (2013, p. 3), "there is no consensus amongst Researchers regarding the measurement of organisational performance". Discussion must be given here therefore, to different ways performance can be conceptualised and the connections and variables that may confuse the relationship between buyer performance and learning.

As Grugulis & Stoyanova (2011, p. 517) point out, defining performance is complex and assessing performance value is, "gauged by very different metrics" dependent on the sector and size of organisation. For example, "for organisations in the private sector there are a range of financial ratios including share price, profits turnover, dividend yield and dividend cover" Grugulis & Stoyanova (2011, p. 517). Though some of these financial performance indicators apply to the buying occupation and are also considered important in other workplaces, Truss (2001, p. 1123) contends,

> Generally speaking it is recognised that adopting financial measures as the sole criterion for success is too limited, and a broader perspective should be considered that additionally takes account of success in terms of the customer and employee constituencies along the lines of the balanced scorecard.

The concept of balanced scorecards encompasses broader perspectives of performance. Proposed and developed by Kaplan & Norton (1996); Becker, Huselid & Ulrich (2001); Huselid, Becker & Beatty (2005) conceptualisations of balanced scorecards lay claim to the identification and importance of, "the behaviors, competencies, and mind-set and culture required for workforce success" (Huselid, Becker & Beatty, 2005, p. *inner sleeve*). Thus, I have used the words of Truss and borrowed concepts of performance scorecards as guidance towards attaining broad understandings of buyer competencies, learning cultures and traditions which are identified and discussed throughout this thesis.

Though the evolution of the balanced scorecard concept continues to find popularity, it is not entirely endorsed as a universal approach to performance measurement and management. Indeed, according to, Perkins, Grey & Remmers (2014, p. 148), "there is much confusion in the literature as to what is meant exactly by a "Balanced Scorecard". Yet, acknowledging the potential usefulness of the balanced scorecard approach informs this research because it sheds light on the extent to which different performance variables might be applied in conceptualising what buyer performance might look like. As Fuller, et al., (2004, p. 13) argue, "performance in the workplace typically involves the integration of several different forms of knowledge and skill". In this way, I do not propose that buyer performance is a clear or distinct concept. Rather, as Truss (2001, p. 1146) suggests,

> the notion of what constitutes 'good performance' needs to be disaggregated, and that we need to compare and contrast performance measures at a variety of individual and organisational levels if we are to gain a real insight into what 'performance' means.

Recognition is given therefore, that allows for diverse concepts of what might constitute a high performing buyer and the potentiality for disaggregated concepts of performance in the buying context. To give an example, Lans, Verhees & Verstegen (2016, p. 321) argue, "the ability of individuals to develop relationships is crucial for learning and success in modern 21st-century society". Indeed, learning social competence may well influence individual performance outcomes and is a notable theme identified and explored in the findings of this thesis.

Yet, assumptions linking learning and training to performance outcomes are problematic, (Bryan, 2006; Druskat & Kayes, 2000; Hager, 2000; Grugulis & Stoyanova, 2011; Nikandrou et al., 2008; Soderstrom & Bjork, 2015). In this thesis therefore, acknowledgement is given to debates voiced in the literature which contend learning and learning interventions may not necessarily be the solution to individual and organisational performance. For Soderstrom & Bjork (2015, p. 176) performance, "is often an unreliable index of whether the relatively long-term changes that constitute learning have taken place". A point emphasised by further claims in their integrative review of learning versus performance which submits,

> There now exists overwhelming empirical evidence showing that considerable learning can occur in the absence of any performance gains and, conversely, that substantial changes in performance often fail to translate into corresponding changes in learning.
>
> (Soderstrom & Bjork, 2015, p. 176)

Accordingly, no assumptions are made here that contend, on or off the job learning and training necessarily solve performance issues. Rather, increasing our understanding of the core KSAOs, competencies and performance dynamics in the buying context may help us to, "more constructively, target existing interventions better", Grugulis & Stoyanova (2011, p. 516). Moreover, the links between learning and occupational performance outcomes, though potentially problematic, arguably intensifies the rationale for accommodating the desire to take steps that might better understand why that is so. As Hager (2004, p. 257) recommends,

> Further research is needed to expand our understanding of learning from work and the most appropriate ways of measuring its progress and of enhancing its development.

My aim therefore was to consult buyers themselves to gain their perceptions and experiences of factors that might inhibit or enhance performance in the UK food and grocery buying context through the guidance of my conceptual framework.

To do this, I turned to an integrated component of the conceptual framework that employs a theory of performance attributed to Appelbaum, et al., (2000) and, Boxall & Purcell, (2003; 2016). The AMO theory I refer to is described by Marin-Garcia & Tomas (2016, p. 1076) to be a, "structured framework that provides a better understanding of the relationship between human resource management (HRM) and performance". The AMO theory of performance is denoted as the mathematical equation, P=f (A, M, O) and rooted to the guiding principles outlined below and explained by, Boxall & Purcell (2016, p.155),

> Individuals perform when they have:
>
> - the ability (A) to perform (they *can* do the job because they possess the necessary knowledge, skills and aptitudes);
> - the motivation (M) to perform (they *will* do the job because they want to do it, or they feel that they must do it);
> - the opportunity (O) to perform (their work structure and its environment provide the necessary support and avenues for expression).

The theory posits that individual performance can be positively affected through the presence and effective alignment of all the factors of ability, motivation, and opportunity. Any misalignment or break in the linkage is claimed to hold adverse effects on individual performance. For example, a buyer with the requisite ability (A) to perform and the motivation (M) to perform also requires the necessary opportunity (O) to perform, without which, performance would be adversely affected. Here

I will again return to, Billett, in, (Bloomer, et al., 2004, p. 25) whose words, though contextually different, echo strikingly to the significance of such notions of habitus on performance (Bloomer, et al., 2004) proposed in the example I have given above:

> Those whose participation is limited will be restricted in their opportunities to perform and learn effectively…
>
> It also resonates with some of my personal experience. Opportunities to engage in work activities are not only distributed on objective appraisals of individual worth or value. The enactment of workplace cliques I have observed in public-sector and university workplaces reflects the thuggish behaviour of schoolyard gangs. These affordances shape the ability to engage in activities and access guidance that can extend knowledge and is central to learning and also the acknowledgement of performance.

Of course, the three factors of performance outlined in the AMO framework do not offer a complete list of ingredients to a defining conceptualisation of buyer performance. As Buller & McEvoy (2012, p. 47) critically consider, "AMO is focused primarily on the individual level of analysis and does not explicitly take into account strategy or group and organizational determinants of performance". Nevertheless, as Runhaar, (2017) points out, the AMO concept might usefully be employed to, "categorise different types of stimulating factors" (2017, p. 759) from which an understanding of buyer performance can be derived for the purposes of this study.

I do not claim therefore, AMO framework offers a defining conceptualisation of performance, and I have not used it in this way. Rather, inclusion of the AMO framework is advanced as a conceptualisation relevant to the level of this research. Which is designed to tease out individual perceptions and experiences, rather than organisational perspectives and which provides a structured line of enquiry from which to systematically and thematically explore the topic and variables of buyer performance. As I will later explain in the methodology chapter, the AMO framework has been fundamental in shaping the research protocol. Indeed, theme two (2) of the research protocol *(Appendix. 1)* illustrates how the three lines of inquiry (ability, motivation, and opportunity) were reflected in the semi-structured interview questions devised to prompt participants to think about the relationship between buyer performance and learning and teaching following the AMO framework's guiding principles.

UK food and grocery buyer VET and learning: investigating the literature

I have so far explained the conceptualisations employed in this study and given critical recognition to the relevance and value of their theoretical perspectives in furthering the research aims. In synthesis, the conceptualisations provide a distinctive and unique conceptual framework from which I have established interconnections between the wider literature and research design components, including; fieldwork, specific questions and protocols, data analysis and contextual conclusions. The following pages will now proceed to further locate the contribution this research makes in relation to the corpus of existing knowledge I have linked to the topic of UK grocery buyer VET and learning and performance.

Before presenting my synopsis, I must first return to claims made in the introduction purporting the scarcity of research and published literature concerning the topic of UK food and grocery buyer VET and learning. The origin of this claim was initially founded on perception fuelled by intuition and assumptions based on my twenty-three years' experience as a UK food and grocery buyer and trading manager. To me there was a perceptible absence of related literature, publications and codified core texts available from which to better understand and potentially further my buying KSAOs. At that time, my acquaintance with such avenues of knowledge included organisational learning materials and resources supplemented by trade magazines, general management texts and some legislative guidance required by GSCOP (2009). Though I consider these sources of knowledge to have been valuable contributors to my development as a buyer, I felt my wider understanding of food and grocery buying VET and learning was incomplete and largely unsupported by a comprehensive written body of codified knowledge. My perceptions of a significant gap in this area of buyer related knowledge remained and became a leading influence underpinning the rationale for this research. Of course, conducting this research has provided the opportunity to challenge my own experiential intuition and assumptions which I have been able to balance through obligation and my firm commitment to investigate the existing body of knowledge associated with UK food and grocery buyer VET and learning as part of the research process. Table (2.3) given in the Methodology chapter confers the full scope of enquiry which turned investigation to exploring the following sources of information:

- Academic literature including; books, journals, trade publications and magazines
- UK retail policy reports and publications
- UK Government education policy reports and publications
- UK retail sector related market research reports and publications
- UK retail institutions and research bodies
- UK Chartered Institutes
- UK retailer organisational and corporate learning and training manuals
- UK based training and education providers; training manuals and documentation

These sources of information were accessed primarily via the archives of the University of Huddersfield Library services and their extensive network of electronic data bases. The Google Scholar data base and search facility was also extensively employed and internet access to corporate web pages and some social media provided useful routes to trace sources of literature and information.

I wanted my examination of the topical literature to include the date from which I entered the buying occupation to the date I completed this research. Criteria for inclusion in searching texts and data bases therefore, was date ranged to include sources from 1992 to 2020. A range of keywords and short sentences was employed to search data bases for literature relatable to the topic of UK food and grocery buyer VET and learning. Here, I will note that my search of the literature did have limitations and proved challenging. The word, buyer for example, is a homonym which often returned data searches linked to, buyer[s] as consumer[s] and not in the occupational context required. And, searches containing the abbreviation, VET returned publications connected to unrelated occupations or of a veterinarian context. My method of collection and analysis therefore required considerable trial, patience and manual screening of literature titles, abstracts and keywords to determine relevance to the research topic.

Though positive for my claims of an original contribution to knowledge, my search returned little evidence of a comprehensive or coordinated representation of UK food and grocery buyer VET and learning in the public literature. Indeed, the lack of, "satisfactory published material concerning what retail buyers actually do" was emphasised by Swindley, (1992, p. 533) in his research titled, *Retail buying in the United Kingdom* (1992). Swindley's assertions on the absence of, "adequate textbooks and precious little literature" (1992, p. 533) prompted research which now serves to provide a historic reference point in the form of a study of 150 grocery and apparel buyers conducted in 1989/90. Though Swindley's research scope included apparel buyers it is unusual in that it shares focus with food and grocery buyer participants and provides useful insight on the changes and issues facing UK grocery retail at the time, the roles and responsibilities of buyers and the characteristics and skills perceived of a good buyer. Swindley's (1992) study also provides an early example of what appears to be the precursor to subsequent focus on the research and development of literature and texts predominantly aimed at furthering the knowledge base of retail fashion buying, not food and grocery buying.

The apparent fashion led focus in the literature is largely exemplified in core texts from this sector of buying attributed to, Jackson & Shaw (2000;2001); Varley (2001;2014); Clodfelter (2003;2008;2018); Jacobsen (2009). In fact, my quest to better understand the distinction of available core texts between fashion and food and grocery buying led me to seek personal correspondence and advice with one of the notable educator authors mentioned above, Rosemary Varley in (2018). My enquiry was gratefully rewarded with a candid written response which concluded that much of the available buyer related educational literature is, "often fashion focussed [because] degrees with fashion in the title have tended to recruit well" (R. Varley, personal communication, 2018). The correspondence further explains:

> When I wrote the first edition of the book (published in 2001), retail management and marketing degrees (where buying and merchandising teaching was situated) were a growing

> HE offer (this was in the 1990s). I wrote my book because there really wasn't a comprehensive teaching resource in this area - I had to cobble resources together to teach a cross sector Business and Management module.

This insight was invaluable because it helped in better understanding the apparent absence of food and grocery buying core texts when set against the rise of fashion buying related literature seemingly driven by the popularity and demand for HE provisions of fashion retail education. And, though much of the fashion buying core texts share principles with food and grocery buying, the disciplinary nuances of food and grocery buying that this research seeks to include remains largely unchartered in core text format.

Yet, it is both incorrect and misleading to claim that insight valuable in establishing a better understanding of the research questions cannot be found in the literature. Indeed, Varley's evocative account of "cobbling together" her resources inspired attempts to widen my search from discipline specific core texts, journals and books to cross disciplinary journals and research publications. The disciplines of marketing, business management, supply chain, retail and distribution all provided place holders amongst others where traces of insight useful to the furtherment of this research could be found. Here, I will select a sample of the literatures that have influenced this study to portray a mosaic of contributions that can be found.

I start with, Davies's (1994) study of 125 retail buyers spanning 102 retail businesses which reveals common decision-making practices and contextual factors related to product selection and, "the delisting of products by retail buyers" (1994, p. 473). Like Swindley (1992), Davies's research takes in a combination of buyer participants drawn across buying disciplines including the food and grocery context. His study asserts the power and, "the influence of the retail buyer in consumer markets" (1994, p. 473) and the centrality of the buyer to the success of the retail organisation. A claim later emphasised by, Dobson & Chakrabortly (2008, p. 333) in the wake of then growing scrutiny over what was perceived as, "Buyer power in the UK groceries market". The mantle of which was taken up by GSCOP investigation (2009) and which has resulted in UK buyer related legislation extant to the time of writing this thesis.

Davies builds on the work of Swindley, directly citing the influence of his work and claiming,

> Swindley (1992) provided data on the background of retail buyers that were used to create scales to categorise each buyer on age, experience and education.
>
> (1994, p. 477)

Both, Swindley (1992) and Davies (1994) provide a fascinating depiction of the learning context of the retail buying occupation and to better understanding the research questions by conferring, range management, pricing, negotiation, profit and loss, promotions and merchandising amongst the core foundations of what buyers do and what buyers learn on and off the job. Like this research, their own research methods also factored in the relationship between formal qualifications and on the job experience and buyer performance. Thus providing, historical context behind some of the participant perspectives given in this study regarding the pathways, learning cultures and traditions of buyer VET and learning that will be discussed throughout. Most, notably, notions linking improved performance in the buying occupation to previous on the job learning experiences gained working on the shop floor. As Davies, then Professor in Retailing at Manchester Business School (1994, p. 477-478) explained:

> Experience was assessed using three measures, the number of years as a buyer, the number as a buyer with their current employer and whether they had experience of working in a retail store for more than a year. It was noted in the preliminary interviews that some larger retailers had been employing young graduates as junior buyers and that these graduates often did not appear to have had experience of working in a store. Such buyers may make mistakes in product selection that would be avoided by those with direct experience of what sold well to the retailer's customers and this may lead to different criteria for deselecting products.

Davies's (1994) work is especially evocative when one reflects on his conclusion which includes contestable yet farsighted predictions that posit:

> Retail buying is not a totally analytical role, at least not at present. Retail buying will become more of a science as the new generation of buyers matures but it will remain something of an art, an area for skill as well as analysis.
>
> (Davies, 1994, p. 491)

Given the date of his study this is a perceptive observation which perhaps foretold future impacts of technology on the KSAOs of the contemporary buyer and the potential influence it may have on buyer on and off the job learning and its relationship to performance as a buyer. Indeed, Ulf Johansson (2001; 2002) seized on the prophetic contextual value of both Swindley (1992) and Davies (1994) in his attempts to both unravel and connect the complexities of retail grocery buying processes in a conceptual framework to advance the potential of the then evolutionary enabling interface between, "Information, IT and the retail buying process" (Johansson, 2001, p. 342). At the time, Johansson recognised the internationalisation and globalisation of fast-moving consumable goods (FMCG) and the innovation and change in technological conditions being brought about by electronic data processing and the rise of the internet. In many ways his study arguably marks a point in time where pre-technological insight from the literature of Swindley (1992) and Davies (1994) amongst others, helped shape an electronic process view of the buying occupation and advanced questions posed by Johansson (2001, p. 353) himself, who queried, "does e-tailing only mean selling in another way or does it also entail buying in another way?".

Of course, history reveals much about the direction that the rise in technology and the internet has had on the way UK food and grocery retailers sell their goods. Yet, the intervening years have revealed very little about the way UK food and grocery buyers buy, how they are educated and the relationship between notions of on and off the job learning and their performance. And, though I acknowledge that the scope of this research does not include some fascinating and informative insight that stretches beyond the boundaries of the UK based literature, that relates to the subject of this research in different international contexts. Texts from further fields have been a useful source of enquiry and provided voices which have helped me to consider perspectives of food and grocery buying that link to buyer education and learning through commentary on aspects of; decision making, functions, characteristics, roles and responsibilities, career management, behaviours, codes of practice and performance indicators.

As Lewis & Arnold (2012 p. 452) note, buyers, “often work with, and influence, many areas of the business”. It is perhaps not surprising therefore, that this research, though education focussed, sits amongst cross disciplinary boundaries of past works and contributes to bridging the gaps between what is advanced as a broadly disparate body of literature with a unique study focused on furthering the knowledge of training and education in UK food and grocery buying.

Chapter Three: Methodology

Section 1. Design and methodology

Ontological and epistemological considerations: a critical realist approach

> Organisations and individuals are operating in an increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous (VUCA) environment.
>
> (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, 2015, p. 3)

The research questions seek to understand the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance that exists within the social world of the buyer. In which the, “systematic unpredictability of human affairs” (Scott, 2002, p. 6) meets the contextually shifting socioeconomic backdrop of the VUCA environment, from which retail institutions must operate and buyers must learn. Against such open and complex social conditions, it is difficult to conceive circumstances where the reality of the occupational landscape the buyer must face can be fully apprehended. These prevailing social conditions have had a profound influence on how I have chosen to pursue and answer the research questions. Assessing what counts as meaningful data and evidence of the research field has therefore, required my considered ontological and epistemological stand point, which I will now explain.

I will start with the assertion that this research has not been, a venture into interpretive reductionism or the deductive world of reasoning which might aim to confer new knowledge based on producing generalisable outcomes. Rather, in the context of this research I have followed, a critical realist philosophy that has been employed to tap into the everyday experiences and perceptions of buyers and extends an ontological hand towards the complexity and multi-dimensional depth of the buying occupation and the UK grocery retail environment. And, which questions the possibility of making, “law-like predictions about social and educational matters” (Scott, 2014, p. 35).

That is not to say I have prescribed to overlook or discount what Guba and Lincoln (1989, p. 561) posit as the important, “paradigmatic differences”. To do so would have been a mistake which for example, overlooks the importance of the quantitative political arithmetic traditions (Pring, 2004) of educational research and its sway over educational policy decision making. The effects of which according to Syed and Mingers (2018, p. 671), “are necessary, if not sufficient to help us understand and steer the complex world we now inhabit”. Moreover, and as I will later discuss, quantitative and statistical methods of research and analysis, if not categorical, play an ever-increasing part in the operational, tactical and strategic aspect of buyer and wider retail decision making. I have therefore, remained amenable to the empirical influence of quantitative based evidence to this study and to its relevance and meaning at the educational and occupational level.

Nevertheless, I do not advocate wholesale methodological reliance on what has been described as the naive realism (Maxwell, 2012) of positivist philosophy in this study. This is because I have not sought to identify what works by the separation of facts and values (Tikly, 2015) in search of my aims. Rather, my aims have sought to better understand a research question which puts emphasis on the relational ties and variables between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer that are inherently diverse and multi-dimensional. Which are stratified, non-controllable within the limitations of this study and wide open to, "people's multiple meaning and interpretations" (Mason, 2018, p. 8). Indeed, in answering the research questions, I have turned to the guidance of Piketty (2013) who proposes:

> It is not the purpose of social science research to produce mathematical certainties that can be substitute for open, democratic debate in which all shades of opinion are represented.
>
> (Piketty, 2013, P. 571)

Inevitably then, an element of interpretivist thinking (Frazer & Lacey, 1993) is present in my research philosophy and is necessary as the starting point (Bhaskar, 2016) to tease out buyer's multiple perceptions and experiences as a meaningful source of data associated with the real world of the buyer. As Bhaskar (2016, p. 105) points out, "We must at least know what agents think they are doing and why they are (in their opinion) doing it". However, my ontological amenability to seeking out buyer's perceptions and experiences is not contingent on the traditions of, phenomenological or constructivist world views.

To clarify, a buyer's perceptions and experiences, I have considered, are indeed relative to their individual social worlds and lived experiences. But, if the existence of the VUCA socioeconomic environment is to be believed, the diversity of buyer perceptions and experiences are also surrounded by events and structures, external realities and phenomena which exist and interact independently of their senses or consciousness. Therefore to, "deny the existence of any reality apart from our constructions" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 5) would seem as radical a proposition as naïve realism in the context of this research. Even if we presuppose these potentialities (Fletcher, 2016) or, "generative mechanisms" (Hoddy, 2019, p. 112) are socially constructed, notions of multiple realities of truth, even when reduced to shared cultural or social group solidarity, strains the epistemological validity of any particular interpretive, "vantage point from which to determine the truth-value and criteria for rationality" (Syed & Mingers, 2018, p. 672).

Consequently, my research philosophy is informed by the potential dangers of resting claims of evidence and knowledge on a false dualism (Pring, 2004) and has been reactive to my initial fears of developing a conceptual strategy that would not adequately map and correspond to the multi-dimensional reality of the buying occupation. To which importance has been given to the relevance of engaging with the reality of multiple variables and uncovering data relational to: agency, structures, process, practices, objects, time and space, communities, histories, prior experience, texts, knowledge and opportunity to learn. (Nind, et al, 2016; Hoddy, 2019).

The underpinning philosophy of this research is therefore responsive to critical realist perspectives which, Tikly (2015, p. 238) conceptually locates, “in contrast to both the ‘naive realism’ of empiricists and the relativism of interpretivists”. Referred to by (Fletcher, 2016, p. 182) as, “a scientific alternative” critical realism is based on assumptions which claim the foundations of science are questionable (Robson, 2011) and that, “there can be more than one scientifically correct way of understanding reality in terms of conceptual schemes” (Lakoff, 1987, p. 265).

Opting for a critical realist position in this study should not however, be viewed as a conceptual sidestep which seeks a theoretical middle ground. To the contrary, I have been motivated to devise and deploy a systematic, empirical research design unique to this study, inspired by pluralist notions that engage in the “potential to build on the strengths whilst avoiding the pitfalls of both empiricism and interpretivism” (Tikly, 2015, p. 238). I do so by, advocating a design scheme, that supports my aims by maximising access to meaningful data sources to capture and reveal as much insight of the reality of the buying world as possible (within the confines of the study) from which to inform the research questions. And, in conjunction with a conceptual framework to empirically structure and thematically assess what is found.

In so doing, I have aimed to moderate my own value judgments and biases as the researcher and a susceptibility from my previous occupational background which predisposes me to be guided by a personal impatience of going looking for pragmatic practical solutions to work based problems. I will now identify and later discuss the buyers’ propensity to favour a pragmatic approach in the workplace and to advocate what works for the individual, the group or what might serve to get the job done in the course of their occupational duties. However, in positioning the conceptual underpinnings and conduct of this study I have not followed the pragmatic argument. My logic rests on my distinction of purpose to better understand, and a critical apprehension of the pursuit of ‘what works’ which does not necessarily get to the nature of epistemology.

Paradoxically, in answering the research questions the findings of this study may indeed provide insight which might yield a practical bearing to the buying occupation. Or warrant further investigation, which might arguably, be better suited to alternative research paradigms. But I will argue that any such outcomes would be because of following a critical realist philosophy which first aimed to take steps towards a better understanding of reality not as a fix for practicality.

The consequences and benefits of these conceptual guiding principles for the methodology, field methods and data analysis I have thus employed I will now go on to introduce and explain.

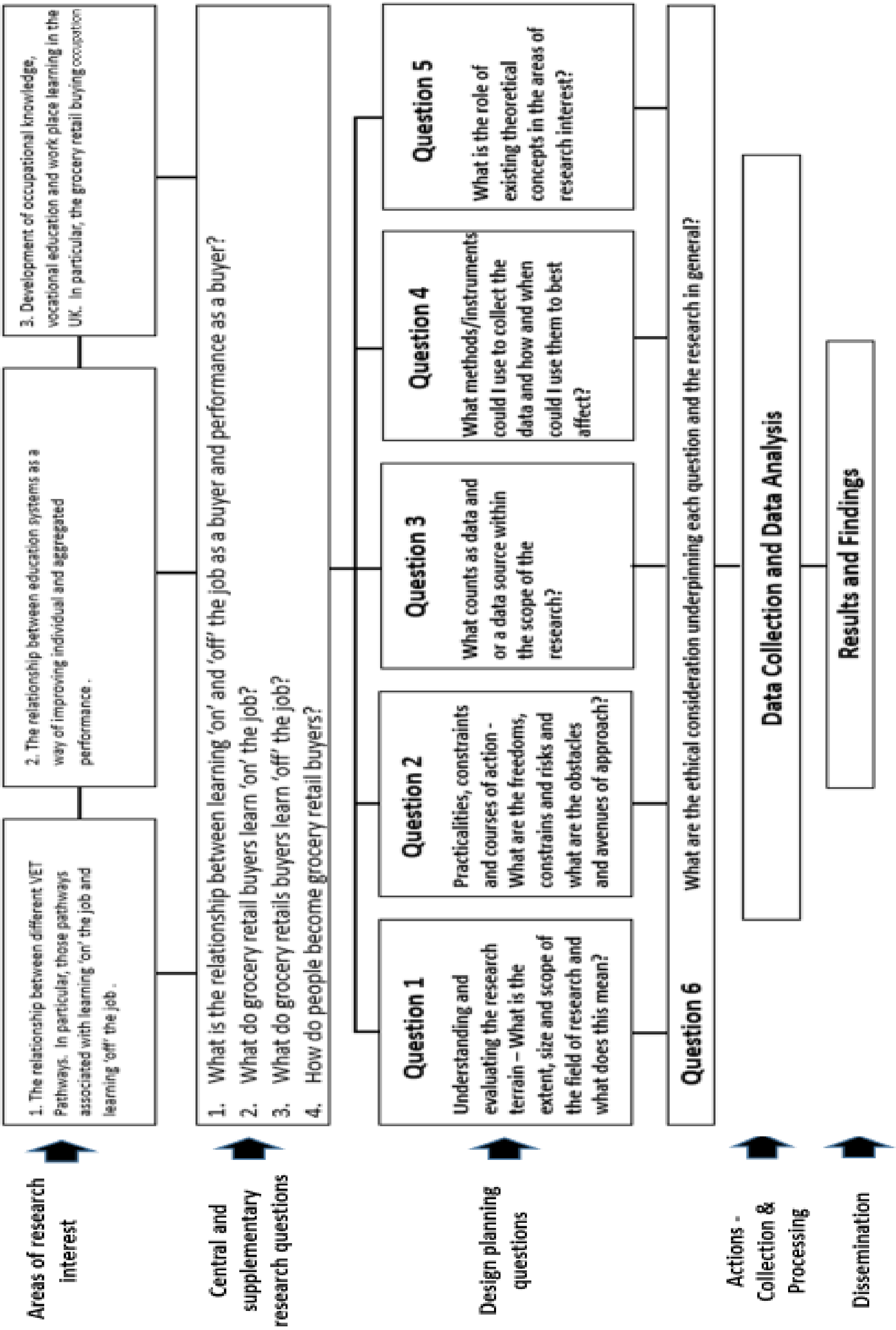
The estimate, planning and practical considerations

My approach to answering the research questions and devising the practical courses of action taken in this study was developed from a preliminary planning strategy which first involved conducting a detailed appreciation and formal planning estimate of the research terrain. This involved the thorough appraisal of a set of planning questions which when answered provided intelligence which informed my decision-making process and helped determine the courses of action and events required to accomplish systematic, ethical and conceptually balanced research. The question set used for the planning estimate in the conduct of this research owes much to the guidance of Mason, (2018) and is given below.

1. Understanding and evaluating the research terrain: what is the extent, size and scope of the field of research and what does this mean?
2. Practicalities, constraints and courses of action: what are the freedoms, constrains and risks and what are the obstacles and avenues of approach?
3. What counts as data and or a data source within the scope of the research?
4. What methods/instruments could I use to collect and analyse the data and how and when could I use them to best affect?
5. What is the role of existing theoretical concepts in the areas of research interest?
    - Could I build a systematic approach using a conceptual framework that draws from and builds upon existing theory that is relational to the broad areas of educational research interest?
    - Would a systematic approach and conceptual framework assist in substantiating the quality of the methodology?
    - Would a systematic approach and conceptual framework link to effective data coding and analysis?
6. What are the ethical considerations underpinning each question and the research in general?

Though presented numerically answering the questions was not a sequential process. In practice, the questions were found to be overlapping and interrelated. By that I mean, it was necessary to consider different questions simultaneously. As a solitary researcher bound by the constraints of a 'single pair of hands' I found this to be a complex, iterative and time intensive challenge to overcome. The ideal scenario I envisaged would have involved the simultaneous examination of each question by a research team contributing concurrently with information being drawn together centrally from which to formulate the concept of my research operation. To help provide enhanced visibility of the overlapping and interrelated considerations encountered, I devised a planning and estimate model, illustrated by (Fig. 1.2) to act as a visual aide memoire throughout the conduct of the research. This Was employed to lay emphasis on interrelated relationships and underline the unifying purpose between the estimate planning questions, research questions and the identified broad areas of research interest. Strength lies in such an approach because my estimations and courses of actions were reached in sight of wider considerations and informed trade-offs rather than approaching each question in isolation.

Fig. 1.2. Planning and estimate model



To further aid estimation, judgement, and the decision-making process a simply designed, three-column format analytical tool was employed. Developed and widely used by Staff Officers and Commanders responsible for planning activities in the UK Armed Forces, it is a tool I have previously drawn upon during several periods of military service, as a practical technique and aid to problem solving. Its strength lies in facilitating a process of systematic consideration and recording of key factors, constraints, evaluation and deduction. To explain and put simply: in answering a question or factor, an initial deduction is made, this is known as the, so what analysis. At that juncture, a task or action is considered in relation to any identified constraints. These are recorded and appropriate, considered choices and actions are taken forward.

Table 1.5. Three-column format

Question/Factor	**Deduction (so what analysis)**	**Task/Constraint/Clarification /Product/Output**
(a)	**(b)**	**(c)**

To summarise, the estimate planning process including the questions, tools and aide-mémoire outlined has underpinned my efforts to apply a systematic and practical approach and has contributed to the formation of the courses of action taken throughout this research and which I will now go on to discuss in detail.

The research terrain: Scope and scale, a concentrated field of research

I have previously introduced the socioeconomic and national geographical scale of the UK grocery retail sector. To emphasise this further, data obtained from the Inter-Departmental Business Register (IDBR) reveals, “The known retail industry population is approximately 200,000 businesses” (ONS, 2018) with food and grocery retailing widely recognised to be, “by far the largest sector within the UK retail economy” (Jones, Hillier & Comfort, 2014, p. 130-138). The extent of the research field provided the challenge of narrowing down and setting an operationally scalable and academically meaningful research scope and sampling strategy which was manageable for the single researcher with limited time and resources. Despite the large number of retail businesses operating in the UK, closer investigation revealed the contextual setting of food and grocery sales to be, “extremely concentrated” Jones, Hillier & Comfort, 2014, p. 130). So much so, and as the table below indicates: nine of the UK’s largest grocery retailers are estimated to account for 95.3% of all UK grocery retail sales, of which just four of these, namely, Tesco, J Sainsbury, Asda and Morrisons share 68.5% market share by sales value.

Table 1.6. UK Grocery Market Share 12 Weeks ending 12.08.2018 (Kantar World Panel, 2018)

UK Grocery Retailer	Grocery Market Share by (£) Value
Tesco	27.4%
J Sainsbury	15.5%
Asda	15.2%
Morrisons	10.4%
Aldi	7.6%
Co-Operative	6.6%
Lidl	5.5%
Waitrose	5.0%
Iceland	2.1%
Independents	1.8%
Other Outlets	1.8%
Ocado	1.1%

It must be noted that this data represents a snapshot of the UK food and grocery market at the given period and does not reflect the historical and statistical ebb and flow of a competitive and dynamic market that in recent times has seen the rise of European based discounters Aldi and Lidl and the emerging prospect of a joint corporate merger between J Sainsbury and Asda. Moreover, it is an example, typical of commercially available market research data which can be found to vary dependent on the commercial provider and the research methods and analysis used. Nevertheless, market data of this sort is used extensively by retailers, analysts and commentators as guidance to grocery retail market performance. Accordingly, this data provided a valuable marker in guiding the study towards an appropriate contextual setting by identifying the largest UK grocery retailers and illustrating the concentrated nature of the environment. Yet, pursuing efforts to access further market research data from which to yield greater exactness of scope based on these measures proved to be constrained as commercial data of this type is expensive and generally, not freely available. Attention therefore, turned to making a comparative analysis against an exemplar of existing methodological practice set against similar sampling parameters given to designated retailers within the scope of UK Government's, Groceries (Supply Chain Practices) Market Investigation Order 2009 (GSCOP).

> Any Retailer with a turnover exceeding £1 billion with respect to the retail supply of Groceries in the United Kingdom, and which is designated in writing as a Designated Retailer by the OFT.
>
> (The Groceries (Supply Chain Practices) Market Investigation Order 2009 p. 5)

Table 1.7. Designated Retailers GSCOP (2009)

Designated Retailers (The Groceries (Supply Chain Practices) Market Investigation Order 2009, p. 17)
Asda Stores Limited, a subsidiary of Wal-Mart Stores Inc
Co-Operative Group Limited
Marks & Spencer plc
Wm Morrison Supermarkets plc
J Sainsbury plc
Tesco plc
Waitrose Limited, a subsidiary of John Lewis plc
Aldi Stores Limited
Iceland Foods Limited, a subsidiary of the Big Food Group
Lidl UK GmbH

In justification of applying my intuition in taking this methodological stance, I acknowledge Denzin & Lincoln, (2013, p. 185) and would contend that this particular, “paradigmatic case transcends any rule-based criteria” and could therefore be considered, “Prototypical”. Nevertheless, and as can be observed, there is a close correlation evident between the ten largest UK retailers defined by GSCOP (2009) and those retailers featured in the commercial market share data (2018) given in table (1.6). Notably, both data sets use variations of Sterling turnover measures that contextualise the retail grocery setting by economic size and scale. The strength of applying Sterling turnover as a key component of scope was therefore identified as a core measure allied to reasoning which equates levels of grocery buying activity with economic measures that are representative of the critical mass of grocery sales in the UK. Furthermore, comparing the GSCOP (2009) data with market share data from 2018 binds this study to a particular timeframe. Thus, giving a window into a period of time which uncovered wider, “sets of goings on” (Mason, 2018, p. 54) in UK grocery retailing. This additional contextual reasoning supported the decision made to narrow the boundary of the research field specifically to the GSCOP (2009) scope of designated retailers (Table 1.7).

Further contextual explanation is given by identifying the inclusion of Ocado in the 2018 market share data. Ocado’s presence signifies the emergence of online grocery retailing over the period and offsets the historical backdrop of dominance by a small number of retailers and points to shifts in the future trajectory of UK grocery retailing. Ocado’s success has prompted consultations by the UK Government investigating the feasibility of extending the remit of GSCOP (2009). However, at the time of writing, Ocado remains outside of the GSCOP (2009) remit and therefore sits outside the scope of this research. This is crucial, because inclusion in this research scope was given to those UK grocery retailers bound to GSCOP (2009) to reflect a logic that also accounts for the context of regulatory legislation on retail and grocery buyer best practice, VET and occupational performance over the period. This then, provided the population of retailers within the research environment from which to determine the sampling strategy I will now discuss.

Factors driving strategic sampling

> Accounts of real phenomena, including the sample in research, are weak constructions. The best we can say of these is that they raise consciousness about social objects we seek to interpret and explain.
>
> Emmel, (2013, P. 6)

Even allowing for the contracted boundaries of the research scope, the generation of a fully representative sample of the, “total empirical population” (Mason, 2018, p. 60) of the research field was unachievable and moreover, it was never the aim. Scale, time, resources and enumerable variables from which to tie measures and judgements of representativeness with categorical certainty was always a constraint that countered any realistic attempts to, “satisfy statistical requirements for randomness” (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 178). The inductive led aims of the research question therefore, was always intended to, ‘better understand’ the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Hence, no claims are made to confer generalisable outcomes.

In this context, preference was given to crafting a purposively selective based sampling strategy. Built on a logic of generating insight that would balance the needs for simplicity, manageability and credibility by providing an illustrative and sufficiently evocative depiction of the, “distinctive elements in the character” (Mason, 2018, p. 60) of the grocery buying occupation and its social and cultural setting. Discounting systematic approaches led me to an information-orientated selection criterion conceived on principles which according to Denzin and Lincoln (2013, p. 182) aims to, “maximise the utility of information from small samples and single cases” and which was in part, informed by a combination of personal judgement, occupational knowledge and enriched by the methodological literature. I have already argued for the value of my experiential knowledge in the context of this study and indeed, my working familiarity of the research field proved to be as Yin (2015, p. 106) contends, a pathway to, “multiple sources of evidence” and which is posited by, Galletta & Cross (2013, p. 12) to be beneficial to, “understanding of the research context”. Allied to this, my thinking was further strengthened by, Trafford & Leshem (2008, p. 198). In particular, by inspiring my consideration of data samples in, “different forms and held by different respondents who were in different locations”. Thinking in these broader, layered terms linked the sample strategy to the national geographic scale and VUCA environment of the buying occupation and helped to counterbalance critical concerns resonant with what, Tight (2017, p. 389) describes as, “going beyond the familiar” boundaries associated with selective and convenience methods of sampling. This then, formed the guidelines for what is advanced to be a purposively selected, multi-participant case study sample which I will now confer further detail.

The UK grocery buyer as the unit of analysis: defining participant characteristics

> Any unit of investigation in which persons were involved could only be understood if the perspectives of those (and the interaction of those perspectives) were taken into account.
>
> (Pring, 2000, p. 40).

Pring's claims given above provides reason I consider central to the social context of this study and advanced as critical reasoning to establishing a better understanding of the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. It is the educational perceptions, experiences and leading opinions of UK grocery buyers themselves that have been gained from their own practical interactions which primarily inform this study. Strength here is found in the buyers' own capacity to gain knowledge, learn and reflect on their own understandings, motivations, performances and those of others which have informed this study with insight depicting, why and how people become grocery buyers and what and how grocery buyers learn on and off the job. The participating UK retail grocery buyers which form part of this sampling strategy are therefore given as the unit of analysis of this research, each having given informed consent to participate in a semi-structured interview and research questionnaire. *(Appendix. 2 and 3)*

Without the luxury of an accurate sample size or a ubiquitous data framework from which to generalise or formulate strata for participant definition and selection, steps were taken to first mitigate critical concepts of researcher bias. This was achieved by, "looking at group characteristics rather than individual traits" (Verschuren, 2003, p. 11) and by adopting principles that according to Cresswell (2009, p. 127), "illustrates sub groups and facilitates comparisons". The aim being to foster representations of subjectivity, objectivity and replicability rather than to errand convenience as the solitary criterion and thereby addressing critical disquiet which, according to Maxwell (2012, p. 94), "exposes your conclusions to serious validity threats".

Accordingly, two categories and separate classifications were chosen to collectively define the group characteristics of UK grocery buyers for the purposes of this study:

- Category (a) Primary buyer.

The Primary Buyer is representative of selected participants with group characteristics as defined by the UK Competition Commissions, Groceries (Supply Chain Practices) Market Investigation Order (2009)

> “***Primary Buyer*** means, in relation to any individual Supplier, the employee or employees within a Retailer’s Buying Team who are responsible from time to time for the day-to-day buying functions of the Retailer in respect of that individual Supplier”
> (GSCOP, 2009, p. 4).

In relation to the research questions, this category provided a sample from which buyer on and off the job education training and learning as understood, experienced and perceived from a current or recent learner’s perspective.

- Category (b) Senior buyer.

The senior buyer is distinguishable from the primary buyer by managerial responsibility. This category of participant is therefore representative of selected participants with group characteristics as defined by the UK Competition Commissions, Groceries (Supply Chain Practices) Market Investigation Order (2009)

> **“Senior Buyer means**, in relation to any individual Supplier, an employee or employees within a Retailer’s Buying Team who manage the Primary Buyer or Primary Buyers for that Supplier (or is otherwise at a higher level than the Primary Buyer(s) within the management structure of the Retailer)”.
> (GSCOP, 2009, p. 4).

In relation to the research question, this category provided data from which buyer on and off the job education, training and learning as understood, experienced and perceived from a past learner and managers perspective.

A further category was created to provide insight from those participants with group characteristics associated with the UK grocery supplier base and associated retail sector.

Category (c) Retail supplier or associate.

Participants selected within this category are defined with group characteristics associated

> **“Supplier** means any person carrying on (or actively seeking to carry on) a business in the direct supply to any Retailer of Groceries for resale in the United Kingdom, and includes any such person established anywhere in the world, but excludes any person who is part of the same group of interconnected bodies corporate (as defined in section 129(2) of the Act) as the Retailer to which it supplies” (GSCOP, 2009, p. 2).

This category provided data from which buyer on and off the job education, training and learning as understood, experienced and perceived from a retail supplier or associate perspective.

Overlaying organisational variance, time and location: refining the selection criteria

Further to the conditions set out above, additional contextual depth was added which reflected consideration of the relationship between participant characteristics, organisational variance, location and time. Accordingly, the following additional criteria for sampling selection was applied:

- All participants selected in category (A) and (B) must have fulfilled the role of Primary Buyer and or Senior Buyer in one or more UK retailer as designated by GSCOP (2009) at any time between 04th August 2009 and 18th August 2018.

Designated retailer means:

> "any Retailer with a turnover exceeding £1 billion with respect to the retail supply of Groceries in the United Kingdom, and which is designated in writing as a Designated Retailer by the OFT" (GSCOP, 2009, p. 5) (See Table 1.7)

- All participants selected in Category (C) must have fulfilled an equivalent role to participants in categories (A) and (B) at any time between 2009 and 2018.
- Any participant meeting the above criteria with additional retail buying experience gained with any retailer outside of the GSCOP (2009) designated retailer definition will not be excluded from participation.

Accessing and selecting participants: personal messaging methods

As Smith (2006, p. 648) points out, "it is generally accepted that trying to gain access to research groups is a problematic aspect of many social research projects". My previous occupational experience as a buyer therefore provided a promising means of identifying and accessing potentially suitable research participants. Accordingly, a total of thirty-five (35) former colleagues and associates were identified from my personal network of retail industry contacts. The initial objective was to contact individuals based on the group characteristic selection criteria, to introduce the research background and gauge levels of receptiveness to participate in semi-structured interviews and biographical questionnaires as part of the study. I will later discuss, my positionality in problematising the social dynamics of my previous occupational relationships with the eventual research participants. But at this stage, the potential benefit of accessing a sizeable network of industry contacts, although promising, offered no assurance of attaining enough interest in participation. Therefore, a communication strategy was implemented to offset the would-be problems associated with what West (2017, p. 551) has described as, "competing and multiple demands on participant time". Thus, a combination of predominantly Linked-In social networking and SMS text messaging was used to initiate contact. Employing a brief introductory message in this informal way short cut the prospect of communication potentially encountering mountainous in trays and becoming lost in pages of work-related E-mail messages. Furthermore, this method reflected my decision to appeal to participants as private individuals in favour of using a more formal, organisationally focussed approach that emphasised their occupational role or position. The added benefit of using this personal messaging strategy meant that communication was not time or location bound and significant merits were observed.

First, the response rate was high, twenty-seven (27) electronic replies were received from respondents declaring a positive intent to participate and only eight (8) communications did not receive a reply. The high response rate enhanced my confidence in accessing enough participants from the potential research population to conduct the study. Second, all the responses were timely and received within one week of my initial communication. Thus, generating impetus and momentum at the start of my fieldwork which in effect, became the call to action across other operational activities connected with the research design and planning. Third, replies from respondents featured feedback which proved valuable in gauging levels of interest in the study. Of note was the evident readiness of respondents to promptly schedule diary dates to participate which added a crucial level of assurance in my assessment of the overall operational viability at the early stages of the research.

Table (1.8) below shows the results obtained by utilising predominantly personal messaging methods to access and initiate communication with the potential participants in this study.

Table 1.8. Multi-communicative messaging methods

Contact method	**Linked-In message**	**Text message**	**E-Mail message**	**Total**
Number of contacts made	27	7	1	35
Number of responses received with positive intent to participate	19	7	1	27
Number of non-responses	8	0	0	8
% effectiveness	70%	100%	100%	77%

Leveraging on the messaging functionality of the Linked-In social networking platform and the value of internet connectivity provided an effective methodological contribution. Above all, by providing an invaluable avenue of approach to the target population whom might otherwise have proved difficult to trace and contact by different means. It was evident that Internet connectivity was wedded to the respondents' use of mobile communication devices and in part, a primary factor I have attributed to the promptness of their responses. Some of which were received at times well outside of more traditional ideas of the working day and proved to be a noteworthy influence of this type of technology on the operation of this research. Principally because as the researcher, I found myself tied to the rhythm and movements of the respondents, the influence of their social locations and that of their mobile electronic devices. All these factors required a flexible responsiveness on my behalf in order not to disrupt their routines and my potential route to obtaining their participation. Consequently, this added an extra methodological dimension to time management considerations and the researcher/participant power relationship which I had not considered fully at earlier planning stages. And, which I submit is reflective of what Saukko (2018, p. 261) claims to be, “the increasing prominence of new technologies, which mediate everyday lives, the global economy and research itself”. Ultimately, by adapting the rhythm of my research to account for what I perceive to be the emergence of a technological-human body clock relationship I was able to secure a safe passage to participation and the primary data necessary to conduct this research.

Purposive Sample Planner (PSP)

In contrast to the usefulness I have attributed to the advances in communicative technology, a simply designed Purposive Sample Planner (PSP) was devised to record all respondent replies and relevant information *(Appendix. 4).* Respondents’ names, group characteristics, date of response and relevant comments relating to how closely respondents were assessed to have matched the guidelines for participation were recorded. Selecting samples in this way incorporated factors of importance advanced by Yin (2009, p. 26) who advocates choosing cases, “that will most likely illuminate your research questions”. Furthermore, the PSP served as the principle working document used to schedule, track and record progress made with each respondent towards active participation in the research. The table below shows the summary data extracted from the PSP.

Table 1.9. Summary data extract from Purposive Sample Planner (PSP)

Group category	**Group characteristics**	**Number of initial respondents**	**Number of initial respondents progressing to participate in the research**
(A)	Primary buyer	8	5
(B)	Senior buyer	10	6
(C)	Retail supplier or associate	9	2
Total		27	13

As can be seen a total of thirteen (13) respondents were chosen to participate in the research from the initial twenty-seven (27) respondents. This initial cut identified five (5) respondents with primary buyer group characteristics, six (6) with senior buyer group characteristics and two (2) retail supplier or associate group characteristics. Further follow up conversations revealed that several of the respondents shared a combination of group characteristics. This was especially prevalent in the senior buyer group where career progression is a contributing factor to dual characteristics. The decision to cap the number of participants to thirteen at this stage of the research and set against the given configuration of group characteristics was connected to operational matters. In particular, to first estimating the levels of workload and amount of time required to conduct the necessary fieldwork, transcription and analysis. A pilot study was planned and conducted from which a more accurate operational assessment was made, and which provided the platform and intelligence to firm up the operational planning, timetable and commence a better-informed approach to the fieldwork. I will later discuss operational matters relating to fieldwork, data collection and analysis however, my attention here remains on further explanation of the composition of the thirteen (13) chosen participants which I position to be representative of a unique, purposively selected, multi participant, case study.

A unique multi-participant, case study approach: defining the sample

The proposition of a multi-participant, case study approach might give rise to methodological interrogation which suggests, had I defined and selected this sample another way the findings of this research, "might be significantly different" (Tight, 2018, p. 390). Moderation is offered against notions of a restrictively bounded methodological design strategy because I have so far set out rationale to better understanding the research questions by drawing from a sample of purposively selected participants matched to a typical set of, a priori group characteristics from the scoped population of UK retailers. No claim is made to suggest the participants featured in this research can be considered typical of the UK grocery buyer. Rather, the participants in this research are a unique multi-participant cluster of similar cases that provides, "an in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness" (Schwandt & Gates, 2018, p. 343) of a comparable set of research questions. The aim being to follow the importance of choosing cases, "that will most likely illuminate your research questions" (Yin, 2009, p. 26) and in so doing take steps to account for perspectives, experiences and context reflective of multiple locations and sites within the UK grocery buying environment. This research should therefore be considered bound to the uniqueness and construct of the chosen sample which is illustrated by the table below.

Table 2.0. A unique multi-participant, case study approach

Participant	Primary Buyer	Senior Buyer	Retail Supplier or Associate	Top 10 UK Grocery Retailers (GSCOP over £1 Billion Turnover)										Other UK and International Grocery Retailers - Non GSCOP							
				Morrisons	Asda	J Sainsbury	Tesco	Cooperative	Iceland	Aldi	Lidl	Marks & Spencer	Waitrose	Poundland	Booths	Shop Direct	Budgens	Jacksons	Shell	Netto	Woolworths
Number 1																					
Number 2																					
Number 3																					
Number 4																					
Number 5																					
Number 6																					
Number 7																					
Number 8																					
Number 9																					
Number 10																					
Number 11																					
Number 12																					
Number 13																					

To explain, the shaded areas within the table maps each participant to the previously defined group characteristics. Furthermore, the table illustrates the individual and collective multi-organisational extent from which questions of, how people become grocery buyers and what grocery buyers learn on and off the job and have been explored. The table also provides supplementary information which reflects participant experience gained from other UK and international grocery retailers which sit outside of the GSCOP (2009) research scope. This is important because, in attempts to answer the research questions these organisational variables will, in some circumstances have either implicitly or tacitly influenced the construct of participant perspectives and experiences.

Furthermore, several variances can be observed from my initial attempts to define the sample using the PSP and shown in table (1.9). First, there are seven (7) participants whose experience bridges both primary buyer and senior buyer group characteristics. This reflects career transition and progression variables present between group characteristics. Second, there are two (2) participants with retail supplier or associate group characteristics combined with primary buyer group characteristics. This reflects career transition variables between group characteristics.

The diversity amongst individual and organisational variables evident in table (2.0) sits comfortably with this research because it was expected. As Scott (2014, p. 34) points out, "social reality then, it is argued has ontological depth". However, responsiveness to individual, organisational and social variables has not been overlooked and is reflected in the philosophy of the conceptual framework which frames the research design methods and data analysis previously discussed in chapter 2. And, though I make no claims that the conceptual framework transcends every conceivable interacting variable between the research questions and the participants, its inclusion and role has stimulated action towards teasing out individual, organisational and social interrelations contextual to this research.

Purposive sampling and researcher participant relationships

By making a sampling choice that leverages on my previous occupational contacts, further social interrelations between, "complex dimensions of the researcher/participant relationship" (Newton, 2017, p. 93) are also brought into focus. No rationale made for purposive sampling in the context of this study would therefore be sufficient, without disclosing how well I know the selected population of participants and evaluating what the impact of these relationships might mean to the generation of meaningful data. The nuances and subtleties of my interpersonal relationship with each participant are unique and therefore a non-replicable entity. Nevertheless, I identified general characteristics which when categorised and taken together represent the essence of the researcher/participant relationships on which the data was obtained. A summary is provided in table (2.1) overleaf, in which the shaded areas correspond to assessed researcher/participant relationship characteristics. An accompanying definition for each characteristic is given below:

Researcher/participant relationship characteristics.

Former colleague: This term is given in box (b) to denote my association with participants who are a former colleague and employee of Wm Morrisons Supermarkets Plc between 1992 and 2014.

Junior: This term is given in box (c) to signify the formality of my relationship to those participants assessed to be junior to my previous occupational standing.

Peer: This term is given in box (d) to signify the formality of my research relationship to those participants assessed to be equal to my previous occupational standing.

Senior: This term is given in box (e) to signify the formality of my research relationship to participants assessed to be senior to my previous occupational standing.

Time known: This term is given in box (f) to signify familiarity by the approximate length of time the participant has been known to me in an occupational or non-occupational capacity until March 2014.

Previous contact: This term is given in box (g) to signify familiarity by the approximate lapse in time between the last previous verbal, non-verbal or written communication with participants prior to initial invitation to participate in this research.

Table 2.1. Characteristics of the researcher/participant relationship

To prioritise the strictest ethical standards and to mitigate the risks of any breach of participant anonymity table (2.1) is prearranged not to correlate with table (2.0).

(a)	(b)	(c)	(d)	(e)	(f)	(g)
	Researcher/Participant relationship characteristics					
Participant	**Former colleague**	**Junior**	**Peer**	**Senior**	**Time known**	**Time since previous contact**
1.					22 years	2 years
2.					0 years	0 years
3.					6 years	3 years
4.					6 years	4 years
5.					5 years	6 months
6.					7 years	1 year
7.					22 years	1 year
8.					10 years	3 years
9.					20 years	3 years
10.					22 years	6 months
11.					5 years	4 years
12.					20 years	6 months
13.					15 years	1 year

Except for participant two (2), it is evident that all participants were former colleagues and known to me prior to the commencement of this study. The formality of each of my relationships with participants can be assessed from the hierarchy categorisation given to junior, peer and senior participants in table (2.1). An even spread of participants was selected to span the occupational hierarchy as an effective way to, "disrupt the widely accepted 'powerful/powerless' dichotomy of the researcher-participant relationship" (Smith, 2006, p. 648) and to stretch the applicability of the data in this study beyond reliance on the social dynamics of singular type-cast researcher/participant relationships (e.g. elite or senior participants). Thus, the data gained in this study benefits from multi-dimensional perspectives which extends across varying occupational levels, experience and competence. Familiarity and the enduring nature of my relationships with each participant can be gauged by the time I have known the participant, but also by the time passed since my last previous contact with each participant. Notably, in most cases (11 of the 13) a minimum of one year has passed since the last personal contact in the interim period prior to participation in this research (2017). Over familiarity is therefore not considered to be a general characteristic of the researcher/participant relationships in this study.

Identifying both the formality and familiarity of my relationship with each of the participants, primarily reflects a picture of former work-related relationships which must be considered historical in context and time bound to the specific period in 2014 when I exited the buying occupation. Hence, the data given in table (2.1), does not account for changing circumstances, shifts in identity and occupational transitions relatable to either myself as a former buyer and research student or that applicable to each of the participants in the interim period. I have problematised my positionality in this respect and provide a reflexive appraisal of the applicability to this study within the data analysis and findings chapter. Accordingly, I will now move on by submitting a general declaration and summary of my positionality and the foundations of the researcher/participant relationships on which the primary data is based.

Declaring my positionality

My positionality was consistently presented to each participant and is summarised to be:

That of a former buyer and ex colleague with a shifting identity and status as a research student. An independent person with insider knowledge and experience of the occupational field being researched, free from corporate ties and not an insider of the UK grocery retail sector or buying occupation. As I observed, conveying transparency in my status and positionality as a research student helped neutralise notions of previous occupational power I may or may not have held with each participant. Furthermore, declaring my positionality to participants added an element of ethical integrity to my intent within the, aims of the study which lessened intuitive participant suspicions of, “friend, foe, ally or something else” (Stybel & Peabody, 2005, p. 13) that might otherwise have undermined or overstated notions of trust as a basis for each of the relationships. The standing of my previous occupational background coupled with my association to my sponsor academic institution and the prevailing ethical codes of conduct which, I will discuss in the following pages, certainly enhanced the feelings I experienced of mutual respect, ideas of proficiency and credibility within each of the relationships. My declared positionality set the tone for each research relationship to be built on foundations of shared trust and credibility, mutual respect and transparency. Moreover, this tone set the conditions for friendly, active and collaborative relationships throughout the data collection process and beyond.

Section 2. Ethics

Guiding principles

Despite the foundations on which I have built my depiction of the researcher/participant relationships, I make no attempt to portray ideas of a utopian research project free from the need to enact voluntary and regulatory ethical codes of conduct. Indeed, safeguarding the ethical framework and code of conduct has been paramount to the integrity and validity of this study. Accordingly, every stage of this research has been informed by, and followed ethical principles and codes of practice required by the British Educational Research Association's (BERA) Ethical Guidelines for Educational Research (2016) and has adhered with obligations placed upon all researchers to comply fully with the Research Ethics and Integrity Policy (2016;2019) of the University of Huddersfield. Furthermore, adherence to the regulatory requirements of the Data Protection Act (1998;2018) has been followed. Additionally, formal institutional ethical scrutiny and evaluation of this research was initially conducted by the University of Huddersfield Ethical Committee (January 2017) and subsequently overseen at formal progress review points (June 2017) and (June 2018) and through dialogs at regular supervisory level meetings (2017 to 2020).

Allied to the ethical protocols, I have set out above, every care was taken to provide continuous overt transparency with all stakeholders throughout the research process. To underpin this transparency, a written research brief accompanied an informed consent form and was issued to all participants in advance of taking part *(Appendix. 2)*. Thus, providing a document giving full declaration of the nature and purpose of the research and registering the, "ethical substance" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018, p. 90) reinforcing participant rights, and assurances of confidentiality and anonymity. In essence, issuing the foundation from which each participant could voluntarily decide if they wished to give informed consent to participate. Furthermore, a verbal brief was also given to each participant directly prior to taking part in semi-structured interviews and survey questionnaire, this included a recap on the research brief, opportunity to ask any questions and reassurance that they were free to decide not to participate or withdraw at any time without prejudice. An example of a participant informed consent form can be found at *(Appendix. 2).* At every stage therefore, non-consequentialist principles have been incorporated and upheld in respect to participant and organisational confidentiality and anonymity which observe and apply principlist ethical values designed to ensure that, "consent must be freely given and potential participants should not be subject to any encouragement or (coercion) to take part such as that arising from payment for participation or power relations between participant and researcher" (Wiles, 2012, p. 15).

Exceeding conventional ethical safeguards

In-line with the world-view of the critical realist methodology I do not claim that this research is value-free or prescribe to any single ethical paradigm. Rather, this research is built on an ethical approach that has sought to exceed, "conventional safeguards" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 120) but has also made allowances for what Barber (2011, p. 11) describes as, "doubts about the reach of moral reasoning" and, for making ethical based judgements and decisions which corresponds to the social reality of the UK grocery buying occupation and the contextual and conceptual background previously portrayed.

The inclusion in this research of the socioethical discourse that dissects notions of human capital provides a case in point of my inclination to apply opposing moral reasoning between those who, "do not shy away from using the term, investing in human capital to describe the process of improving the quality of the labour force" (Becker, 1993, p. xix) and those who, "have expressed outrage regarding this hyper capitalist influence" (Cannella & Lincoln, 2018, p. 87). Indeed, the opportunity to evaluate broad conceptual and individual based assumptions and biases in seeking to answer the research questions for the moral good arguably portrays Kantian ethical perspectives that can be found at the very core of my personal values and standards which are underpinned by notions of, a sense of duty and of moral courage.

My ethical approach has in-part therefore, been influenced by deontological sympathies that, for example, drives my openness to be explicit about my previous grocery retail buying experience, my positionality as a student researcher and my encouragement of reflexivity to inform the research questions as a tool to generate new knowledge. I am therefore allied to notions which argue any form of ethical deception, "sometimes considered justifiable in positivism in order to control human variables might be confounding, if the purpose of the inquirer is to uncover realities as they are constructed" (Guba & Lincoln, 1989, p. 137).

Given the socio-economic landscape of this study, perhaps the assertions of Kant (1785) best captures the philosophy of the underpinning ethical framework this research aims to emulate in search of its objectives,

> Act in such a way that you always treat humanity, whether in your own person or in the person of any other, never simply as a means, but always at the same time as an end
>
> (Kant, 1785, in Cottingham, 2011, p. 512).

Ethical Planning

Table (2.2) given below features ethical planning questions, considerations and mitigations which further aided the ethical management of this research. For the purposes of the table, reference is made to me as the, 'researcher'.

Table 2.2. Ethical planning considerations

Ethical questions and considerations	Mitigation
Independence and impartiality: • As the researcher I am a former UK retail grocery buyer, and ex colleague known to most participants.	• This research is completely independent of any UK retail Institutional or financial sponsorship. Research benefit and enhanced ethical and academic rigour is argued on account of: o Reduction of the influence associated with organisational bias. • The researcher does not and has not worked for any UK grocery retail organisation since March 2014 and is thereby independent of any institutional or managerial influence over any of the participants. Research benefit and enhanced ethical and academic rigour is argued on account of: o Reduction of the influence associated with power relations. o Enhancement of openness of response to research questions which may otherwise not occur if the researcher was a research 'insider'. o Enhanced levels of trust, credibility and rapport with participants. o Enhanced levels of research objectivity. • Pilot trial of the participants' willingness to voluntarily partake and contribute to the research. Correspondence obtained responses from twenty-seven (27) potential participants willing to partake in the research pending informed consent. • The researcher has a shared knowledge, understanding of the research topic and the language associated with the UK grocery retail buying occupation. Research benefit and

	enhanced ethical and academic rigour is argued on account of: o Enhanced levels of design and evaluative written and verbal communication within the context of the research. • The researcher has not received any pay or reward from any participants or organisations whilst undertaking specific research tasks. • The researcher has not offered any financial or non-financial incentives throughout the duration of this research.
Anonymity and confidentiality: • Confidentiality and security of personal data. • Confidentiality, anonymity, security of sensitive individual or corporate data. • Potential for data, analysis and findings to be commercially exploitable?	• All participants were free to partake and withdraw at any time without prejudice under the engagement of informed consent and received documented and written briefs throughout each stage of the research. • There has been no requirement for the use or publication of participant or third-party names in this research. All participants have been anonymised and no names of any participants will be published unless specifically agreed using informed consent. • No data relating to the names, or personal details of any participant or third party has been used or stored for any other purposes outside of the scope this research. • This thesis has been completely anonymised in respect of all the research participants. • Throughout the duration of this research the researcher has undertaken systematic reviews of all data in order to scrutinise and evaluate for any data which may be considered personally or corporately/institutionally sensitive, derogatory or harmful. • This research has only used corporate or organisational data available in the public domain. • The objectives of this research are clearly stated. The researcher declares that he does not have any associated or personal commercial or conflicts of interest.

Active ethical response particular to this study

The dependence of working within the ethical guidelines and planning framework submitted was critical in mitigating significant ethical dilemmas which may have adversely affected this research and, in this respect considered to have been a successful outcome. Yet, it was not possible to identify and mitigate against every ethical eventuality with prior planning. To provide the most notable example; whilst conducting semi-structured interviews, my active ethical reaction was frequently required in response to intentional or unintentional reference to, or identification of, persons known to both myself as researcher and the participant. In some cases, reference and identification was also made to persons not previously known to me. This situation was initially identified at the pilot stage of this study and therefore demanded the extension of ethical obligations to apply to those mutually known associates and third parties mentioned but unable to give informed consent or contribute their perspectives.

This meant, the following action was taken:

- All transcriptions of semi-structured interview recordings were transcribed personally and in full by me to mitigate the emergence of intentional or unintentional identification.
- All transcriptions have been anonymised to remove any identification of mutual associates or third parties.
- Sound recordings of all semi-structured interviews have been removed from any personal or University IT systems and securely stored on data memory sticks, encrypted with password protection and stored securely.
- No data, reference or identification of a mutual associate or third party not directly involved in this study has been used in this thesis.

Given the safeguards put in place, I was content with my decision to neither encourage nor discourage reference to, or identification of others by participants in semi-structured interviews. Raised awareness of this issue at an early stage was helpful in actively managing what is advanced to be measured, non-consequentialist responses to this type of ethical circumstance throughout the research. I have since reflected and conclude to note; the emergence of this situation within a research setting where the researcher participant/relationship is bonded by mutual associates within the occupational field should not be considered an ethical anomaly. Rather, and as experienced in this research, it is likely to be an expectation.

Section 3. Data generation, collection and recording procedures

Principles

The previous pages have emphasised the precedence given to generating primary data from the perceptions, experiences and attitudes of buyers as a means of evidence from which to answer the research questions. For the purposes of this research, primary data is defined to mean, "data that are collected for the specific research problem at hand" (Hox & Boeije, 2005, p. 593). Investigation has however, sought to derive insight beyond primary data and participant interpretations to include additional supplementary material from which the multi-dimensional real world of the buyer can be interpreted and inferred. Table (2.3) below, is given to summarise the extent and scope of the primary data set and supplementary material investigated and used in answering the research questions.

Table 2.3. Data generation and collection methods

Type of primary data or supplementary material	Data generation/material collection method	Summary of primary data and supplementary material generated or gathered

Primary data	**In depth semi-structured interview.**	• A total of thirteen (13) in depth semi-structured interviews with individual buyers, senior buyers and buying associates were conducted. See (Table 2.0)
		• All semi-structured interviews were conducted solely by the researcher.
		• All semi-structured interviews were conducted between 18th July 2017 and 20th March 2018. See (Table 2.4)
		• Semi-structured interviews were conducted at a variety of locations and settings including:
		  o The University of Huddersfield.
		  o Retail organisation corporate offices.
		  o Coffee outlets. See (Table 2.4)
		• Twelve (12) semi-structured interviews were conducted face to face.
		• One semi-structured interview was conducted by telephone.
		• The total number of semi-structured interviews collectively generated 785 minutes (13.01 hours) of audio recordings. The longest interview was 1 hour 39 minutes duration and the shortest 27 minutes duration. The average length of time for each interview was 60.38 minutes (1 hour) duration. See (Appendix. 5)

		• Fully transcribed the total amount of recorded/verbal data produced approximately 117,000 written words. See (Appendix. 5) • All semi-structured interviews were conducted using guiding principles derived from a research protocol and question set designed to correspond with research themes identified in the conceptual framework. See (Appendix. 1) and (Fig. 1.0)
Supplementary material	**Field notes.**	• For the purposes of this research, field notes mean, written notes collected and recorded in a notebook format in proximity to the surroundings used to conduct the semi-structured interviews. For example; o The University of Huddersfield. o Retail organisation corporate offices. o Coffee outlets. See (Table 2.4) • The role field notes play in this research was to provide a record of observational settings, environment, personal feelings, participant behaviours, etc. In this context, written field notes do not constitute raw or primary data for the purposes of this study. Rather, written field notes have been used here as a supplementary material from which to better understand the research setting and to potentially inform, develop and test later analysis and interpretation of findings.
Primary data	**Multi-choice research survey: biographical and attitudinal questionnaire.**	• Participants were given a research survey questionnaire upon completion of semi-structured interview. • The question set comprised of fifteen (15) questions designed to obtain biographical and attitudinal data and insight. See (Appendix. 3)
Primary data	**Email and Linked-In correspondence.**	• Throughout this research, correspondence with academics, authors and retail practitioners has been recorded and where appropriate consent has been sought for inclusion in support of this research.
Supplementary material	**Researcher work based experiential knowledge base.**	• See Methodology Chapter.
Supplementary material	**UK retail policy reports and publications.**	• Of particular note is: The groceries (supply chain practices) market investigation order 2009. GSCOP (2009). • See references for further sources used.
Supplementary material	**UK Government education policy**	• Of particular note is: UK Post-16 Skills Plan (2016) • See references for further sources used.

	reports and publications.	
Supplementary material	**Academic literature, texts, journals and publications.**	• See references for full listings of all sources used in this research.
Supplementary material	**UK retail sector related market data reports and publications.**	• Of particular note is: IGD UK Retail Market Report (2018) • See references for further sources used.
Supplementary material	**UK retailer organisational and corporate learning and training manuals, documentation and buying role profiles.**	• Obtained from corporate and organisational websites, written documentation and publications. • See references for sources used.
Supplementary material	**UK based training and education providers: training manuals, documentation and publications.**	• Obtained from corporate and organisational websites, written documentation and publications. • Of particular note is: GAP Partnership. (GAP Negotiation Course material) • See references for further sources used.
Supplementary material	**Personal contact information.**	• 13 participants were identified, contacted and agreed to participate drawn from personal contact information held by the researcher. • See purposive planner (Appendix. 4)

The ethnographic self

Generating and collecting data using the multiple methods, data sources and additional supplementary material tabled above provided the means from which to answer the research questions and better understand the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Caution is offered here that guards against suggesting these means are fully comprehensive or infallible. Rather, the methods, data sources and supplementary material used should be regarded as the lens from which this research picture comes into focus.

Of course, alternative options were considered for their merits. In particular, the Ethnographic tradition through which observation and participation within the research setting can play a part in, "getting close to the reality of the social phenomena" (Robson, 2011, p. 145). However, Coffey (1999) speaks of the Ethnographer as the stranger, distant or remote from the social environment being observed. And, though no longer an insider within the buying occupation, I am certainly no stranger to the research field. Throughout my former buying career, I gained extensive first-hand experience of buying culture, language and the environmental setting through my own personal participation and observation of on and off the job learning within the retail buying field. This observational and participatory experience I have identified with my former, “Ethnographic self” (Coffey, 1999) and an important characteristic of my overall experiential knowledge of the research field.

As can be seen from table (2.3), the value of my occupational background and experiential knowledge has been counted as a meaningful resource from which I have harnessed to interpret and structure the data collected. Therefore, before proceeding to discuss the various data sources, supplementary material and methods that feature in this research a brief explanation in advancement of my experiential knowledge must be given.

Experiential knowledge

I have drawn on an ontological perspective inclusive of my experiential knowledge as a complimentary rather than subjective feature of this research. Which distinguishes its functionality in a guiding and intermediary capacity attuned to the social world of the buying occupation and as, Creswell (2009, p. 9) might argue to be, “grounded in direct acquaintance with the settings, people and phenomena” that are the subjects of this study. In so doing, acknowledgement is given to those who might critically probe the epistemological credibility of practitioner-based knowledge and inquiry which Schön (1991) identifies with the, “familiar dichotomy between the ‘hard’ knowledge of science and scholarship and the ‘soft’ knowledge of artistry and unvarnished opinion” (Schön, 1991, p. viii). Such estimation contests the legitimacy of knowledge that is debatably, “subjective and therefore suspect because it is not seen as being as credible or prestigious as the literature” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 87).

My intention therefore, was not to argue the infallibility of my own occupational experience and situated knowledge of buying nor claim that my role as researcher is totally objective or value-free. Indeed, my intent put trust in the sceptical words of, Hume (1748) who proclaimed, “The best expedient to prevent this confusion is to be modest in our pretentions” (Hume, 2008, p. 23). Indeed, distinguishing this wisdom has served to, keep my ego in check (Seidman, 2013) heighten my consciousness of such reasoning and boosted my critical self-control and reflexivity over what some might label as, “unorganised experiential knowledge” (Eraut, 2001, p. 75). My experiential knowledge is therefore advanced as a tool which provides an awareness of what might otherwise prove to be unverifiable complex factors, knowledge and theories situated in the largely uncharted and uncodified context of the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Additionally, my experiential knowledge has contributed to the identification and selection of relatable concepts and features in the design of this research and has been used to connect and facilitate other experiential perceptions, experiences and sources of buyer knowledge and data.

Furthermore, the essence of this research actively responds to the research questions but also to appreciable calls on retail practitioners and academic institutions to embrace the potential benefits of enriched inter-disciplinary cooperation in the future development of occupational knowledge in the retail sector (Blackley, Resnick & Cassidy, 2017). To do this requires perspectives, perceptions and experiences from multiple angles, including that of my own. Recognition then, is given to the potential of fostering inter-disciplinary cooperation practical in spanning the boundaries between those concerned with addressing academic and scientific rigour and those concerned with better understanding and improving day to day occupational practice. As a result, my experiential knowledge is given a meaningful status in support of what is positioned to be progressive, empirical research with both academic and practical relevance and appeal. My occupational knowledge and experiential voice are therefore positioned to, speak to rather than, speak for all those buyers, retail practitioners, academic and scientific institutions concerned with an interest in the future development of buyer VET and learning.

Generating primary data through semi-structured Interviews

As a reminder, Chapter two previously introduced components of the conceptual framework that link this research to existing theories. Figure 1.0, also found in Chapter two, illustrates how utilising the conceptual framework has provided a functional theoretical tool from which to empirically investigate, through semi-structured interviews, the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Here, I do not imply that the chosen theories accumulated in the conceptual framework to guide this study can account for all intervening variables that may confuse the complex relationship between buyer on and off the job learning and performance. Indeed, the conceptual framework used in this study, though unique and therefore developmental in design, has sought to provide conceptual cohesion between existing theory and the design and conduct of semi-structured interviews. In-turn, my aim has been to yield empirically derived descriptive inferences through the words of participants which may make connections between prior theory and data. As King, Keohane & Verba (1994 p. 23) point out, “In practice any data-collection effort requires some degree of theory, just as formulating any theory requires some data”.

Accordingly, efforts have been made to conduct a systematic study that anchored buyers’ perceptions and experiences to theoretically informed themes chosen as the lens from which to investigate the research questions. Here I am again grateful to, King, et al., (1994, p. 29) who submit, “no empirical investigation can be successful without theory to guide it’s choice of questions”. The chosen themes in this study therefore theoretically underpins the semi-structured interview protocol *(Appendix. 1)* and established the foundations for obtaining descriptive inference of the connections between on and off the job learning and performance as a buyer from participants that have led to subsequent thematic analysis outlined in Section 4 Data analysis.

In shaping this aspect of the research design, I refrained from mechanically converting (Maxwell, 2012) the central research question into a rigid set of interview questions. Choosing instead to promote the generation of buyers' own perceptions and experiences of buyer on and off the job learning and performance in a way that would allow the participants to speak and the research to unfold. Brinkman (2014, p. 286) contends,

> Compared to structured interviews, semi-structured interviews can make better use of the knowledge-producing potentials of dialogues by allowing much more leeway for following up on whatever angles are deemed by the interviewee.

Conducting semi-structured interviews therefore enabled me to take up a well-ordered, conversational style posture with the participants. This was important because I wanted to avoid verbatim formality as an interview technique in favour of encouraging participants to relax, speak freely and confidently and in so doing enjoy their experience. As Bertaux, (1981, p. 39) points out, "if given a chance to talk freely, people appear to know a lot about what is going on".

Building an informal but controlled form of rapport with participants required a flexibility in approach which meant the conduct of the interviews became individualised events, responsive to the characteristics of the participant and the specific research setting but, at the same time, implicitly following the themed agenda of the semi-structured interview protocol. Table (2.4) given in the following pages serves to record the specific setting, date and duration of each interview. This avenue of enquiry required what Yin (2015, p. 143) describes as, "intense levels of listening" and concerted levels of personal engagement towards participant responses. Audio recordings of each interview were made as the primary method of capturing original data, "by preserving the words of the participants" (Seidman, 2013, p. 117) for later transcription, thus aiding accuracy and transparency of the participant's spoken words. Additionally, the use of the mentioned semi-structured interview protocol also served as a practical strategy devised to overcome the problem, which will now be discussed.

Semi-structured interview protocol

By using the research protocol *(Appendix. 1)* as a visual aide-memoire I was better able to take notes, track progress and prompt and guide the participant's responses and my own actions closely to the theoretical themes that inform the research question. Below, an explanation of the aims and the themes are given which were used to tease out insight and data to better understand the connection between learning on and off the job and performance as a buyer, and required participants to:

Theme 1. Think about themselves and reconstruct the origins of their career, their learning trajectories and the factors they associated with their transition to becoming a buyer.

My aim was to tease out primary data situational to learning in their buying community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 2002) and not to ignore factors of the social process of buyer learning and the impacts on the participant's changing identity and occupational status.

Importantly, by speaking first about themselves in this context, I found this generated impetus and rhythm early in the interview which naturally led in to the other themes.

Theme 2. Think about the relationship between buying performance and learning and teaching.

Here the P=F (A, M, O) model was employed to create sub-themes and questions to contextualise participant's learning and notions of performance to the factors of ability, motivation and opportunity.

Theme 3. Think about how participants might depict buyer learning and VET contextualised to notions of on and off the job learning.

Here a combined questioning approach was employed which drew from notions of learning as participation and acquisition (Sfard, 1998), human capital notions of Individual, organisational and social learning (The Tripartite Relationship) and aimed to tease out data from buyers relative to the KSAOs of buyers (Ployhart & Moliterno, 2011).

Theme 4. Think about the pedagogy of buyer teaching and learning.

Turning here to a question protocol informed by theoretical notions of the 3 Dimensions of Pedagogy (Nind, et al, 2016), questioning aimed to tease out the interactions, relationships and methods of teaching used in the buying occupation and investigation followed a line of enquiry linked to concepts of pedagogy as experienced, specified and enacted.

The benefits of a repertoire of possibilities

The adaptability of the semi-structured interview in combination with the theoretically themed protocol meant steps could be taken to interactively vary the choice of theme and question interchangeably in conjunction with the natural ebb and flow of each interview. In this study, semi-structured interviews delivered what Galletta & Cross, (2013, p. 24) described as the benefits of a, "repertoire of possibilities". For example, the semi-structured interview enabled me to select, a range of introductory, open, direct, probing, structuring or linguistic forms of questioning advocated in qualitative interviews by (Kvale & Brinkman, 2009). Or to adjust my verbal phrasing and adapt questions dependent on the direction of the participant's views rather than steering their thoughts with explicit or inflexible questions. This resulted in the emergence of both related and sometimes unrelated data, insight and themes with a multi-layered depth of meaning and perspective. Furthermore, where time allowed I was content to encourage the participant to expand their views and where time was pressing I was able to exercise a more concentrated approach.

The role of time within an adaptable structure

Although the first semi-structured interview required eighty-three (83) minutes to complete, results of the pilot study revealed one hour to be enough allocation of time for conducting each interview. Indeed, the average completion time of each interview was approximately sixty (60) minutes duration. However, table (2.4) overleaf, illustrates the range of occasions when the duration of interviews varied and benefited from the advantages of operating an adaptable interview protocol. It was noticeable that time became more of a constraint in the instances where interviews were conducted in the workplace of the participant and, more noticeably by telephone. Certainly, the constraints of an organisational room booking system cut short one interview with participant 8, Rob to just thirty-three (33) minutes. However, flexing the interview protocol enabled me to emerge with respectable levels of data to justify my travels. Furthermore, a pre-planned allocation of time to conduct each interview was important because buyers are busy people. Thus, from the outset the intent was to be courteous and respectful of their willingness to participate by enabling them to plan their time effectively and with confidence. A factor I felt would lead to setting the conditions of credibility, trust and respect I wanted the data to reflect. Also, from an operational perspective, the pilot study revealed that a one-hour interview typically generated approximately twelve (12) hours of transcription work and created 10,000 words of data text for analysis. This level of research activity and time constraint required factoring into the overall research design and planning and helped to control the scalability of the study.

Table 2.4. Semi- structured interviews: date, location and duration

Participant Number	Participant Name	Date of Interview	Place of Interview	Duration of Interview (Minutes)
1.	Tom	18 July 2017	University of Huddersfield	83
2.	John	24 July 2017	University of Huddersfield	59
3.	Simon	02 August 2017	Workplace Location	40
4.	Edward	07 August 2017	University of Huddersfield	84
5.	Rebecca	15 August 2017	University of Huddersfield	45
6.	Steven	17 August 2017	Workplace Location	64
7.	Jacob	18 August 2017	University of Huddersfield	99

8.	Rob	23 August 2017	Workplace Location	33
9.	Joe	25 August 2017	University of Huddersfield	84
10.	Paul	05 September 2017	Participant's Home	60
11.	Kate	13 September 2017	Workplace Location	41
12.	Josh	23 February 2018	Telephone Interview	27
13.	Patrick	20 March 2018	Starbuck's Coffee Shop	66

Enthusiasm, reciprocity, and mischief: features of interviewing buyers

Whilst conducting interviews I repeatedly experienced a personal connection with the participants and their responses on a subjective and occupational level. Undoubtedly, my own personal depth of engagement was further encouraged by the conversational nature of semi-structured interviews which frequently stirred my desire to offer personal responses to participants. In my role as researcher and interviewer, consciously keeping my enthusiasm in check to maintain active listening and at the same time not to reveal personal biases or reinforce participant responses took much self-control. Here I cannot deny or hide what a review of the interview audio-recordings or transcriptions will reveal; that my familiarity and enthusiasm for the research topic occasionally clashed with a lapse in my concentration, my emerging levels of proficiency and experience as a new researcher, or perhaps, my natural disposition to be a human being.

If this aspect of the researcher/participant relationship is considered to be a threat to the quality and meaningfulness of the data in this study I will offer mitigation in declaring that this was a factor I identified early. In so doing, I was able to consciously apply principles of reflexivity both, 'in action' and 'on action' (Schön, 1991) as a feature of all the interviews conducted. Taking field notes prompted or reminded me of instances I identified 'in action' and notably, my post interview actions included, identifying instances of any unintended over exuberance on my account as part of the transcription and analysis process. Subsequently, and as the following pages identify, I was able to identify and sift out data of contentious origins as part of the data analysis process.

No attempt has been made to declare that all my responses to participants within the interview process of this study were concealed or value-free. To have done so would have been counterproductive by potentially damaging equity and reciprocity towards the participants. Especially in this study where I was typically exposed to participants who, as buyers or retail executives, are commonly, "accustomed to being in charge of situations in which they find themselves" (Seidman, 2013, p. 108). I was therefore attentive to instances where it was necessary to exchange views with participants or where I was skilfully, and, I have reflected enough to conclude, sometimes mischievously drawn into expressing my own views by those participants who appeared to relish their occupational status and intellectual engagement on the topic. I was content therefore to allow myself a controlled level of reciprocity whilst generating data in this way. Furthermore, and in offering a more modest mitigation, my previous formal negotiation training received as part of my former buying role instilled an alertness to this type of interaction and enabled me to limit my responsiveness to those instances.

Preliminaries credibility, and essential formality

In contrast to the measured informality of conducting semi-structured interviews, I erred on the side of structured formality (Seidman, 2013) in respect of the preliminary actions immediately prior to collecting data in this way. Before commencing a semi-structured interview and to "safeguard the position of the interviewees" (Wengraf, 2001, p. 184) a set process was followed. This process was formatted in an Interview Aide-Memoire document *(Appendix. 6)* which accompanied each interview. Observing a formal process helped set a professional tone that enhanced the credibility and status of the research project and set the conditions for meaningful engagement in the interviews.

The following actions were taken:

1. Welcome and thank the interviewee for their participation.
2. Give fire safety brief and health and safety brief (appropriate to location).
3. Explain and define the purpose of the research (referral was given to the informed consent form). *(Appendix. 2)*
4. Explain the type and format of the interview and accompanying questionnaire.
5. Explain the high ethical standards applied to the interview and the research in general including:
    a. The protection of the participant's rights.
    b. Any participant comments would not be altered or decontextualized.
    c. Assurance was given on confidentiality and anonymity.
    d. Assurance was given on the compliance to public data protection policy and compliance to the University ethical standards for research.
6. Explain that the interview will be recorded to aid the accuracy of the data.
7. Obtain the participant's signature on the provided informed consent form. *(Appendix. 2)*

Generating primary data: biographical and attitudinal research survey

As a reminder, the unit of analysis of this study is the individual participants. Generating biographical data therefore, was a way of adding a layer of inferential primary data with the potential to tell a story about the uniqueness and distinctiveness of each of their individual cases or, indicate potential links to explore between them. Accordingly, I devised a standardised research survey to capture data relational to each participant's gender, age group, years of occupational experience, occupational status and highest level of educational qualification, alongside attitudinal multi-choice questions relating directly to the research topic. Each participant completed the research survey on conclusion of their semi-structured interview. In the case of the telephone interview the research survey was completed by postal correspondence. As a guide to later analysis and findings, outlined overleaf in table (2.5) is the biographical profile of each participant.

Table 2.5. Participant biographical profiles

Participant Number	Participant Name	Gender	Age Group	Experience (Years)	Highest Level of Occupational Status	Highest Level of Academic or Vocational Qualification
1.	Tom	Male	55-59	35	Category Director	MBA
2.	John	Male	40-44	20	Senior buyer	1st Degree
3.	Simon	Male	30-34	8	Senior buyer	1st Degree
4.	Edward	Male	50-59	40	Group Director	A Levels
5.	Rebecca	Female	50-54	30	Category Director	1st Degree
6.	Steven	Male	50-54	25	Senior buyer	O Levels
7.	Jacob	Male	45-49	25	Category Director	1st Degree
8.	Rob	Male	30-34	10	Senior Buyer	1st Degree
9.	Joe	Male	55-59	35	Group Director	MA Cambridge
10.	Paul	Male	45-49	10	Buyer	O Levels
11.	Kate	Female	40-44	20	Strategic Director	1st Degree
12.	Josh	Male	25-29	2	Trainee Buyer	1st Degree
13.	Patrick	Male	55-59	35	Group Director	O Levels

Collecting and analysing supplementary material

So far, distinction has been made between the notions of generating (Mason, 2018) primary sources of data specifically for the purposes of this study and collecting and analysing further sources of supplementary material. The motives behind collecting the multiple sources of additional material identified in table (2.3) for this study were threefold.

Firstly, to make use of the available data bases, organisational archives, publications, public records, reports and existing literature to contextualise the social background and setting within which the primary data generated for this study is situated. The Grocery Suppliers Code of Practice (GSCOP, 2009) exemplifies one such source of UK Government policy that plays a practical rather than epistemological role in this study. So too, UK grocery retailer annual reports, the variety of grocery market reports and data sources referenced from research analysts such as IGD and Kantar WorldPanel and from trade body sources like the British Retail Consortium (BRC).

Second, to identify, aspects of presumed knowledge to explore and, "learn what is already known and what remains to be learned" (Johnston, 2017, p. 70). As already revealed, the known public and academic literature on this research topic is scarce. So, collection and reference to additional material has served to underline the opportunity for this study to contribute to widening the public knowledge base of buyer VET. Moreover, the supplementary material collected, referenced and used in the conduct of this study have been a fundamental research material that has helped to inform and, "Illuminate blind spots" (Wagner 2010, p. 33) in my personal understanding of buyer on and off the job learning and performance and in my approach to answering the research questions.

Third, as an additional means to inform, "overall assessment of findings" (Robson, 2011, p. 358). As (Hox & Bieije, 2005, p. 593) point out, the generation of new primary data adds, "to the existing store of social knowledge". Exploring the potential inconsistencies or links between primary data and the supplementary material used in this study therefore assists in providing a better understanding of the research question through corroboration between the two and offers a starting point from which to gauge and now discuss notions of validity and reliability of the primary data used in this study.

Validity and reliability

In generating and collecting an extensive data set I devised an approach that has aimed to provide a conceptual best fit for yielding answers to the research questions but at the same time uphold notions of best practice in establishing trust, validity and reliability of the data used. According to Robson (2011, p. 159), "there is no fool proof way of guaranteeing validity". Indeed, Onwuegbuzie & Leech (2007) point to what they pose as the oxymoron of binding objective validity with qualitative research. Here, I must reiterate that better understanding the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer, "does not depend on the existence of some absolute truth" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 133). Rather, the output of this research is dependant, on the accumulated multiple perceptions and experiences of participants, any of which, in principle, provide 'a version' not necessarily 'the version' of reality. To borrow from (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018, p. 130), "Taking this approach could we say that there is no such thing as invalidity of data or method if someone can find it to be an accurate reflection of their interpretation of reality?". Therefore, no further attempts will be made to extend the contentions and debate surrounding the validity of specific data methods used in this study. Instead, attention now turns on the importance given to countering threats to the trustworthiness of data that using such methods produce.

In so doing, emphasise is given to the principles of rigour, auditability and transparency to the design and conduct of this study. To which I am indebted to the insight derived from Onwuegbuzie and Leech's (2007) Qualitative Legitimation Model and additionally to Maxwell's (2012) overlapping typology of descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity which have been referenced to guide my way of thinking about the potential threats to validity and as means to better establish the trust, integrity and credibility of the data used in this study.

Descriptive, interpretive and theoretical validity: an overlapping concept

Control measures to mitigate threats of descriptive validity included ensuring all primary data generated from semi-structured interviews were audio recorded, precisely transcribed and represented verbatim in the text of this thesis. Transparency is provided by way of an extensive electronically stored inventory of all individual audio recordings which ties to a corresponding catalogue of transcribed texts. It is acknowledged that stored audio recordings and verbatim transcriptions can only provide partial representation of primary data which omits tonal features of participant's speech, visual cues associated with body language, environmental factors and the social dynamics between researcher and participant. However, I have previously discussed my attentiveness and responsiveness to these factors and will later debate the role of reflexivity in detail as part of the data analysis chapter. Furthermore, primary, data gathered from research survey questionnaires was also indexed prior to data analysis and no information was altered or presented to mislead or misrepresent. Supplementary material and references have been used in line with the relevance of the research questions or contextually to fit the prevailing subject within the study.

I have not intentionally distorted or misrepresented the descriptive content or context of the dataset. My role as researcher has been to facilitate the multiple but ultimately dominant voices of the participants. Unavoidably therefore, I am a willing and legitimate co-constructor in the interpretation of the knowledge generated in this study (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018). A posture so far argued to be aligned to the ontological position of generating knowledge through interactions with the participants and the experiential and occupational background of my former 'ethnographic self'. The latter of which has played a crucial role in comprehending, interpreting and explaining the language used by participants in articulating their own variety of perceptions and experiences and the settings in which they and their statements are situated.

For example, whilst conducting interviews, transcription and data analysis I was able to understand instances where certain words or terms were used to describe features of the buying world which could be interpreted to have dual meaning. In the following except from a semi-structured interview with participant 2, John, a senior buyer uses the term, "*working the fixtures"*.

> Well, those anecdotes would help form an opinion but, there is no substitute for actually going in to your own store or stores and '***working the fixtures'.***
>
> (John)

I can interpret John's use of this term to refer to: the physical placement of grocery products on to the supermarket shelf. Typically, this is a manual task store staff carry out in line with a set of paper based or electronic merchandising plans and principles generated to guide the correct placement of goods for replenishment and display purposes.

Explanation of this term is emphasised because understanding its descriptive interpretation within the buying context also helped to identify a link to a learning activity that buyers could be perceived to learn on the job and useful in answering the research questions. To explain, "*working the fixtures",* is a term which can be used to infer a buyer's hands on involvement in work place activities outside of head office. In this context, John is signifying that as a store-based workplace activity, *"working the fixtures"* is a potentially positive means of learning the features of the products and product ranges he was responsible for as the buyer and an activity that may contribute to buyer development and performance.

The aim has therefore been to be interpretive and faithful in descriptive representation of the data yet at the same time respectful of the meanings attached to the perceptions and experiences of the participants. By this it is meant, I have not tried to second guess or interpret individual's meanings through my own perceptions and interpretations. To do so would have been to ignore the irritation yet ultimate inability to access, uncover and interpret the participants' conscious or unconscious mental thoughts and extended agendas (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018). Choice was therefore given to follow the lead of Colley (2003, p. 6 in.) who points out, each participant's account, "is true, in the sense that it reflects the perceptions, intentions and beliefs of the speaker". Colley's insight was influential in my consideration of practices that might enhance validity and would provide a level of detachment from critiques of personal bias and an over reliance on descriptive validity of the data and notions of my experiential interpretation.

Here attention turns to what, Bathmaker (2010 p. 209) describes as the significance of the, "dialogue between data and theory". A concept interpreted in this study to hold with notions of theoretical validity and, influential in inspiring my creativity and use of theory in constructing and developing the conceptual framework as a theoretical resource to investigate and explain the research questions. I have not taken my creativity and the theoretical links made for granted. It is fully acknowledge the construct of the conceptual framework featured in this study provides an abstraction rather than a, conceptualisation of certainty and therefore, “goes beyond concrete description and interpretation” (Maxwell, 2012, p. 140). Indeed, enhanced theoretical validity requires high levels of consensus which this research has yet to achieve, but seeks to propose as a potential means to answering the research questions and perhaps, as a contender for an adaptable model useful from which to ascribe to similar VET related questions. An appraisal of the success or otherwise of this conceptual feature will later be given in the conclusions to this thesis.

Representation

Here, acknowledgement is again given to the potential limitations of the dataset for which, “may not be optimal” (Hox & Boeije, 2005, p. 594), in relation to specifically answering the research questions or guarantee the dataset’s freedom from error and bias. I will reaffirm, that no attempt to portray an optimal depiction of the whole research field has been made and have accepted that the dataset generated and collected can only provide a partial representation of the, “tied and untied variables” (Lincoln, Lynham & Guba, 2018, p. 145) connected to answering the research question. Furthermore, no claims are made suggestive that I, or any of the participants are fully representative of the buying community. Nonetheless, the collaboration and relationship between myself as researcher and the purposively selected pool of participants featured in this research has been conceived to provide a representational voice within the constraints of this project, not considered generalisable, but neither a-typical of the group characteristics of buyers or senior buyers of the top ten grocery retailers in the UK.

Section 4. Data analysis

Data analysis principles

My approach for generating data from a multi-case study approach comprising of thirteen (13) participants has been outlined in the previous pages. The principle idea being to uncover participants’ individual perceptions and experiences using semi-structured interviews to reveal a multifaceted understanding of the research question. It is the individual participants therefore that are the unit of analysis in this study and whose individual understandings have been systematically analysed using principles aligned to framing, ordering and interpreting their data through the interactions between the themed research questions and the structured lens of the conceptual framework.

A cross reference with (Fig. 1.0) will serve to remind the reader that the structure of the conceptual framework is made up of five (5) pre-determined theoretical categories (Maxwell, 2012) including an etic and emic category. This categorising structure provided conceptual place holders which enabled the coding and thematic classification of the individual perceptions and experiences of participants from their original form. For the purposes of this study, coding, “labels segments of data with terms to summarise, categorise, and account for these segments” (Charmaz, Thornberg & Keane, 2018, p. 424). Segmenting and coding data in this way generated thirteen (13) theoretical sub-categories and fifty-four (54) substantive categories and themes. According to, Maxwell & Chmiel (2013, p. 25)

> Substantive categories are primarily descriptive, in a broad sense that includes descriptions of participants’ concepts and beliefs; they stay close to the data categorised and do not inherently imply a more abstract theory.

Table (2.6) below, shows the alignment between the theoretical categories and sub-categories used. The fifty-four (54) substantive categories produced inferential themes which, “forms the outcomes” (Flick, 2013, p. 3) of this research and emerged from transcription of the literal spoken words of the participants and shaped through my own analytical judgements and interpretation of similarity. By similarity I mean the way I distinguished, “resemblances” (Maxwell 2012, p. 54) or the “dialogue” (Bathmaker, 2010, p. 20) my thinking established between the data and the conceptual themes.

Table 2.6. Alignment between theoretical categories and sub-categories

5 Theoretical Categories		**13 Theoretical Sub-Categories**		**Substantive categories and themes**
1	Human Capital KSAOs and the Tripartite Relationship	1	Individual Capital	Fifty-four (54) substantive categories were generated from the transcription references of the literal spoken words of the participants or through my own interpretations of similarity. Each substantive theme is aligned to a corresponding conceptual category and sub-category.
		2	Organisational Capital	
		3	Social Capital	
2	2 Metaphors for Learning (Sfard, 1998)	4	Learning as Participation (on the job)	
		5	Learning as Acquisition (off the job)	
3	Performance P = F (A, M, O)	6	Ability	
		7	Motivation	
		8	Opportunity	
4	3 Dimensions of Pedagogy (Nind et al., 2016)	9	Experienced	
		10	Enacted	
		11	Specified	
5	Emerging Etic and Emic	12	Etic	
		13	Emic	

In the findings chapter, I will identify and discuss the substantive categories and themes that were generated, but here, explanation is given first to the detailed process of analysis from which the substantive categories and themes derive and have been combined into the findings of this study. To do so, has drawn from the methodological influence of Roulston (2013) who puts forward a three-phase approach to analiysing interview data, namely: data reduction, data reorganisation and data representation. Although the understood phases are useful for providing a structured explanation here, in practice the entire data analysis process proved to be a highly iterative exercise in which the three phases of data analysis were interconnected and overlapping rather than a linear process.

Data reduction

Data reduction was a necessary phase of the analysis process given to distilling the raw data gathered from the semi-structured interviews. Indeed, table (2.3) outlining data collection methods, records that fourteen (14) hours of audio recordings were generated and required transcription. Personally, transcribing all the thirteen (13) audio-recordings of semi-structured interviews was a considerable but valuable expenditure of time because it proved to be an essential first step in my, "close engagement" (Bathmaker, 2010, p. 202) and familiarisation with the data and set the conditions for connecting the raw data to the theoretically informed categories and sub-categories.

The following (Fig. 1.3), provides an excerpt from a typical transcript produced in the conduct of this study. It shows how I systematically used the comments box and highlighting functionality of Microsoft Word software to supplement my working memory by capturing my thoughts and developing my initial interpretations throughout the transcription process. This analytical strategy was particularly helpful when returning to re-read the texts, analyse and code sentences, specific words and "chunks or slices" (Mason, 2018, p. 198) of potentially meaningful data from the transcripts. Primarily because I was immediately able to reflexively re-engage with the data and with the agenda of my previous thinking at any time. In much the say way, I have since reflected that reviewing my field notes also provided a further reflexive device to retrieve ideas, representations, interactions and thoughts I recorded at the time of conducting the semi-structured interviews. Furthermore, and even at this early stage of data analysis I was able to identify interesting, inferential themes allied to the guidance provided by the conceptual framework and, to start identifying what I contextually and sometimes intuitively assessed to be, "topically thin" (Roulston, 2013, p. 307) or ambiguous content.

Fig. 1.3. Transcript excerpt

Ed. 18.53	I wasn't a graduate, in a way there was a bit of....**there was a bit of a reverse, that was a more of a challenge to me. You know, I had something to prove, that I was as good as any graduate even though I wasn't a graduate.**
DS. 19.10	So that is quite an interesting reverse psychology actually.
Ed. 19.14	Which in the terms of...But, in the retail world....which is quite a...A. it's a people orientated business, both in terms of customers and getting stuff done. You only get stuff done in retail through people. They haven't invented robot shop keepers yet.
DS. 19.35	Not yet!
Ed. 19.36	Mmm, they've invented robot pickers but they haven't invented robot shop keepers yet. Erm, so that for me was a part of a thing to prove.
DS. 19.51	You see that's interesting. And how long did you spend as a trainee then, (Edward)?
Ed. 19.55	Well it was a 2 year programme. And it was laid out very clearly. Sainsbury's at that time, it was a clear programme with a clear line of sight. It was a 2 year programme in terms of the period. There was an opportunity for a six monthly review so that was clear. So I knew that there was a chance to get a bit more money if I did a good job every six months. And that, I would then move in to a junior buying role after 2 years if I did the job right.
Ed. 20.44	**But there was no formal work book. There was some off the job training on specific things like; managing time, on mmm, negotiation at a pretty basic level.**
DS. 21.10	Would you call those generic skills?

Darren Schofield
Do those without graduate level education feel that it is a challenge to do better in the work place than those who have credentials? Very interesting concept which could be a reverse psychology in approaching the training of those who don't have the credentials. Also think about the performance aspect of the 'hungry' individual and their motivation to do well.

Darren Schofield
Good point about it being a retail specific context which would not work in other vocations or contexts.

Darren Schofield August 11, 2017
Watch this space?
Reply Resolve

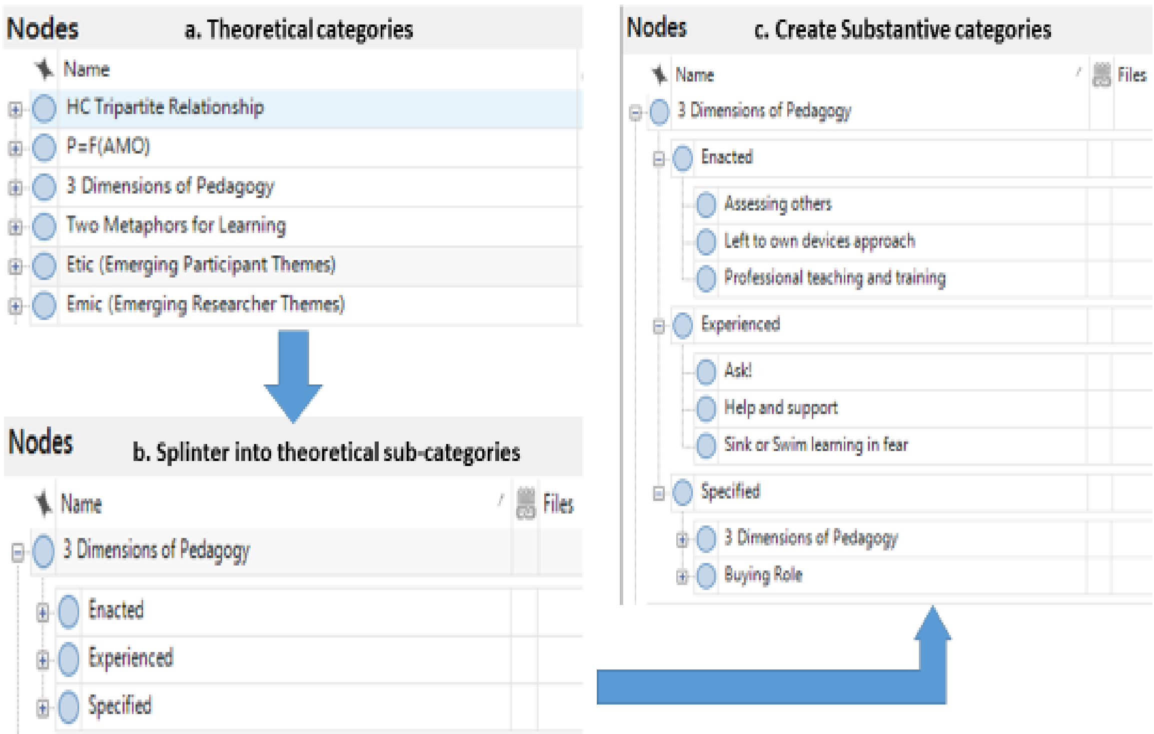
Darren Schofield August 11, 2017
Individual motivation in the work place to prove oneself better than other academic credentials. I think I can personally relate to this and it would be an interesting piece of work to do?
Reply Resolve

The completed transcripts were dated and stored in electronic and printed version files for easy retrieval and auditability and, as can be seen from (Fig. 1.3), and a further example at *(Appendix. 7),* each line of transcript is aligned to the corresponding participants initials and run time on the original audio-recording. Using this method enhanced the management of iteratively searching and retrieving data from within the transcripts. Written, field notes were also stored with the corresponding transcripts and used for contextual incorporation and additional interpretative value relating to the observed events of the semi-structured interviews.

NVivo and Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS)

Harnessing the utility of NVivo Computer-Assisted Qualitative Data Analysis (CAQDAS) system (Woolf & Silver, 2017) was an effective means of managing the screening, extraction, codification and reduction of the large amounts of transcribed data generated. Completed transcripts were uploaded into the NVivo system from which data references could be digitally stored, manipulated and coded. (Fig. 1.4) overleaf, illustrates how the NVivo software and functionality was employed to reproduce a digital model of the conceptual framework. As can be seen, each of the theoretical categories splinter or break down into the aligned sub-categories. The figure also shows how the example theoretical category given, (*Three Dimensions of Pedagogy)* has been splintered into three further theoretical sub-categories into which I was able to import and copy and paste the passages of digital transcript data which in turn, were placed and electronically stored as references within the substantive categories and themes I identified.

Fig. 1.4. Digital representation of in categorising and coding data in NVivo



I further underpinned my digital interactions with the data in NVivo by reading and analyising printed transcripts, manually highlighting potentially useful data references with different coloured marker pens, sticky notes and general paper-based indexing and modelling. Though this approach added an element of analytical duplication engaging in manual processes appealed to my kinesthetic nature and contributed an enhanced hand on rigour to my interactions and immersion in the data.

Furthermore, this level of manual interaction with the data lead to drafting and sketching my thoughts on paper or digitally on Microsoft PowerPoint slides which first helped me to visually understand how I wanted to design and employ a digital data management solution in NVivo. Moreover, as an early career researcher I did not want to short cut (Brinkmann, 2018) the value of manual data analysis which I felt was an important part of my personal development that would enhance my practical 'human' research skills and also mitigate the reliance on, and limitations of, CAQDAS which suggests, "Software packages such as NVivo do not fully scaffold the analysis process" (Maher, et al., 2018, p. 1). Utilising both manual and CAQDAS methods were mutually supporting activities which gave opportunity for checks and balances throughout the coding process and built my confidence in comprehensively managing coding of transcripts.

On reflection the NVivo suite of digital nodes and the effective researcher friendly functionality was a far more precise, rigorous and time-friendly method of coding overall. But, emphasis must be given to the distinction made to employ NVivo as a data management tool only. The identification of theoretical categories, sub-categories and substantive themes, their coding, interpretation, comparison and meaning were all, “100% of the intellectual work” (Woolf & Silver, 2017, p. 4) provided by me as the researcher.

Data reorganisation, creating breadth and depth in better understanding the research question

The coding process produced over 400 data references and generated 54 substantive themes from the transcripts, thus revealing an extensive breadth of participants individual understandings, perceptions and experiences from which to unfold my exploratory assertions to answering the research question. Indeed, the findings chapter will discuss how the breadth of the 54 substantive themes has informed a better understanding of: what and how buyers learn on the job, what and how buyers learn off the job and how people become buyers.

Allied to exploiting the extensive breadth of information was the aim of developing a greater depth of information from which to better understand the research question. To do this the data required further reflection, iterative revision, comparison and what has previously been borrowed from Roulston (2013) as a phase of data reorganisation.

What was particularly beneficial in achieving greater depth of data analysis was the use of what Robson (2010, p. 410) describes as, “simple descriptive statistics”. This was done to limit any bias I may have explicitly or implicitly shown in selecting themes to discern the significant factors that might enlighten the research question. A simple data table was used to record and calculate the number of references which were aligned to each of the fifty-four (54) substantive themes. I concluded that the top ten (10) ranked substantive themes by number of data references would constitute what are termed in this research as the major substantive themes. In turn, these major substantive themes would provide the focus for deeper analysis from which to investigate the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. As a prelude to the main findings chapter, the following table (2.6) identifies the top (10) major substantive themes; number 1 having received the greatest number of references, number 10 fewest.

Table 2.7. Top 10 major substantive themes

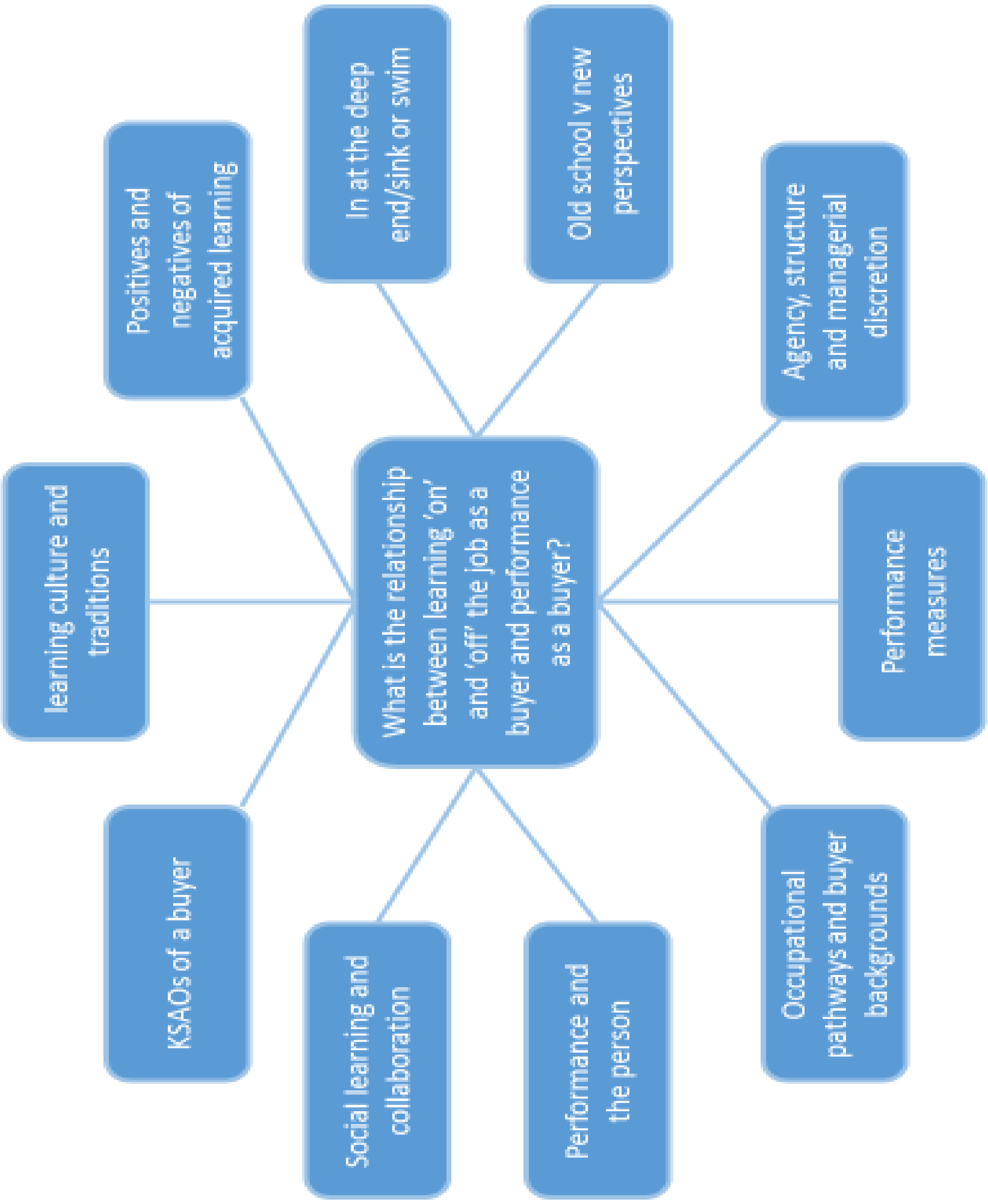
Ranking	Substantive theme
1	Learning culture and traditions
2	KSAOs of a buyer
3	Social learning and collaboration
4	Performance and the person
5	Occupational pathways and buyer backgrounds
6	Performance measures
7	Agency, structure and managerial discretion
8	Old school Vs new perspectives
9	In at the deep end, sink or swim
10	Positives and negatives of acquired learning

I considered that attributing metrics of incidence as a marker for identifying the major substantive themes may divert my gaze (Mason, 2018) from those themes less frequently populated with references, these I will refer to as minor substantive themes. Here, I will concede that a further targeted exploration of minor substantive themes might provide further angles from which to consider this topic. However, a cut needed to be made to work within the time and resource constraints of this study and my rationale followed the path of choosing the most prevalent themes referenced by the participants themselves.

Data representation

To reorganise the data in a way that would visually represent the direct relationship between the research question and the major substantive themes, I created a relational thematic map shown in the following (Fig. 1.5).

Fig 1.5. Top 10 major substantive themes by reference: relationship to central research question



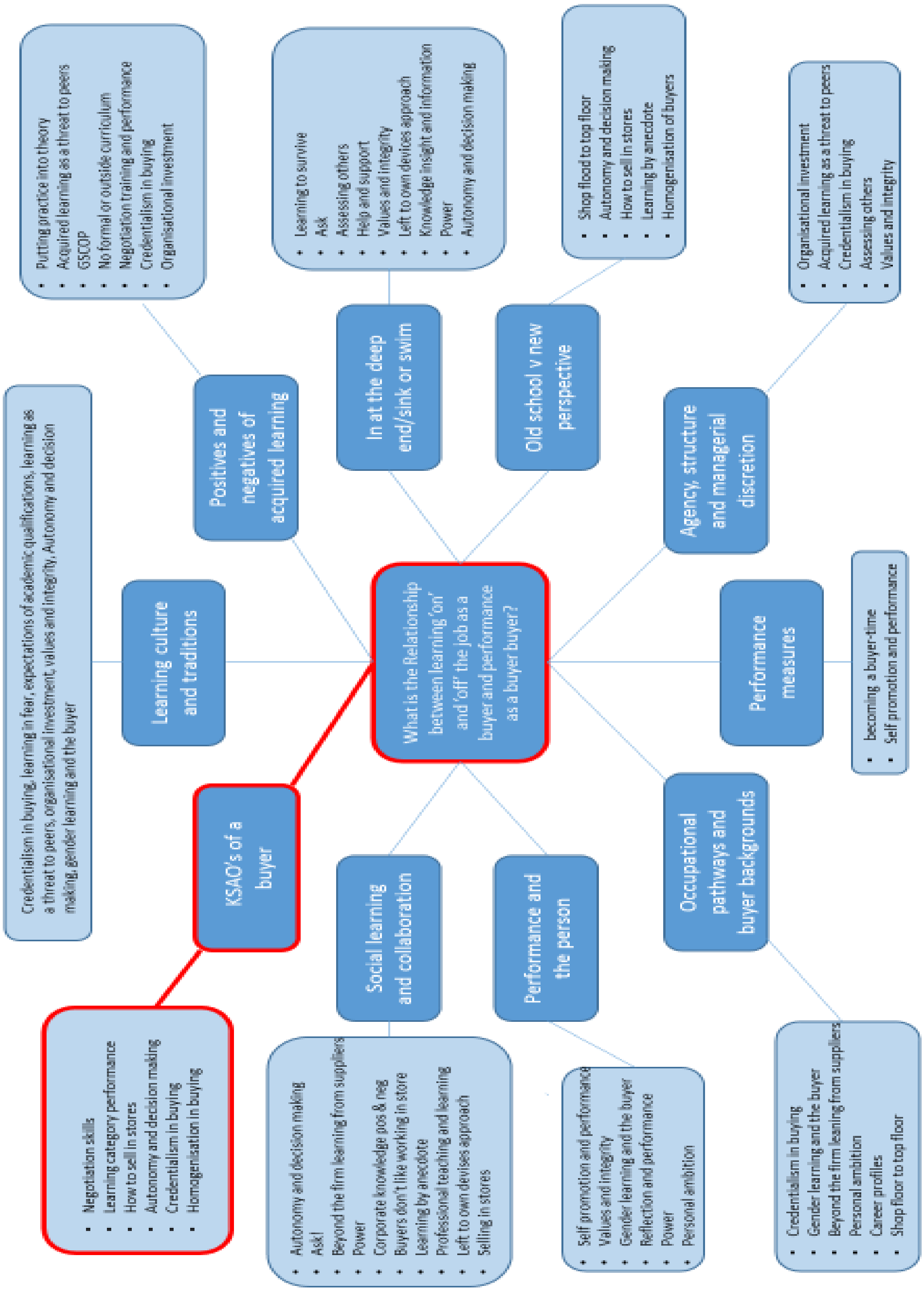
As can be seen the primary research question is placed at the centre of the model and is connected to the 10 major substantive themes identified. Visualising and representing the direct relationship between the ten (10) substantive themes and the research question in the form of a map helped to form a picture in my mind of what was going on between the research question and themes generated. The map also prompted me to question if there were any discernible relationships between the major themes and the remaining minor themes that would draw together a greater depth of analysis from the breadth of the data available.

The answer was yes.

To show this called for an element of creativity in managing the data which I was unable to achieve digitally using NVivo and therefore, a more low-tech approach was employed. In short, a return to manual methods of analysis prevailed. Ten (10) white index cards were evenly spread, laterally across a large table, each card being labelled with one of the major substantive themes. Systematically, a review of the complete list of minor substantive themes was conducted to assess the possible links, connections and relationships to each of the 10 substantive major themes. Where I interpreted a correlation between the two themes the minor substantive theme was tagged to the 'parent' major substantive theme by using a sticky note. Throughout the process, written notes were taken to record the interpretation behind each inferential relationship. Although extremely time consuming for the single researcher, the process was highly effective because it enabled me to build and record an insightful picture of the inferential relationships between the 'parent' major substantive themes and the 'child' minor substantive themes.

Figure (1.6) given overleaf, provides a visual map illustrating inferential relationships between the substantive major and minor themes and the research question. The benefits of this visual style of mapping are gained from the capacity to discern potential thematic patterns, at a glance and trace inferential thematic links directly from the research question or from any starting point on the map. This level of visual representation was a critical aide memoir in better understanding the interconnectedness and the depth of complexity of the research question. Major substantive themes are represented in dark blue and minor substantive themes in the light blue boxes.

Fig 1.6. Inferential relationships between substantive major and minor themes

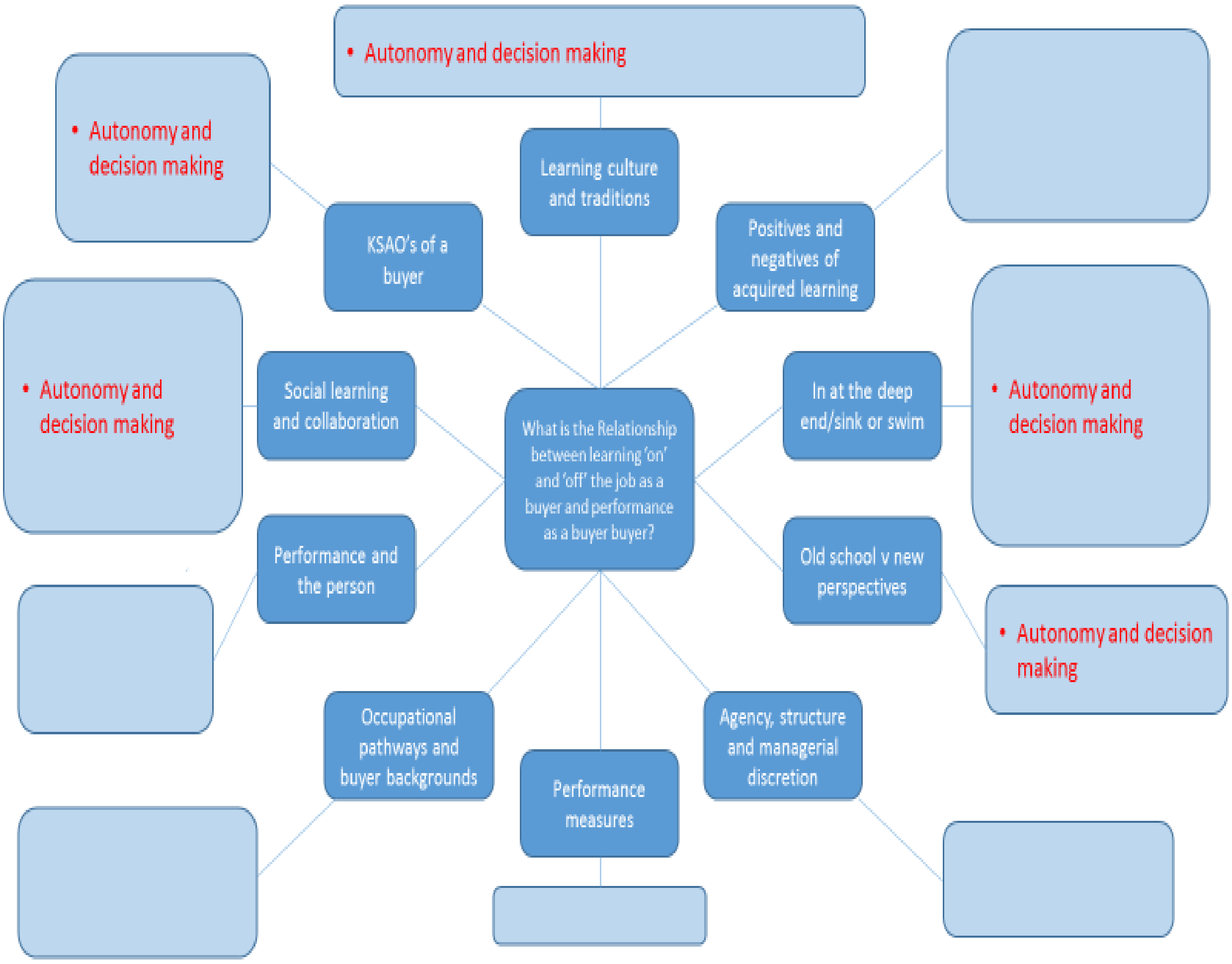


If we look at a cross section of the map *(indicated by the red coloured border trace)* and follow a red line from the central research question to the major substantive theme, *KSAOs of a buyer,* a further line can then be traced to the aligned minor substantive themes. Using this method of analysis, we can infer that:

a. The theme, KSAOs of a buyer, has a major substantive link to the research question.
b. Negotiation skills, learning category performance, how to sell in stores, autonomy and decision making, credentialism in buying, homogenisation in buying represent prevalent, linked minor substantive themes inferred by participants.

Furthermore, this method of analysis also revealed multiple instances of overlap between themes. Figure (1.7) below is given as an example to illustrate how the minor substantive theme shown, *'autonomy and decision making'* has been interpreted to have an overlapping multiple relationship which spans across five (5) of the major substantive themes.

Fig 1.7. Overlapping minor themes



Applying this further level of analysis identified seventeen (17) overlapping themes *(Appendix. 8)* for which a similar thematic map was produced showing varying levels of overlapping relationships between the major and minor substantive themes. These maps provided further thematic templates useful in tracing insightful patterns and inferential avenues of interest to target and pursue in answering the research question. Of course, each major or minor substantive theme, thematic map or data table used to reorganise and represent the data can trace its origin to the source of individual perceptions and experiences of the participants. These individual accounts are extensively recounted and represented in this thesis by the direct quotations and excerpts of text that have been drawn upon throughout and are used to connect the people and buyers that sit behind the themes. The individual biographical data relating to each participant generated by research surveys adds additional depth to the findings and discussions in this research and brings history and background together with perspective which is reflected in their individual experiences and perceptions. And, although some participant's perspectives might inevitably draw analytical comparison, it has not been my intention to produce a comparative study of individual cases or to reduce data to generalisable statements. I will concede then to an awareness of the dangers of context stripping from the uniqueness of each individual case. However, each individual case is contextual to the buying field and the overall research design I have used. This I argue, makes context harder to lose sight of when considering the robustness of the research findings and outcomes.

The ability to identify inferential patterns and trace thematic links in the way thus described has produced a level of analytical rigour which although I posit as diligent cannot claim to be complete. But, which benefits this research because the process has endeavoured to open-up as many, "complexities and nonlinear uncertainties" (Taleb, 2010, p. 106) of the relationship the research question seeks to better understand. In so doing, it is argued that this analytical process goes beyond what some might contend as, "a reliance on coding and categorisation of data to interpret qualitative data" (Roulston, 2013, p. 306) which might deny the unknown aspects of this research topic. This is because the thematic maps are given as a transparent method of analysis to show the paths and patterns used to analyse the data. But at the same time, the maps can also be used to reveal the territory I have chosen not to cover and the multitude of alternative patterns and relationships which might otherwise be discounted because they go un-reported or unobserved.

Chapter Four: Findings

Introduction

As already shown, the 10 major substantive themes that have emerged in this research from questions aiming to better understand the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer are interconnected, overlapping and non-linear. And, though significant merit could be found in the independent examination of each major and or, minor substantive theme, my inclination has been to bring together these findings and results under the banner of a combined and reduced number of relatable section headings. Here I will introduce the relatable headings given to provide three sections that will be discussed in turn and constitute the findings and results of this thesis.

- Section 1. Pathways, learning cultures and traditions.
- Section 2. Learning the core: on and off the job KSAOs, the person and performance.
- Section 3. Social learning, collaboration and changing perspectives.

Each section heading is made up of a combination of the key related major substantive themes that are linked to the central research question and combine insight which draws predominantly, but not exclusively, on its associated major substantive themes. Figures (1.8), (1.9) and (2.0) are given on the following pages to illustrate the relationship between the key substantive themes, the central research question and the findings for each section 1, 2 and 3. To explain; each figure shows the research question at its centre connected to the 10 major substantive themes arranged round the outside. Red lines and a red border outlines and attach the themes linked with each section heading of the findings. Applying this approach maintains the integrity of data analysis by ensuring all 10 major substantive themes are represented and provides the basis from which wider discussion and insight emanates.

Fig 1.8. Section 1. Pathways learning cultures and traditions

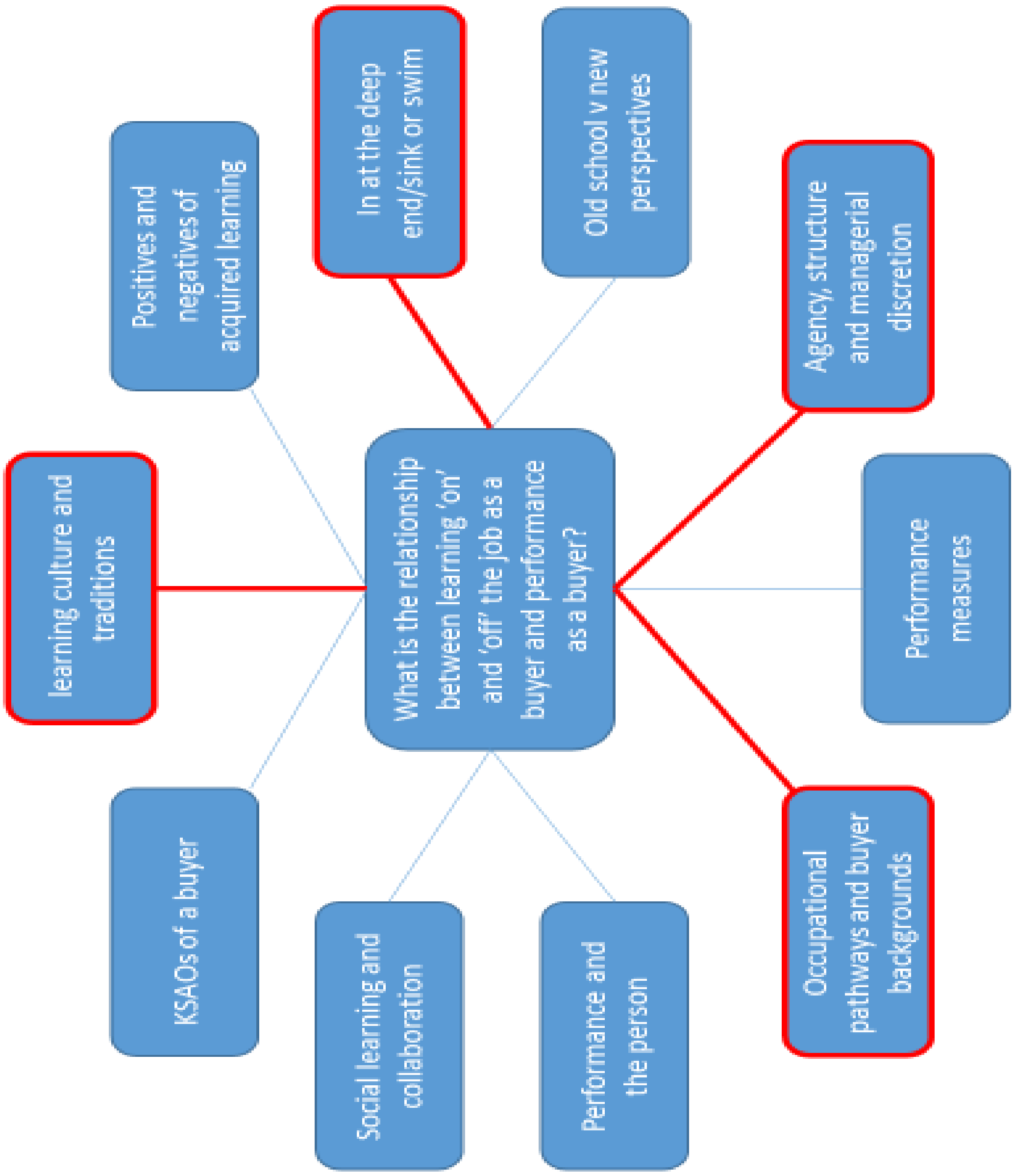


Fig 1.9. Section 2. Learning the core: on and off the job KSAOs, the person and performance

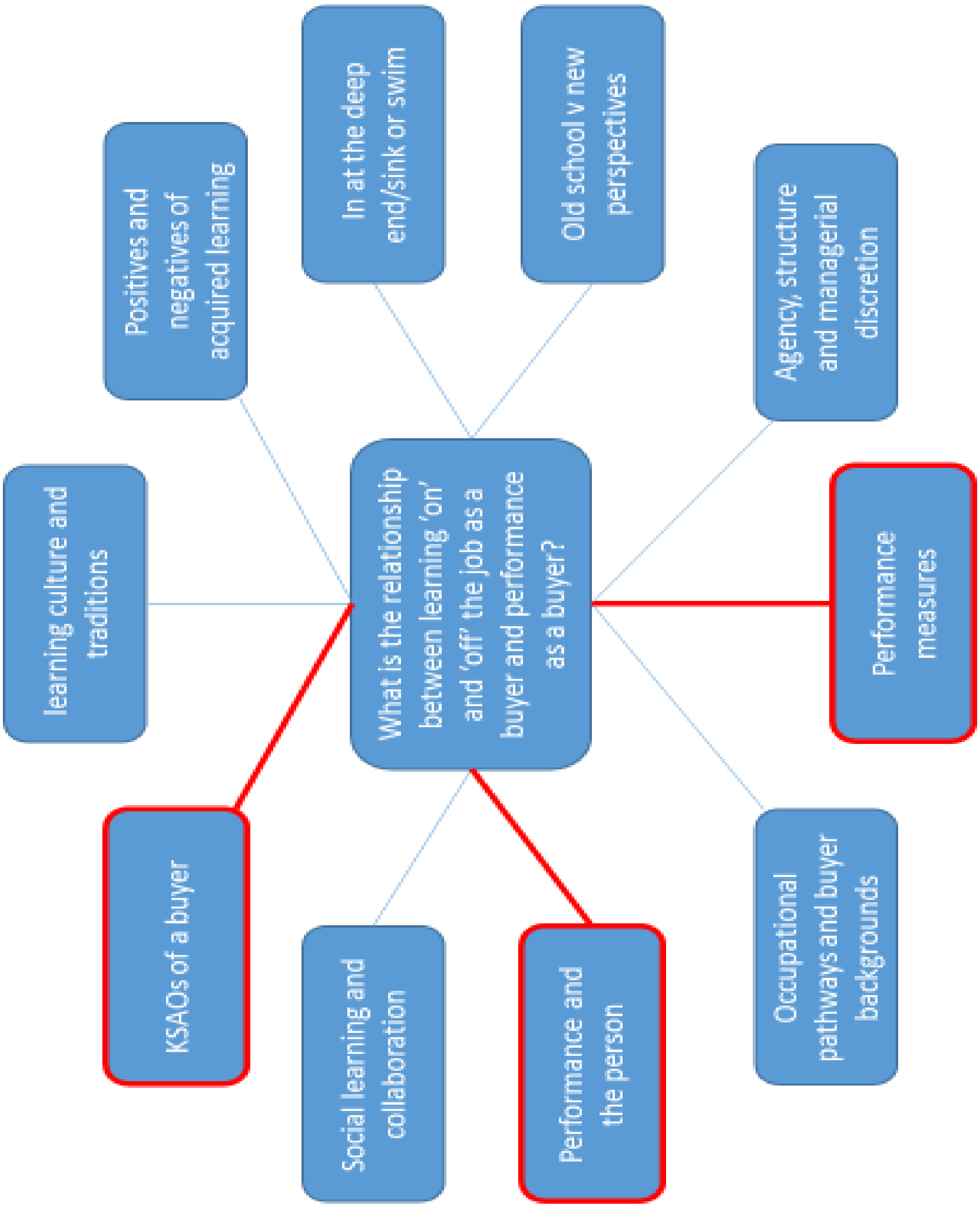
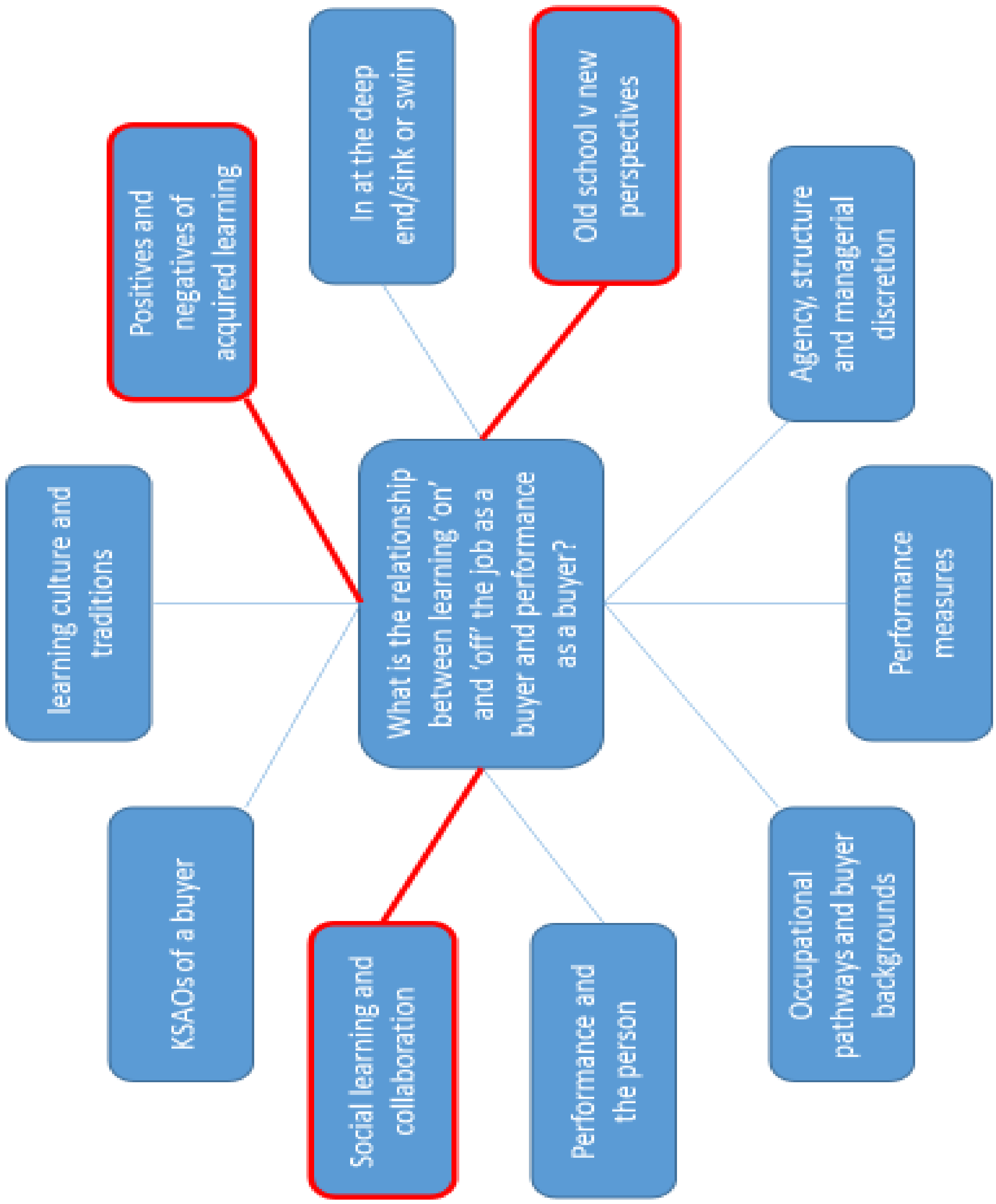


Fig 2.0. Section 3. Learning beyond the firm and the occupation: Social learning, collaboration and changing perspectives



As Brinkmann (2013, p. 122) points out, “Data become findings only when coupled with methodological and theoretical reflections”. The results and findings presented in the following pages do not therefore, simply recount the text of individual views given by participants or separately address the identified substantive themes in isolation. Rather, the results and findings of this study reflect the affinity between the data-set generated, the methods and engagement with theoretical concepts (Brinkman, 2013) which have been integral to shaping and informing this study and, which represent the unique mechanism and connecting strategy employed to shed new light on this topic (Kamler & Thomson, 2014).

Accounting for difference

These findings and results are meaningful because they are a mosaic of individual views of participants who through their involvement in buying can provide insight best described as a, “range of perspectives, experiences and standpoints, including my own” (Mason, 2018, p. 224). I have presented these participant perceptions and experiences in the excerpts and quotes selected from the transcripts of semi-structured interviews. All of which have been accurately reproduced to faithfully tell their individual stories. Many of the excerpts and quotes voice contradiction, ambiguity as well as similarity of views which are evocative of the contextual backgrounds and lived experiences of the individual participants. In this respect, the diversity of participant experiences conceivably draws parallels with many other occupations and professions. As Eraut (2001, p. 17) has found in his work on, developing professional knowledge and competence:

> In general, many differences can be found between the personal knowledge of working professionals which informs their judgement or becomes embedded in their performance and the public knowledge base of their profession.

Eraut’s (2001) assertions has increased my awareness and appreciation of the diversity of views which can be connected to investigations of occupational knowledge and has strengthened aims to be inclusive of the differences in findings offered by the participants. By employing a connecting strategy to code and analyse the findings and discussion of this study, the intention has been to contribute a better understanding of the complexities of the research question without a, “bias towards verification” (Flyvbjerg, 2013, p. 169) and to avoid what, Roulston (2013, p. 306) warns as the, “dangers of forcing data to fit preconceived hypothesis”.

Thus, emphasis is placed on the individual as the unit of analysis to restrict what Maxwell (2012, p. 117) has referred to as the problems of, “imprisonment in the story” which I have considered might occur by not reporting such difference. This I propose, emphasises desire for this study to account for, rather than cut, the reality and existence of diversity in participant perceptions and experiences.

Thereby, I do not claim generalisable conclusions or ubiquitous and united occupational beliefs that are, "devoid of inconsistencies" (Taleb, 2010, p. 17). Inevitably, this means findings, results and discussions may mean different things to different people dependent on the organisational or individual context. However, on this point I rest content, chiefly because I am satisfied that individual differences influence the nuances, subtleties and inconsistencies that can be attached to the vocational concepts and themes that will be discussed.

Profiles of the participants

Before proceeding, I will direct the reader's attention to table (2.5) which has been previously introduced. The table provides reference to the diversity of biographical and occupational profiles of each of the participants and offers an, at a glance accompaniment to the reading of the semi-structured interview excerpts, quotes and testimony used to present and support the findings and discussion throughout the following pages. The information contained in table (2.5) was obtained by extracting and bringing together data from the research survey completed by participants *(Appendix. 3)* and from data generated by conducting the semi-structured interviews. A review of table (2.5) will familiarise the reader with the diversity of the participants' age, gender, and length of occupational experience. This information is given as a contextualising aide to understanding the variety of findings in this study, primarily because this data offers an additional, individually focused lens from which to assist interpretation of the given excerpts and quotes that depict the participants' perceptions and experiences. Such a proposition supports the critical realist notion that, "not only are individuals' perspectives and their situations real phenomena, they are separate phenomena that causally interact with one another" (Maxwell, 2012, p. 20).

I will now provide the findings of this research which in turn, presents each of the three section headings discussed and which precludes the direct response to the research question; what the relationship between learning on is and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer and the conclusions and recommendations of this research.

Section 1. Pathways, learning cultures and traditions

Pathways to the buying occupation

"it's quite a departure from what I studied to do"

(Josh)

I will begin with analysis of data which uncovers the diversity of participants' motivations and post-school routes (CIPD, 2016) of entry into the retail buying occupation. Indeed, for all the participants interviewed in this study, buying was not an occupation of first choice. As can be seen from the summary of responses given in table (2.8) below, there are multiple pathways which first led the participants of this study into the world of buying. The term *pathway* is used here to mean a route, inclusive of a participant's previous post-school learning and education, occupation, work experience or planned occupational choices. This pathway connects the participant to the structures of the buying occupation.

Table 2.8. Participant pathways

Participant Number	Participant Name	Previous learning and education, occupation, work experience or planned occupational career choice.
1	Tom	"So, for me, my career was never planned. When I was 18, I worked for my father. He owned a flooring business, so I worked for him as a floor fitter prior to National Service in the South African Army. After which the biggest retailer in South Africa at that stage was a company called OK Bazaars, so I joined them as a trainee manager".
2	John	"So, my degree was in communications, I had a work placement at the BBC on a children's programme and that was like a baptism of fire into the world of media and I really didn't enjoy it, it put me off"
3	Simon	"So, I kind of fell into it [buying] really, because I graduated from University with a Business and Marketing degree and I started off working for [Research organisation] down in Oxford".
4	Edward	"I was faced with going to University to read English or getting a job. So basically, I became a trainee retail manager".
5	Rebecca	"Okay, so I'm from a farming background and I went on to do an agricultural and marketing qualification".
6	Steven	"Asda at the time were looking for trainee accountants, this was down at *[address]* at the time. So, I went to work for them for 3 years".
7	Jacob	Like a lot of people, getting in to buying was by default rather than by design. I worked for Morrisons as a student from 16, so I worked in-store until I finished at University at Manchester – I did Economics and knew that was something I was interested in, but I couldn't work out how I could make a job out of it!".
8	Rob	"I actually did a dissertation at University [Spanish and Business Studies degree] on the power of Supermarkets. I Wanted to get into retail, work for a retailer, a supermarket, so I ended up working for Musgrave stores in London. Budgens, basically".

9	Joe	"It's a bit of a long story this, but I left University with a Law degree intending to join West Yorkshire Police".
10	Paul	"15 years in stores, started off as a student filling shelves for six months - I cut a visible path through the management system at a flag ship store as a Wines and Spirits manager, which gave me a lot of exposure to visiting buyers and trading directors".
11	Kate	No buying experience – retail strategy and transformation Director
12	Josh	"So that's quite a long story….so my degree is Medical Microbiology. So, it's quite a departure from what I studied to do".
13	Patrick	"My early life was spent living over a Grocers and Greengrocers shop! And then having left school I joined Woolworth's as a trainee manager and spent my time learning the retail management side of it".

Buying, an occupation hidden in plain sight

While research of associated literature and the career web-pages of top 10 UK retailers featured in this study found the buying occupation to be as visible and well represented as any other retail occupation, the data suggests the buying occupation may be otherwise hidden or, "withdrawn from popular discourse around employment occupations" (CIPD, 2016, p. 5). The point I am making here is, despite the centrality of food and grocery retail to the UK economy and the importance of food and groceries in all our lives, grocery buying is not an occupation traditionally exposed to the public gaze or a categorised occupational analysis. This is an observation and aspect of the data vividly brought out by, Josh, a trainee buyer who recalled:

> Buying had never been something that I'd considered or actually…still today, I'm not quite sure that my family understands what I do! It's almost like a hidden role within retail. You don't think of a person being behind the shelf as it were.
>
> (Josh)

From this data I inferred that the buying occupation, although not a career of first choice was indeed, a largely hidden occupation to all the participants. This notion is observable and typified by, Steven a former senior buyer turned retail sales director, who whilst working for a top 4 UK retailer as a trainee accountant recalls receiving an invitation from his manager to discuss a buying vacancy.

> So, I said, "What's buying?" I never forget his face! You know what buying is...No I don't, I'm an accountant, I don't do buying.
>
> (Steven)

A similar experience is described by, John, a senior buyer of 20 years, who recalled his experience of speculatively applying for a marketing vacancy at a top 4 retailer:

> There was nothing, but then the reply back was, have you ever thought of a role in buying? And, I have to say I hadn't a clue what that role involved.
>
> (John)

By emphasising what, Josh perceives to be the surprise notion of, "a person being behind the shelf as it were" he is accentuating a perspective suggesting retailers place greater emphasis on the front facing side of retail, namely, the shop and the products. Quite strikingly, Edward a senior buyer and former group trading director with 40 years buying experience sheds light on what amounts to evidence of a perceptibly strategic human resource practice of, occupational filtering. By this, I mean the action taken by retailers to hide the profile of the buying occupation within the wider retail occupational context, essentially, to minimise the loss of staff to buying roles from store management roles.

As Edward explains:

> A lot of retail businesses struggle to keep good people in shops, unless they are a particular type. And, graduates who go into retail because they think they want to run a shop who are then exposed to either marketing or buying suddenly…but the majority, decide they want to do marketing or buying. They don't actually want to run a shop.
>
> So, there is a lot of effort made in keeping retail graduates in retail by not exposing them beyond…you know a quick visit to central departments, cos otherwise you'll never keep them.
>
> (Edward)

Edward's account offers a highly strategic explanation for notions linking buying with an ostensibly withdrawn occupational profile. More so when further related to the individual perceptions and experiences of those participants with previous work experience gained in shops. Senior buyer, Simon enlightens Edward's view by recounting a tipping point in his own experience of running a shop as a graduate trainee manager:

> Got sick of the unsocial hours, I worked kind of Monday to Friday and weekends as well. The final straw really, was people coming in [the shop] in warm sunny weather…Barbeques! I was kind of selling them stuff and wanted to be out myself…So I phoned the guy who was in charge of the graduate course and said, "I'm not happy with this have you got anything for me?" And I ended up working as a buying assistant at head office for a period of time".
>
> (Simon)

Simon's experience is of course a personal response and is not given to suggest all participants experiences were the same. Rather, as Edward clarifies:

> Shop floor stuff is hard work. And you've got to be a particular type that likes dealing with customers and dealing with the day to day hassle and routine. Because actually, whilst every day is a bit different you're still opening the store at 9am and shutting it at 7pm.

> So, for people who don't necessarily like that level of routine, the thought of going into a decision-making role, where you are helping to decide what the stores will sell, so you are the one that is then informing and leading that business rather than being involved at the front end...I learnt that very quickly and said… "I want to be the person issuing the bulletin not the person having to operate it".
>
> (Edward)

The struggle between structure and agency

Edward's reasoning points to an occupation which this research finds to have been almost, hidden in plain sight of the participants and hints at relationship dynamics resonant with the struggle between the agency of individuals and the willfully controlled structures of buying organisations. For example, despite not previously working directly inside a retail environment, Simon recounts his personal motivation for entering the buying occupation which was kindled whilst working with buyers as a retail analyst at a large retail research organisation.

> I didn't really know much about buying before I started at [research organisation]. But what I soon realised, working with retailers, was the importance of buyers within the retail environment. I found that interesting because, I found that I was doing all the work but not really getting the rewards for it or the recognition. The buyers often would, you know what I mean?
>
> I was like a consultant to them or to the supplier who was presenting to the retailer and the buyers. So, I thought you know what, yeah…I fancy that…I wanted to get my foot in the door at a retailer, with a view to then to going into buying. Or finding out more about it.
>
> (Simon)

Simon's motives resonate closely with those of Edward and identify, extrinsic reasoning linked to financial rewards and intrinsic motivators such as recognition, responsibility, autonomy, decision making and power. All of which are recurring themes cited by participants and infer key factors underpinning their motivation to learn as a buyer and to which I will later return. But Simon's experience is unusual when compared to the pathways of most participants because he had no previous experience of working in a retail environment prior to entry into buying. This was also true of, former category director Rebecca who was introduced to buying through her participation in what she termed as:

> A sandwich year where you were [working] in industry and as part of that, I experienced buying produce and I just really enjoyed it, it gave me a sense of self-worth. I was really clear when I was doing my qualification that actually when I'd experienced that on the sandwich year, that's what I wanted to do.
>
> (Rebecca)

Indeed, eleven (11) of the (13) participants featured in this study have previously worked in a retail shop floor environment prior to entering the buying occupation. This is perhaps no surprise given, "more young people start their working life in retail than in any other industry" (BRC, 2016, p. 5). Nevertheless, and significantly, this insight more than hints at UK top 10 grocery retailer's awareness of the value of an extensive pool of nurtured and budding retail talent from which to handpick individuals who demonstrate the most valued vocational KSAOs attributed to performing well as a buyer. A luxury not necessarily afforded to all occupations and professions. As a point of departure from which to better understand the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer, this is significant. Primarily, because vocational experience and knowledge gained working within the wider retail community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) or previous exposure to the buying occupational context can be considered as potentially valuable, and a valid route of entry into the buying occupation. Here, I have identified an evident notion of a shop floor, rite of passage into the buying occupation as a significant cultural factor I will explore in more detail in the following pages of this chapter.

Valorising experiential knowledge and on the job learning

Indeed, findings reveal, of the (13) participants in this study who have practiced buying, six (6) entered the occupation as a university graduate and seven (7) entered as non-graduates. This insight provides evidence to suggest previous off the job academic attainment and credentials at graduate level has not been an essential or traditional pre-requisite of entry to the buying occupation. Of course, this study is necessarily historical, and statistics published by the ONS (2019) report the increase of graduates to September 2017 in the UK labour market:

> The percentage of the population classed as graduates has been rising steadily from 24% in 2002, to 42% in July to September 2017. This reflects changes to education since the 1970s, which have led to it becoming more common for people to undertake higher education and less common for people to have no qualifications.
>
> (ONS, 2017)

Despite the rise in graduate numbers, senior trading director, Joe puts a comparative angle on the graduate versus non-graduate statistics given above and his perspective reveals an example of executive level attitudinal insight towards both on and off the job learning within the sector.

> You know, when I look at people, and I'm thinking about my days *[on the executive trading board at a top 4 UK retailer]*. You know, I'm sitting there with a Cambridge University Law Degree and I'm sitting around a table with you know *[colleague's name]* who has no formal qualifications, but every bit as much right to sit round that table as I had, and he had learnt it all on the job. But he was damned good at what he did.
>
> And yeah, I think my degree, to an element, gave me a level of confidence to feel like I could go out into the world and compete and win. But it didn't give me permission to do well in the industry.
>
> (Joe)

It can be discerned from Joe's comments, the importance he has attached to the part, on the job learning played in his own success. Joe more than infers it was his, on the job learning and participation in work-based activities, which gave him the 'permission to do well' as a buyer. He does not underrate his prior off the job learning and his status as a graduate. Rather, he equates the validity and credibility of his own learning pathway with the principally vocational learning route of his colleague and has given it equality of status in considering their respective performance as successful senior buyers. Analysis also reveals how similar perceptions and attitudes are evident from all the participants of this study regardless of their graduate or non-graduate status, age or seniority. Kate, a group strategy director at a top 10 UK retailer, provides a strategically considered perspective towards entry level learning, education and knowledge as a foundational marker for potential performance as a buyer. When asked, "is it important that buyers have a degree level education", Kate's answer was measured:

> No not particularly. I think…I mean, I don't think it would hurt either. But no, I don't think it is necessary. I think what you might get, or what you might infer from a degree educated person is that there is a base level of intellect there, that might mean they can grasp some of the complexity of buying more easily. But if I was recruiting in that space it wouldn't particularly bother me whether someone had a degree or not".
>
> (Kate)

Rob, a senior buyer and Business and Spanish graduate, fervently explained his own perceptions for performance outlooks on entering buying as a non-graduate:

> For me you don't need formal qualifications. You don't need to have been to University, you don't need the degree. For me, learning on the job, learning the ropes as you go along is invaluable and probably teaches you a lot more than you might learn from a text book. Although I've got qualifications, I'm not…probably not that academic. I mean I'm not a book worm.

As a non-graduate entry trainee buyer, Edward reflected on his experience amongst his graduate peers:

> In fact, I think from a retail perspective, which is what we're talking about, I had a clear advantage that I'd worked in retail from the age of 14. So, I knew much more about the buying and selling process than any of the graduates I met. Cos, they hadn't worked in that environment.
>
> (Edward)

These perceptions and experiences drawn from the data are significant because, in trying to better understand the relationship between learning on and off the job and performance in the buying context they valorise the importance of experiential knowledge and learning opportunities which can be found in the workplace. Furthermore, the data indicates entry into the occupation and good performance is not solely dependent on graduate level academic credentials. This will encourage those who argue against ideas of human capital theory and the overemphasis and use of, "qualifications as a proxy for learning and skills" (Fuller et al., 2004, p. 2).

Being alive to the buying environment and developing an understanding of the complexity of the occupation are evident features of Kate's, Rob's and Edward's perspectives, all of which suggests at the entry level at least, the relationship between on and off the job learning and routes to performance as a buyer shares a broadmindedness and healthy respect towards the diversity of academic and vocational pathways.

Buying qualifications, David Beckham's tattoos and new initiatives

So far, the perceptions and experiences of participants suggests the road to becoming a buyer can start from a diversity of learning and educational backgrounds and have not identified a clearly defined pathway of entry into the occupation. Indeed, in this study, participants entering the buying occupation without a graduate level education were found to marginally outnumber those entering the occupation with a graduate level education, with most participants having entered buying with varying levels of vocational experience of the retail sector. One common factor which was found to be shared by all the participants was an absence of grocery buying specialist, academic or vocational qualifications attained prior to entering the occupation. Steven a senior buyer of 25 years' experience explains, "I can't think of a course in the UK that is vocationally based on grocery buying". Edward was also not aware of grocery buying specialist education in the UK, although he did point out:

> There are formal qualifications in purchasing, but that's all about buying and selling Widgets…and services and contracts…I looked at that and that was all about buying goods and services. It was non-retail buying.
>
> (Edward)

Simon reveals the absence of a buying curriculum or careers advise in core business education when reflecting on his experience as a business and marketing student at University:

> I didn't really get told about careers in that much detail really at Uni. And looking back now, I think bloody hell! Nothing about careers and what you could go into. There was a little bit on PR and Market Research, but, in terms of core business, you know, being a salesman or a buyer, no. Particularly with Morrisons being in Bradford, I was at University in Leeds, Asda in Leeds as well! You know there wasn't that much connection there, so that was a bit of a surprise.
>
> (Simon)

Collectively, the evidence from the data found all participants did not identify a nationally recognised VET syllabus for grocery retail buyers in the UK. Furthermore, Simon's experience implies low levels of occupational acknowledgement within a Russell Group HE institution. This may hold broader inferences to the profile of grocery buying in the wider HE and FE sectors given as, Eraut (2001, p. 7) suggest, “Universities have a recognised independent role in the creation and validation of knowledge”. And, although I have discussed the participant’s valorisation of experiential knowledge and workplace learning, paradoxically, the absence of a recognised grocery buying syllabus was a point of astonishment for, Steven who reflected:

> I don’t see any reason why now, you can get degrees on…David Beckham’s tattoos or whatever it might be, that you cannot have a formalised grocery buying degree!
>
> (Steven)

I interpret Steven’s comments to aim a blow and be dismissive of the credentials of some graduate qualifications (Lin & Lin, 2012) and their relevance, or irrelevance to the buying occupation and wider workplace. But conversely, Steven’s comments also point to his awareness of the growth in graduates in the UK and the perceived effects of increasing educational levels which, Karmel (2015, p. 29) suggests has been the, “lynch-pin of public education policy over the last 50 years (or longer)”. The data therefore indicates credentials associated with academic, occupational or professional qualifications hold value to some of the participants and suggest, academic and VET approaches within the occupation might be expected and would be welcomed. But as, Edward posits, there are barriers, “It’s just not a recognised profession is it?”. As we have seen, this may be a consequence of the structural controls seemingly exercised by some of the organisations in this study and resultant in notions of the buying occupation as, “hidden in plain sight” (Josh) Nevertheless, Edward stresses,

> There is a huge opportunity, I think for a [national syllabus] for the principles of buying goods for re-sale… A degree, a formal qualification.
>
> (Edward)

Edward is advocating formal, supplementary off the job training and the utility of converting experiential work placed knowledge and articulating it into, “a distinctive knowledge base” (Eraut, 2001, p 3) which he believes could augment grocery buyer learning. His notions of a, ‘huge opportunity’ to develop nationally recognised VET for the grocery buying occupation goes beyond the context of the 10 UK retailers featured in this study and is more broadly aimed at all UK grocery retailers, big or small. This is a perspective which falls out of the investigatory scope of this study but is a view which resonates with policy makers intent on, “strengthening the relationship between education systems and the economy” (Fuller et al., 2004, p. 1). And, those like, Illeris (2011, p. 33) who suggests:

> Today we must reckon with the need for both vocational basic training courses and workplace training having to be brought up to date to a considerable extent with supplementary training or direct retraining outside the workplace.

Such thinking can be evidenced by the initiatives emanating from the Sainsbury Report (2016) and the work of the Institute for Apprenticeships and Technical Education (IfATE) to develop apprenticeship standards across the occupational base in the UK. And, In- part, by the growing scrutiny and regulatory governance on buying practices in the UK by the Grocery Code Adjudicator (GCA).

To explain, since 2010 the GCA have mandated compulsory training on the requirements of GSCOP. As Groceries Code Adjudicator (GCA), Christine Tacon insists:

> Every buyer of the regulated retailers is trained in the code every year. I also look at the training when I go to visit the retailers and have fed back where I have felt the training to be inadequate
>
> (GCA, 2019)

Annual GSCOP training constitutes an example of compulsory post-appointment legislative knowledge and education applicable to ethical and corporate social responsibility accreditation at every level of grocery buying. GSCOP training for grocery buyers therefore amounts to an initiative to drive legislative national occupational standards which is likely to become increasingly complex as each year new case studies add to the growing interpretations of the code. This aspect of compulsory education for buyers is therefore likely to warrant further attention, development and codification. Additionally, the efforts being made by the IfATE to, "oversee the development, approval and publication of apprenticeship standards" (IfATE, 2019) in the UK have made recent advances in the direction of the buying occupation. Though not ready to use as of June 2019, a Buying Assistant apprenticeship standard is under development (IfATE, 2019) and has been designed and backed and designed by a, 'trailblazer' employer group which includes four (4) of the top 10 UK retailers featured in this study. The employer group has worked to identify the key knowledge, skills and behaviors appropriate for their definition of the buying occupation, which according to the IfATE (2019) covers the, "main tasks and duties characterised by a high degree of similarity and common ground across a relevant sector or sectors, rather than being associated with a single employer".

IfATE's requirements for its definition of an occupation are for it to be:

- Transferable to a range of employers
- Sufficiently broad, deep and skilled to require at least a year of employment and training with 20% of this being off the job
- Capable of providing full occupational competence for new entrants to the occupation
- Recognised and stand alone

(IfATE, 2019)

These initiatives are new, yet these findings provide additional insight to provoke notions found in this study of the growing influence of different state departments in their attempts to regulate occupational standards and enact blanket reforms of VET and technical education in the UK and which have started to impinge on the grocery buying occupation. This might signify early stages of the formulation of a nationally recognised buying syllabus and an alternative pathway of entering the grocery buying occupation further to those described by the participants of this research.

Learning culture and traditions

Close analysis of the data reveals how some participant's outlooks may have been influenced by what I interpreted to be culturally derived notions of on and off the job leaning which indicated learning practices that might be either discouraged or supported in developing buyers' occupational competence and performance. Where these recurring themes were found, I tied them to ideas of buying learning cultures and traditions. Here attention was turned to the guidance of Birch (2013, p. 17) who succinctly defines learning cultures as, "the practices through which learning takes place". For the purposes of this study, this means those, on and off the job buyer related learning practices which take place in the context of the top 10 UK retailers. I do not claim there is one prevailing or shared buying learning culture within this community of retailers. Rather, these findings infer buyer learning cultures can be tied to the prevailing organisational culture, community of practice (lave & Wenger, 1991) and the strategic direction and purposes of the individual organisation.

As Rebecca points out:

> In a corporate business you sort of have to conform a bit, don't you? And that's always going to be the challenge around corporate business, the investment in the individual and the strategic direction of the business.
>
> (Rebecca)

Rebecca's comments tie workplace learning, be it on or off the job, to ideas of learner conformity to the influences of the socio-cultural environment or as Avent (2017, p. 113) puts it, "success within a firm means: learning about and thriving within the culture". Rebecca's comments place further emphasis on the struggle between agency and structure by citing economic investment and hinting at managerial discretion as factors which influence an individual's restrictive or expansive (Fuller & Unwin, 2011) opportunities to learn within the buying workplace environment. This situates, Rebecca as the individual learner within the wider group of its members and structure of the organisation and confirms buyer workplace learning is not independent of context. These cultural and strategic factors of course differ along the lines of the conventional wisdom, and wide-ranging features influencing each retailer. Indeed, Mullins's (1965) description of culture as, "the way things are done around here" can be very much understood by a review of the diversity of cultural statements that adorn the corporate web-pages of all the retailers featured in this research.

The findings of this research do not aim to identify with any specific retail organisations learning culture. But, I cannot ignore Eraut's (2004, p. 201) supposition that, "learning is significantly influenced by the context and setting in which it occurs". Indeed, as can be seen from table (2.0) ten (10) of the thirteen (13) participants gained experience of learning on and off the job in more than one retail organisation throughout their careers and working lives. Their perceptions and experiences can therefore, be said to carry the influence of their respective histories, network of interactions and different learning cultures they have experienced.

The significance of participant learning experiences gained, "across a range of cultural groups" (Eraut, 2004, p. 201) has contributed, over time, to shaping their attitudes towards learning on and off the job and performance as a buyer and were particularly detectable in examining the participant's recounts of their transition to becoming a buyer.

A two-year tradition: of not making big mistakes with small categories

A notable feature of the proposed IfATE assistant buyer apprenticeship initiative particularly resonant with my own attempts to better understand how people become grocery buyers was the proposed 24-month duration of the programme. This is because, a period of two-years is commonly cited and perceived by most of the participants in this study to be the conventional timescale traditionally associated with transition on entry, to becoming a grocery buyer. This, "implies becoming a full participant, a member, a kind of person" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 53). Indeed, when I interviewed, Josh he was nearing the end of a two-year period as a trainee buyer at one of the top 4 UK grocery retailers. Through his words, Josh identifies with notions of transition from his identity as a trainee buyer and was soon, "looking to be signed off as a full-fledged buyer". When questioned about the duration of his training and anticipated new identity as a, "full-fledged buyer", Josh went on to explain:

> I think it'll be about right to be quite honest. I think those two years give you a good grounding in terms of the stupid questions, getting some of the silly mistakes out of the way as part of the on the job learning by the time you come to the end of it.
>
> (Josh)

Josh's comments are telling because they convey ideas of initial buyer VET and learning as a time-bound transformational action associated with a degree of organisational tolerance of trainee buyers learning by doing and inevitably, making mistakes. Josh's comments also allude to a predominantly on the job learning practice found to be frequently cited by many of the participants; explicitly, that of assigning responsibility for economically minor product categories to inexperienced buyers. Senior buyer, John's comments typify this philosophy of learning peripheral and economically minor product categories.

> They gave me a very small category, they weren't particularly interested in my views about how the category should be developed, they were just wanting somebody to manage it and make sure the world didn't fall out of the bottom of it.
>
> (John)

In Josh's case he explains:

> More often than not that [category] is something that has been split off from a larger category. So, for example, my Kids Yogurts is a sub-set of Yogurts and is not its own true category at all, so there is a buyer that looks after Yogurts, understands Kids Yogurts and is able to pass down knowledge that way.
>
> (Josh)

John went on to reflect on the positives and negatives of his experience and explained:

> It did help me that a lot of the categories I was given were in long term decline so actually the only way was up!
>
> I think they did that to minimise the impact of any calamitous decisions. If I make a mistake, the margin of error on a small category is going to be far less damaging than the margin of error on a much larger category.
>
> (John)

The practice of assigning minor categories as cited by the participants helps us to better understand what buyers learn on the job and links to performance in two important ways:

First, it reveals evidence of VET and learning traditions built on maximising trainee buyer exposure to the on the job operational complexities of the buying occupation whilst at the same time minimising the impact of any, "calamitous decisions or mistakes". Second, it infers a correlation between the economic size and profile of the product category for which a buyer is responsible with occupational status and proficiency. As I will later discuss, the data from this study indicates these factors may be deeply embedded in notions of buyer status and performance throughout their careers.

In at the deep end: on performance and the economics of buyer training

The participants do give widely varying accounts of this transitionary period of initial buyer learning. A recurring theme which could not go unreported because it identifies evidence of a further prominent learning culture and tradition I have interpreted to be associated with initial buyer VET and learning. Indeed, regardless of personal biography, analysis shows all participants talked of experiencing buyer VET in terms I have interpreted and tied to characteristics analogous to, being thrown in at the deep end and notions of sinking or swimming. John's and Simon's words explicitly use both terms to exemplify their own personal perception and experiences of buyer VET as a trainee.

> Then suddenly I was in this role which for me was a case of sink or swim. I couldn't allow myself to fail which for me meant the first few months were extremely difficult. They left you to your own devices.
>
> (John)
>
> I'd say really informal, I would class it as being thrown in at the deep end. And I think that term was actually used at the time. Yeah, thrown in at the deep end, prove yourself. I remember (Person C) saying it to me, you know, "We'll give you 2 categories, yeah and you prove yourself". Then it was about me driving that development and learning from people, but me owning that.
>
> (Simon)

In determining this understanding, I drew from the conceptual framework (Fig 1.0). Specifically, from notions of the three dimensions of pedagogy given by, Nind et al., (2016) as experienced, enacted and specified which was invaluable in focusing lines of inquiry on teasing out methods of teaching and learning as 'experienced' by the participants. Both, Simon's and John's experiences infer minimal alignment towards an off the job curriculum, structured learning routes and methods of teaching from their managers, colleagues or those around them. The focus being on using personal initiative and a self-directed learning approach to build practical vocational KSAOs from the outset. This approach resonated with participant notions of buying as a complex occupation requiring high levels of autonomy and decision-making capability to perform well. As, Tom points out:

> Buying to me is… you have to make it up sometimes. You have to think your way through things, you have to think about what's your next move, you have to think about the end result, you have to think of the impact on different areas and on others.
>
> (Tom)

The focus on self-direction and the predominance of, on the job buyer VET in the early stages of buyer development conceivably points to participant's experiencing customary methods of testing their future ability to be autonomous and cope with complexity and ambiguity. But, Rebecca adds a more culturally practical and economic reasoning to notions of a predominantly self-directed approach to buyer VET by explaining:

> I went in as a trainee. That business at the time, wouldn't have invested in training, so it was very much on the job training. Because they didn't see the value in it it's probably fair to say and, that there was a job to be done and the way to learn that job was on the job training.
>
> (Rebecca)

From Rebecca's comments a strong link can be distinguished to the economics of training buyers and a perceptible organisational orientation of buyer learning to activities which increase or enhance the immediate and future productivity of trainee buyers working in a fast moving and competitive retail environment. Even allowing for the management of economically minor product categories, trainee buyers in a UK top 10 retailer are likely to hold substantial economic responsibility from the early stages of their career. To exemplify this idea, Edward recounts the economic impact he made as a trainee buyer:

> So, my big break if you like was as a trainee. I was given what was called 'Boxed Cheese' right…So, this was the bottom end of the cheese range. It was things like Dairylea Triangles that came in boxes…
>
> And I took that business from making £11 million a year on 'Boxed Cheese' to £26 million in one year! Just by having it available. And that's what changed my career, because I got made a buyer after 2 years and within 12 months I'd been made the youngest deputy of a buying department at [a top 4 UK retailer] age 23.
>
> (Edward)

Analysis and interpretation could conceivably stress the economic importance to the retail firm of learning on the job and the notion of learning for the chief purposes of getting the job done, over secondary ideas of learning for personal development. As Fuller et al., (2004, p. 2) remind us, "learning is not the primary purpose of the organisation but is derived from the needs of fulfilling the organisational goal of providing goods and services".

Of course, Edward's words do not definitively trace what he endorses as enhanced economic performance, "from making £11 million a year on 'Boxed Cheese' to £26 million in one year!" to his learning. Indeed, the literature reviewed in this thesis has discussed the problems associated with evidencing connections between learning and performance. Yet, it is observable that Edward reasons his concept of enhanced economic performance to, "just by having it available". The inference here is that Edward had known or learnt to identify the prevailing availability issues of the 'Boxed Cheese' category. Thereby, Edward indicates the use of his cognitive abilities to think whilst engaged in the practice of buying and to act in a way that by his account, improved the availability of 'Boxed Cheese' and influenced the trajectory and outcome of his workplace activity. Tom's previous account also conveys the importance of, 'thinking your way through things" in the context of buyer performance. Here I will borrow from Billett (2004, p. 111) to further advance the potential significance of thinking and acting in relation to buyer learning.

> The process of thinking and acting become indistinguishable from learning. Therefore, learning when considered as changes in existing knowledge and ways of knowing, is inherent in everyday thinking and acting.

The extent of Edward's prior knowledge and workplace interactions which informed him of the influence enhanced 'availability' may have on the performance of the 'Boxed Cheese' category is not clearly understood. Nevertheless, in the VUCA context of the buying occupation, my interpretation of Edward's words is inclined to follow Billett's (2004, p. 111) proposition that,

> The most likely change arising through everyday thinking and acting, will be to reinforce or hone what is already known. A likely outcome from engaging in a task that is new to the individual is to extend what they already know: the development of new knowledge.

Though not conclusive, my interpretation of Edward's insight submits an example of how participation in on the job workplace activities may have contributed learning episodes that provided ingredients which could boost situationally based judgments about perceived links between Edward's on the job learning and his economic performance as buyer of the 'Boxed Cheese' category. Other potential ingredients, such as; prevailing market conditions, luck or indeed, Edward's own intuitive ability to grab a commercial opportunity may, override, mask or even enhance the contribution played by conceptualisations connecting learning to thinking and acting on the job. Yet, these factors as ingredients to performance, are equally problematic.

Nonetheless, through this analysis, questions emerge which conceivably reason for investigating further, the potential impact on economic performance to buying organisations who might speedily orientate trainee buyers to firm specific processes whilst encouraging them to situationally evaluate, think and act on the most appropriate participatory workplace processes and practices. This proposition sits contrary to occupations or workplace tasks where participatory practice specifically encourages the maintenance and continuity of the workplace processes. Of course, encouraging buyers to autonomously think and act may come with some element of uncertainty and risk to both the organisation and the individual. In Edward's case improved economic performance was achieved which enabled him to swim and not sink. Indeed, Edward directly attributes the economic measures of performance he achieved in the 'Boxed Cheese' category to his own promotion and to becoming, "the youngest deputy of a buying department at [a top 4 UK retailer] age 23". Thereby, at least in Edward's case, my interpretation connects perceived economic success of buying categories to one example of an organisational measure of successful performance as a buyer. Thus, the demonstration of thinking and acting on workplace processes in the buying context may represent some level of learning capacity associated with becoming a better buyer, even if this conceptualisation of learning comes with some individual and organisational uncertainty and risk which may also be associated with individual experiences of being thrown in at the deep end.

The data in this study leads me to suggest, new buyers need to be economically productive from the off if they are to be seen to perform well amongst the structure and prevailing culture of their organisation. I have concluded, buyers must first learn to participate fully with live economically important product categories in the highly competitive UK grocery market. This supports Becker's (1993, p. 31) economic presumptions that, "future productivity can be improved only at cost, for otherwise there would be an unlimited demand for training". In the case of grocery buyer VET, the evidence of this research points to the cost of educating buyers is being partially met by the perceived economic return on investment of their own efforts to drive the economic performance of their categories and by the amount of time spent invested in the buyer by others around them. A point which according to, Josh leaves individual buyer learning experience and performance a hostage to a degree of good fortune.

> I think it [buyer training] can be hit or miss depending on where you land [category] and with what type of [mentor] buyer you end up with. If you end up with someone who is keen on developing people, then it's obviously going to go pretty well.
>
> From what I've experienced…people have always been willing to take time and sort of walk me through things that I needed to learn or support me when I obviously needed support. But I could see the opposite being true. I suppose there is probably the case there for training to be slightly more standardised in that way.
>
> (Josh)

Sinking or swimming then, can be seen at least in part, to represent a buyer's efforts and capacity to learn successfully and to evidence their performance and productivity through results from the very start. Again, I turn to, John who recounts his own experience of being exposed to such performance scrutiny:

> I can remember vividly, the kick up the backside, which was…and I think it happens to all buyers, or at least I was told that. It gets to a point in your career where you are hauled in front of your Commercial Director and told that you're no good and you have to pull your socks up and if you don't you'll be out on your ear.
>
> (John)

John is recounting a pivotal sink or swim moment for him. A moment which he overcame and, like all the participants featured in this research, he survived to reap the rewards of varying levels of success in the buying occupation. It is pertinent for me to be explicit in pointing out therefore, that all who were interviewed and participated in this research, can be said to have swum and not to have sunk. It would therefore, be incorrect to accept that the seemingly traditional method of, throwing buyers in at the deep end constitutes an effective means of buyer VET and learning without additional consultation with those who failed to swim under such conditions. Perhaps the tradition of sinking or swimming owes as much to the yet, uncounted human cost not represented in this study of those that sunk rather than swam.

Of bricks and mortar and the digital economy: the changing face of the shop floor learning culture.

The background to this study has previously introduced the notion of a shop floor to top floor culture of learning and development that has been attached to the retail industry. The interview data certainly indicates evidence of the shop floor context as a site for participatory forms of learning and knowledge development linked to performance as a buyer. In fact, in this study eleven (11) of the (13) participants made mention of their previous experiences of working or learning on the shop floor and talked of its influence on their occupational learning and their ideas of its potential significance to buyer performance. Edward vividly recounted his experience of working and learning on the shop floor:

> So basically, I became a trainee retail manager with, British Home Stores, which meant I then spent 9 months at their store in Worthing in Sussex. Learning about stocking shelves and presenting goods and selling to customers and managing stores and training staff and all the stuff that goes around running a shop basically.
>
> (Edward)

Edward's experiences were contextually set almost 35 years previously in the 1980s, which were both hands on and managerial in context. But, the data reveals a more present-day experience and perspective, Josh a trainee buyer at a top 4 retailer:

> I had a six-month period where I worked in a Morrisons store in the Café and enjoyed the company ethic there and the comradery in store.
>
> (Josh)

Furthermore, Rob, "ended up working for Musgrave in stores in London, Bugden's basically for about 9 or 10 months" and, John recalled his time on the shop floor, "in the cash office, counting money, which I enjoyed". Joe's experience of the shop floor culture prior to his buying career was interesting in that he had, "grown up in a retail environment" under the social and cultural influences of his father's family run traditional corner shop. As, Joe described:

> This was the kind of organisation where people came in and said, "I want half a pound of bacon" and you cut it and weighed it up and that's what you did.
>
> (Joe)

The varied shop floor contexts of each example given indicate participant's experiences and perceptions that share an affinity with what I interpret to be evidence of a sustained culture of buyer VET rooted in an almost spiritual like reverence of the shop floor, which this study can trace back to the perceptions of most participants. For, Edward the customer facing culture of the shop floor brought home a sense of an invaluable learning experience and productive benefit, as he explained:

> What it [the shop floor culture] did bring home to me, which was very much what I then learnt subsequently, is that buyers, buyers have to be as good at selling and knowing their customer as people who run the shops.
>
> (Edward)

Edward's words are supported widely by most of the participants in this study. Former category director, Tom's testimony offers just such insight on the perceived criticality of the customer facing culture of the shop floor. When questioned about the essence of learning as a buyer, he emphasised an assertion that claimed, "you always start with your customer". By this, Tom is stating that a buyer should start with what a buyer thinks the customer wants. Of course, a buyer cannot know with certainty what a customer wants or does not want, but the shop floor is seen as a place where those who run the shops interact closest with the customer and increased knowledge and certainty of customers' needs can be found and is considered to be a fundamental factor to performance as a buyer. The importance of gut-feel and the accumulation of tacit knowledge and experience of the buyer through physical interaction with customers is being highlighted here. Yet, this is perhaps indicative of culturally conservative perceptions, allied to the customary predominance of bricks and mortar, shop-based, on the job, learning traditions which might feed the compulsion of participants to perpetuate this type of thinking.

Especially so in view of statistics pointing to the growing impact of online grocery shopping, which in recent times have marked a significant shift in the overall balance in grocery retail sales and which gives reason to re-think conceptualisations of the grocery shop floor as the font of buyer VET and learning. According to retail research conducted by Nielsen BrandBank (2019):

> Even though only 6.1% of UK grocery sales are made online, 29% of UK shoppers browse products online before purchasing in-store, so the role of ecommerce websites in driving UK sales is potentially far higher than this figure suggests.

Interpreting this data has led me to prospect, that no longer can we consider the grocery shop floor as a purely physical space. The online trend in grocery retailing signifies the emergence of an expanding, complimentary rather than competing digital shop floor. Indeed, my analysis of the data in this study would have faltered without giving recognition to broader factors of what, Avent (2017 p. 79-97) describes as the, "dynamics of the digital economy" and notions of, "the firm as an information processing organism". Technological advances now mean grocery retailers routinely exchange dialogue and interact with consumers through multiple digital means which in turn, leave a data footprint enabling data savvy retailers to, "structure their internal flows of information in ways that yield things customers want" (Avent, 2017, p. 98). Introduced in 1995, Tesco's Clubcard provides the most prominent example of how the UK's largest grocery retailer legitimately harvests data from registered customers to better, "understand our customers including their patterns, behaviors as well as their likes and dislikes" (Tesco, 2017).

The digital shop floor means it is no longer necessary for consumers to visit grocery stores so often. Consumers ability to check prices, browse promotions, and post comments on social media or via corporate webpages suggests the retail shop floor is expanding furthermore into a virtual, online digital selling space. Retail researchers, Nielsen BrandBank (2019) propose, "Thinking in terms of ‘bricks’ versus ‘clicks’ is outdated; ‘bricks-and-clicks’ is the current and future retail reality”. Therefore, rethinking what is meant by the shop floor and better understanding how its changing shape might inform grocery buyer VET, may, in the future, yield more fruitful and productive methods of buyer learning and teaching as retail becomes increasingly about gathering and processing large amounts of data and information (Avent, 2017).

Learning by anecdote, shooting from the hip and data management software as the surrogate teacher

Most participants in this research have experienced changing times and the evolution of UK top 10 grocery retailers as information processing organisms. Indeed, nine (9) of the participants have buying careers which span over 20 years’ service which has given a historical and almost longitudinal perspective on the impact of the digital era on the culture of buyer VET and learning. Senior buyer, John’s experience stands out in this respect because the emergence of the digital age in his time as a buyer signaled an opportunity for him to enhance his knowledge and understanding of his job and his performance as a buyer. John recounts taking his first steps into using increasingly accessible office-based spreadsheet software like, Microsoft Excel which marked the start of what he describes as:

> An analytical understanding of my category rather than what up to press had been quite a superficial and shallow understanding. The way in which I learnt was typically by anecdote, I found. It was stuff that they kind of just planted in your head and you had to interpret. My decisions up until that point…well, I was shooting from the hip.
>
> The analytical stuff… which I hadn’t been formally trained, but I liked math and stuff and suddenly there was some tangible subjects that I could finally bring to the role.
>
> It’s the one aspect, the analytical stuff that has remained constant since that day. And since that day, of a different approach if you like of managing my range which was really to get in to the numbers, facilitated by things like spreadsheets and those kinds of tools. Ever since it has informed me on everything I have ever done. I think that’s vital.
>
> (John)

Taken in the historical context of a seemingly self-directed, on the job, sink or swim learning culture, John is suggesting that using data management software informed his learning in a more concrete way than his manager, mentors or those around him did. In this way, it can be interpreted that learning to use data management software gave John a platform for greater assurance of his perceptions of occupational knowledge and his role as a buyer. In John’s case these early data management tools appear to have taken on the role of his surrogate teacher. By this, I mean a substitute to the limited access to a senior manager, instructor, mentor or guide willing, as he perceived it, to adequately assess and supervise his learning. Yet, at this occupational stage of his buying career this was a teaching and learning mechanism, John initially appeared anxious about using and which required clandestine measures to peruse:

> Then we didn't have the analytical tools, plus the fact at the time it was frowned upon and if I'd have asked to go on…go on the computer and then boot up Excel, I probably would have been sacked on the spot.
>
> (John)

As the findings of this study will later discuss, modern buying is certainly not as conservative about technological change and innovation as portrayed by John. John's experience perhaps marks a point in time, pivotal between the past and the present and signifies a move towards a changing learning culture in grocery buying which looks increasingly set to challenge notions of the effectiveness of human characteristics of learning by anecdote, from gut feel or shooting from the hip.

The participants of this study strongly indicate that buyers have traditionally gained much of their customer facing, commercial astuteness based on the foundations of a predominantly on the job approach to learning. Yet, the data also reveals participant explanations suggesting the need for buyers to demonstrate increasing levels of competency in data management to inform their occupational decision making. Much of this type of data management skill and learning can now be gained by schooling or training which is commercially available or through FE or HE education establishment at undergraduate or post-graduate level. This could indicate the rise in status of off the job learning to performance as a buyer and the importance of early exposure and preparation for what appears to be the future analytical world of the buyer. As, Jacob an experienced trading director points out:

> Most of them, [new buyers] do come to the role with quite good data management and analytical understanding and I think that's the age we are in anyway. They are brought up with those tools and those skills. A lot of them do business [degrees] and they are a certain type of individual.
>
> (Jacob)

There is perhaps a concern to raise here from the human capital and social mobility perspective. Obtaining data management skills can be costly and are the domain of those with access or who can afford to invest adequately in equipment, time and tuition to obtain them. This cost of learning is being met by the individual and has led me to question whether the rise in technology and data management has becomes as much a barrier to the occupation as a gateway. John gives some indication of the decline in recent times of potential buyers entering the occupation from the shop floor. From his experience he recalled, "I can't think of one person who has been brought in from the shop floor now". For most of the participants in this study with decades of buying experience, modern methods of data management and analysis had to be learnt on the job and were much less relevant in the days of their entry to the occupation. Jacob's previous remarks suggest these modern data management knowledge, skills and abilities are now an expected pre-requisite of the buyer.

Furthermore, there is a perceptible tension between changing notions of the type of individual suitable for the buying role. The data management savvy type of individual branded by, Jacob can be viewed in stark contrast to notions of the, "natural trader" identified by, Joe when speaking of a former colleague,

> You know he was just a natural trader. He just wouldn't want to work that way [with spreadsheets and data tables] and he'd feel stifled. I don't think you can train in that natural trading ability and thought process. He was just a natural innovative thinker. A guy with not much formal education but got great results.
>
> (Joe)

I have not uncovered evidence to suggest that the trend found in the data which moves us towards the data savvy buyer is contested by participants. Indeed, most of the generation of buyers interviewed for this study show concern with the potential passing and influence of core concepts of buyer types, KSAOs and core concepts of on and off the job learning which they have inferred fosters the potential to do well as buyer and which the following section now goes on to identify and discuss.

Section 2. Learning the core: KSAOs, performance and the person

Learning the core: on and off the job learning and the KSAOs of a buyer

Analysing data on how people become buyers has so far contributed to findings that outline buying occupational pathways, learning cultures and traditions which portrays the past predominance of irregular participatory forms of learning. Yet this background is offset against analysis from the data which also points to growing trends and increasing demand for wider ideas of VET in the buying occupation driven by the rise in IT. The evolution of the present-day data savvy buyer who might be considered better equipped to cope with the demands of emerging IT innovation is perceptively therefore, on a trajectory consistent with notions of the retail firm as an, information processing organism (Avent, 2017). In the following pages, I will discuss findings which reveal the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer in greater depth. This is achieved by analysing participant data gained from a line of enquiry, informed in-part, by, Sfard (1998) whose work talks to this research through her ideas, "on two metaphors for learning and the dangers of choosing just one". Sfard's (1998) approach makes neither the case for, or against either concept of learning as participation and of learning as acquisition and has inspired the following questions which support aims to better understand the balance of the relationship between on and off the job learning in the buying occupational context. As a reminder, the questions I have used sought to better understand:

a. What do grocery retail buyers learn on the job?
b. What do grocery retail buyers learn off the job?

The purpose of these questions was to tease out (Nind et al., 2016) participants' perceptions of the central features of buyer on and off the job VET and learning and to identify those core KSAOs and tasks of a buyer. My intention was not to use this line of questioning to make binary comparisons of on and off the job learning in the buying occupation. On the contrary, these questions were used in a complementary way, to give equal weighting and measures of consideration to both spaces of learning. The questions then, have been employed to provoke participant insight on what core aspects of on and off the job learning are perceived to be most relevant to the buying context and contribute to performance within the occupational field.

Learning to negotiate and situational cognition.

> So, I think inevitably, as a buyer you get into negotiation and that's a big part of the role.
> (Kate)

As Kate points out, negotiation is undoubtedly an integral feature of the grocery buying role. According to, Jacks (2018, p. 7) negotiation is defined as, "a process of making a deal and agreeing arrangements on which it is arranged". For Patrick, "it's the number 1, always should be negotiation number 1". The ability for buyers to successfully negotiate and, "build relationships" (Simon) with suppliers on behalf of their organisations is identified by participants and perceived to be a primary core skill and an essential ingredient in the assortment of KSAOs of a buyer by all the participants in this research. As, Simon goes on to explain, "negotiation, it's treated like your day to day in your job, which is what it should be". Thus, learning the art of negotiation constitutes a significant portion of buyer VET and learning.

For all the participants, learning and developing negotiation skills are predominantly learnt on the job, situated in the real world of grocery buying and rooted in concepts of situated cognition, (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In this way, learning to negotiate is achieved predominantly by interacting in live negotiation situations. The data suggests this interaction and learning occur either individually or in groups and is, "supported by coaching or scaffolding" (Russ-Eft, 2011, p. 125) which fades as buyers experience and competency is seen to increase. Senior buyer, Rob's comments evoke this sense of the situated nature of learning to negotiate as a buyer:

> I still remember my first meeting [negotiation] with a supplier. It was with, [person, x] and [person, y]. Those guys had been doing it for years and years and I'd kind of probably been…2 or 3 weeks into the role. But for me that was the best way to learn. There was no text book, there was no manual, no formal training as such when you went through that.
>
> Yeah, you got guidance and support from your line manager at the time, but you've got to show the ability and capabilities to get on and get it done.
>
> (Rob)

Though, Rob is recounting his situated learning experience as a newcomer to buying and negotiation, evidence from, Tom describing negotiation as an established buyer, infers this situated mode of learning and continued development is enacted irrespective of the seniority or status of the individual buyer. Indeed, when asked to clarify how he knew he was learning in this situated way, Tom explained:

> Because every day I was coming home with something new, with a different angle. Because what [person a] was good at after meeting with suppliers… and directly after the meeting he'd recap, and we'd talk, and I'd say, why did you do that at that point in time? What were you thinking? So, I was wanting to learn.
>
> (Tom)

Tom's comments are typical of examples from the data which depict routine interaction and, on action (Schön, 1991) review of negotiation activities between subordinates, managers and peers alike. This affordance of workplace learning opportunities and co-participation (Billet, 2001) with colleagues is a mode of on the job workplace pedagogy appearing to play a role in conferring, "educational progress" (Lave & Wenger, 1991, p. 62) whilst at the same time, asserting control over negotiation outputs and performance at all levels of buying as set within the culture and traditions of the individual retail organisations.

A 'Gap' in buyer knowledge: supplementing situated cognition

Despite the significance participants attached to negotiation as a frontline activity and core buying skill, there was no evidence in the data which suggested any of the participants had first attended specialist negotiation training or education before they entered the buying occupation. Exposure to learning negotiation was in all cases, first situated in the organisational and buying context and supervised by more experienced others. Any specialist, off the job negotiation training and education undertaken by the participants was done so as established buyers. I interpret this to indicate an underlying rationale used by retail firms to educate buyers in such a way as to first establish and thereafter, preserve organisational continuity of processes and cultures which might be seen to hold competitive advantage and maintain operational stability. This is important because in my experience, the nature of retail negotiation is an inherently competitive social process of communication, where the parties involved will want to know what is in the negotiation for them. The following extract taken from, category director, Tom recounts his own experience of observing the positioning of such opposing points in a negotiation situation between his then, senior buying director and a sales representative.

> So big company, a really big company came in to his [senior buying director's] office. He had the very end office in the building okay, which had doors to a garden. And the [sales] guy walked in and sat down. He [senior buying director] said, "what's your offer?" and the [sales] guy put a piece of paper in front of him as if to say that's my offer.
>
> He [senior buying director] turned to him and said, "mmm, not only have you abused my hospitality by sitting here and drinking a cup of Tea, you have now insulted my intelligence. Okay, you are no longer welcome in this building". And with that he stood up and walked into the garden. End of discussion.
>
> The [sales] guy sat there, didn't know what to do. They had a multi-million-pound business with our company!
>
> (Tom)

Of course, Tom's extract depicts a rather macho, one-sided event and collaboration is required between parties to arrive at an outcome. What analysis has shown is that retail grocery buying negotiation, buyer with supplier, is not a ubiquitous or uniform activity. In the buying context the data clearly demonstrates that economic outcomes and notions of winning and losing can ride on the outcome of negotiations, this can include performance implications for both the individual and the firm and of course, there are many tactics which can be employed in any negotiation. These might stem from combative, highly competitive modes of negotiation expressed by, Tom to more integrative or collaborative approaches which seek to find a solution seen to be more collaborative and mutually beneficial. Retail buying negotiation is far more complex and competitive than simplistic ideas of, "a process of making a deal and agreeing arrangements on which it is arranged" (Jacks, 2018, p. 7). The data suggests the contextual perspective of the individual retail firm and the prevailing strategies, structures, resources, processes and practices will underpin negotiations; all of which need to be learnt and understood by the buyer so not to raise the threat of displacing continuity to the ways of working which prevail in different retail firms.

As a topic, negotiation is fascinating, and much insight can be found in the data which alludes to many of the methods and tactics used by UK top 10 grocery buyers which, if endorsed appropriately, would prove insightful for any such future study. But to debate the advantages and disadvantages of negotiation strategy here, sits well outside the scope of this research. Though as a topic for buyer education, negotiation training was perceived by many of the participants as the most important aspect of buyer, off the job learning identified in this study. According to, Steven:

> One of the best things I ever learnt, coming onto shall we say, the formal side of education, was going on a GAP [negotiation] course.
>
> (Steven)

Steven refers to a commercially available specialist range of negotiation training undertaken residentially by learners over a period of three or four continuous days. I use the organisations name, GAP, freely because it is widely cited in the positive by many of the participants and because I will not refer to any of the course content mentioned by participants. John, claimed his experience of, learning about practice rather than from practice, was vital in validating and making sense of his own situated learning experience and practice.

> The GAP Negotiation course which we did, that's invaluable. The point where I actually, on reflection, got the most out of, if not to validate my negotiation technique up to press.
>
> As I said, you're taught a load of theory and techniques, and although a lot of it was rubber stamping …some of it was rubber stamping, some of it you would use to refine existing bad practice if you like.
>
> (John)

A particularly interesting point to note from, John's comments, is his receptiveness to use his experience of off the job learning to compare, contrast and challenge the legitimacy of his own situationally gained understanding of negotiation. John provides reasoning which infers his situated learning in this respect did not always provide the model or opportunity for him to challenge his own learning, his assumptions or indeed the knowledge and authority of more experienced others. His reference to rubber stamping perhaps shows the value of formal learning environments as a means to help assess and validate off the job learning. The following excerpt from the data provides an enlightening example of John's experiences of situated learning and of his feelings on being challenged over his own negotiation practice.

> At the time it was terrifying, cos I was just being told off about everything. I was being told off, told I was not too good. Which is fine when you're in school, but when you're in a company and they are paying your wages and you then use those wages to pay your accommodation and your food, with no family network to fall back on, it's quite terrifying.
>
> Yes, things like being told, "put down the phone, you've been talking way too long"
>
> You don't do that again!
>
> (John)

Learning in fear: on clones and heretics

John's reprimand constitutes a learning experience that clearly left a mark on him which by his own account, inferentially at least, influenced his workplace practice and behaviour. The enforcement of continuity of practice by others might not be a palatable pedagogy in the workplace to all, but its presence ties with John's claims of experiencing challenges to his workplace practices. Here, the data provided evidence of a fine line which separates learning to survive as a buyer, from learning to thrive as a buyer and which sits deep inside concepts of this type of situated and co-participatory learning. This is because, John, was ostensibly learning in fear. In the case given he has clearly muted his thoughts of challenging assumptions or seeking clarification of his understanding, in fear of what he perceived as the consequences threatening his economic and financial security. Lave & Wenger, (1991, p. 116) might argue that, John's experience reflects notions of, "submissive imitation" and would imply that in such learning environments, "Knowers come in a range of types, from clones to heretics". My interpretation therefore, could be argued as, naïve. Yet, John's comments point constructively to ideas of the benefits of supplementing situated learning with access to progressive, specialist knowledge and off the job VET. This might be used as an independent means to combat submissive imitation, complement self-assessment or critique by clones or heretics, and re-ignite any muted understandings that might manifest in such situated circumstances (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In, John's case, specialist negotiation training and learning served to lessen his frustrations and help him to guard against what he might perceive to be inappropriate forms of learning and workplace practice without direct rebuke and which in his eyes, directly enhanced the status of this type of, off the job learning as a perceived performance enhancing activity for the buyer. As, Billett (2001, p. 70) warns, "Considerations of a workplace pedagogy cannot be restricted to deliberate guided learning experiences enacted in the workplace".

Yet, turning to notions of, three dimensions of pedagogy (Nind, et al., 2016) from the conceptual framework to guide enquiry, I found specialist, off the job negotiation training and learning was not specified by UK retailers as a mandatory learning activity. In fact, except for GSCOP training, there was no suggestion offered by participants of any type of mandated specialist, off the job buyer VET. Here, I make the distinction between specialist forms of off the job training, like negotiation which are directly applicable to core buying skills and generic forms of buyer, off the job VET. Edward's comments typify concepts of generic forms of off the job training found by participants in this research.

> There was some off the job training on specific things like; managing time…yes, more generic office skills. On things like speaking and…what was it called? It was basically a speaking course. How to communicate and articulate an answer and present stuff in a meeting.
>
> (Edward)

As, Simon explains:

> I think the only course that I've really taken a lot out of is the Gap Negotiation course, that's it. That's the only course that I've been on. It's an unbelievable course, I've been on it at [2 different UK top 4 grocery retailers] but you know, that's the only course I've been on. And, advised to go on…it's not mandatory. You know, but, there's no mandatory learning. You are thrown in at the deep end, you sink or swim…Err, if you sink then you're out pretty quickly.
>
> (Simon)

Specified, mandatory VET programmes are not a general feature of buyer VET as experienced and recounted by the participants of this research. Indeed, Simon's comments above, show the relatively insignificant amount of time he spent away from his day job engaged in mandatory specialist or generic learning activities as a buyer at two, top 4 UK retailers. A point also brought out by, Rob who stated:

> In the twelve years that I've been a buyer there hasn't been that much training, that formal training support or anything. No, there hasn't been loads.
>
> (Rob)

Yet, the apparent absence of an identifiable specified curriculum and mandatory training programme perhaps gives a false impression of the level of access to acquisitional leaning opportunities experienced and open to the participants featured in this research. Indeed, the data is scattered with references to a diverse variety of organisationally based or externally provided learning opportunities which shows retail organisations do recognise the buyer's, "dual role of learner and productive worker" (Thompson, 2010, p. 129). For example, Rebecca talks of her experience participating in a part-time, "Mini MBA" run by a University Business School. Edward recounts his opportunity to reside on a two-week management learning programme at, "Harvard, on executive training" and as, John points out when referring to his knowledge of learning opportunities from within his organisational learning academy, “we have all manner of different courses”. Table (2.9) is given to provide a typology of off the Job VET learning opportunities cited by participants in this research. The terms used to denote the types of training and education reflective of the participants descriptions and experiences and do not reflect the level, duration or perceived effectiveness.

Table 2.9. Typology of buyer off the job VET and learning

Types of buyer off the job VET as experienced and described by participants
Negotiation training
Management diploma programmes (mini MBAs)
Mandatory GSCOP training
Report writing
Effective speaking and listening
Managing conflict
Time management
Microsoft PowerPoint Word, Excel, PowerPoint *(also referred to as spreadsheets)*
Management and Leadership (Leading teams and Leading Individuals)
BI systems (Business intelligence)
Coaching and mentoring
Effective appraisals and one to ones
Personal business executive coach *(This was specific to one senior participant)*
Decision making and planning

Evidently then, the participants in this research have been exposed to a system of occupational VET and learning that can be seen to potentially offer buyers a flexible, eclectic pick and mix of off the job learning opportunities from which to regularly develop personal occupational KSAOs and supplement on the job learning. The data suggests that buyer learning is contextually bound to the extent of the buyer’s workplace as a learning environment, personal autonomy, ability, motivation and the opportunities afforded to them. John’s comments below, are insightful in this respect because, set against the back drop of wide-ranging off the job learning opportunities, John is clearly exercising his individual autonomy in electing his learning decisions.

> I’ve never taken part and I kind of resist all efforts to…I’ve been fobbing people off for…what we call HR now, for months now.
>
> (John)

The correlation between the relevance of off the job learning to his performance as a buyer and his prevailing occupational motivations and needs perhaps contributes to John's attitude which clearly pushes back against this form of learning. The idea of learning relevance to occupational status and motivational need will be examined at greater length in chapters five and six. Furthermore, this type of participant perception perhaps inadvertently, communicates notions of the relationship between on and off the job learning as being restricted to the workplace, disjointed or underdeveloped as a system of learning, short of wider occupational or organisational coordination. Especially so when compared to systems of VET associated with professions that typically require qualifying examinations, memberships to associations and portfolios evidencing vocational ability (Eraut, 2001). Yet, I have not interpreted ideas of the perceived disjuncture of buyer VET learning to necessarily mean restricted or inferior to more structured, codified learning associated with conventional notions of, "learning as a product, where individuals acquire packages of skills and knowledge" (Fuller & Unwin, 2011, p. 51).

To the contrary, the participants featured in this study have evidently been exposed to a range of different sectoral learning environments and approaches to VET and learning and draws attention to synergies between buyer on and off the job learning and notions offered by Fuller & Unwin's (2004) conceptualisation of restrictive and expansive features of workplaces as learning environments. Using Fuller & Unwin's ideas have helped interpret the individual perceptions and experiences of participants by providing insight that takes account of sectoral differences and further moderated my temptations of making binary comparisons of how learning is understood cautioned by, Sfard (1998) and instrumental in the conceptual framework of this research. Moreover, notions of expansive-restrictive learning environments helped better understand the research question by directing my investigations to trends in the data I perceive links to advances towards expansive learning environments by top 10 UK retailers. By expansive, I mean learning environments that develop buyer VET and occupational transition over several years. Which make provision of time and opportunity for buyers to gain a range of, off the job learning activities that supplement core, off the job occupational learning and afford levels of buyer autonomy in selecting those generic and specialist learning opportunities. Furthermore, expansive learning environments are said to display evidence of an on the job pedagogy that perceptibly:

> treats learning as part of work, supported by supervisory and managerial processes such as mentoring and coaching, and embedded within appraisal and other review procedures.
>
> (Fuller & Unwin 2011, p. 52)

Trainee buyer, Josh's comments below are given to exemplify such ideas found in the data:

> You do get a mentor, in terms of a senior leader within the business to sort of meet with you and try and guide career progression, where we want to go…
>
> Yeah, so when August comes they'll monitor what I've done, and what I'm doing, and essentially, I'll do a presentation at the end where I'll take them through what I've done and obviously, there is ongoing performance reviews.
>
> (Josh)

Analysis of, Josh's comments reveal links between his learning and the alignment of his personal performance as a buyer with that of organisational targets. This shows some buyer learning, though not necessarily formally specified in conventionally coordinated, mandatory packages are nevertheless consciously, "integrated within a symbiotic relationship" (Fuller & Unwin, 2011, p. 52).

Learning whole category dynamics

Further analysis of Josh's previous insight suggests, individual buyer performance is aligned with organisational strategy which can be closely tied with the performance goals of the product categories buyers are responsible for. The implications for buyer VET in this context are concisely put by Kate who insists:

> So, I think we expect them [buyers] to understand much more about the, whole category dynamics.
>
> (Kate)

Learning, "the whole category dynamics" is a phrase used by, Kate to capture the extensiveness and complexity of buying grocery product categories. It is a theme of central importance emphasised by participants as an essential foundation to buyer VET and a key concept of learning from which I interpret the core KSAOs of buyers to emanate. As, former group trading director, Patrick explains:

> So, ideally you want to give people [buyers] an understanding and appreciation of all the different dynamics that are going to get the product to the shelf and what makes and drives that profitability and the trade-offs you're having to make.
>
> (Patrick)

Patrick's comments are broad but are used to convey the necessity evidenced in this research for buyers to acquire knowledge and understanding of whole category dynamics which encompass the end to end trading process that spans across organisational, interdepartmental divisions of labour and the wider social boundaries of the grocery retail world. I will later discuss the role of social learning and collaboration that takes place across these boundaries however, for now, emphasis continues with, Kate's remarks below, which impart further detail surrounding the centrality and complexity of what is meant by, learning the 'whole category dynamics' and provides the starting point from which to examine the concept and its relationship to learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. As Kate explains:

> So, you're asking them [buyers] to understand the dynamics of the category as a whole, and then have a conversation with a supplier. And, the fact that you've got multiple levers that you can pull that culminate in a supplier discussion.
>
> You've got to think about…understand where you want to take your range, your range hierarchy, and some of the different roles' products play within that mix and therefore which supplier you're talking to.
>
> Understand how the supplier is engaging with you relative to the performance of the product so you are viewing what they are talking.
>
> Understand the different promotional dynamics that are going on. That's becoming more complex because it's no longer just kind of broadcast promotions, it's also personalised promotions.
>
> (Kate)

Kate's portrayal is expressive because it unravelled and identified some of the key constituent subjects, characteristics and features which were identifiable elsewhere in the data and which collectively, have been interpreted to make up the constituent parts of whole category dynamics that underpin what buyers need to know and, or need to do (Young, 2004) in fulfilling the buying role. For example, understanding the product range, understanding promotions and understanding the supplier base to name but three.   The data is full of insight alluding to what, John refers to as buyers with "hands in so many different pots like supply chain, ordering stock, managing inventory levels, scheduling deliveries and all that kind of thing". Kate's insight especially inspired rationale for investigating the primary and secondary data base to establish an inventory of the constituent parts which shape a general representation of the core foundations of buyer KSAOs and which I have routed back to the concept proposed by this research of learning whole category dynamics.

The following table (3.0) give overleaf, provides a summary inventory of the core constituent parts representative of what is meant by learning whole category dynamics found in this research. The table is not in any way hierarchal or positioned as an exhaustive representation of all the associated constituent category dynamics buyers might be called upon to learn and do. Rather, the table is given to illustrate that the buying role is not limited to a minor field of knowledge, skills or expertise. Indeed, the table's contents illustrate the wide-ranging factors of buyer on the job learning and KSAOs which are learnt and cultivated inter-subjectively and draw from understanding other occupational areas like supply chain, marketing and store merchandising functions. As the following pages and sub-section will discuss, the table's contents provide an overview that accentuates the importance of participatory notions of collective collaboration and social learning as a factor of performance as a buyer. Furthermore, by condensing the data from participants in the table an inventory of the core constituents of whole category dynamics is created which might be useful in forming a buying curriculum or scheme of work from which more general acquisitional off the job learning activities and resources might be developed as an output of this research.

Table 3.0. Core constituents to learning whole category dynamics

Core constituents to learning whole category dynamics
Understand the category local and global supplier base.
Understand the category product range.
Understand the category product hierarchy.
Understand category product engineering and manufacturing.
Understand the category marketing and promotional dynamics.
Understand category retail pricing dynamics.
Understand the category product cost base dynamics.
Understand the category supply chain, warehousing and distribution channels.
Understand category ranging and in store merchandising.
Understand category market trends and competitive sets.
Understand category customer insight and purchasing behaviours.
Understand category technological and health and safety compliance.
Understand category social and ethical impacts.
Understand category customer segmentation and demographics.
Understand corporate or organisational category strategy; financial, sales and quality.
Understand category product design and development trends and opportunities.
Understand category formats and channels.
Understand category manufacturing principles.

Tailoring on and off the job learning

As can be seen, table (3.0) shows findings which are presented as core constituents of understanding whole category dynamics and which I propose, underpins the origin and development of buyer KSAOs. But, as already discussed, investigations show buyer learning to be highly contextualised and influenced by the prevailing organisational culture and context, the individual competency and understanding of the buyer and the mix of product categories buyers are responsible for. The last point is important to emphasise because different product categories carry with them contrasting dynamics. Buying responsibility for bread, soft drinks, seafood or dairy categories for example, all require an understanding of the subtleties, nuances and specialist knowledge associated with their respective environments. This background might nurture the need and propensity for the individual buyers featured in this research to principally self-direct and demonstrate elective agency in tailoring their own VET and learning activities. In all cases, notions of creating personal development plans and learning objectives came down to individual responsibility.

Such an approach to learning has, in turn led to findings which identify participants with what amounts to individualised portfolios of KSAOs which carry features shaped by the predominantly on the job core constituents of whole category dynamics yet, are also reflective of the prevailing social conditions and strategies needed to perform in their respective organisations. This evident approach to learning and developing buyer KSAOs is not perceptively driven by individual buyer preference or philosophical stance towards the merits of learning on or off the job. Indeed, the data suggests that many of the participants in this research are learning without calling it learning and draw comparison with Eraut's (2011) research which found:

> over a wide range of professions and workplaces, informal workplace activities provided between 70-90 percent of the learning; but informal learning was treated as only an occasional by-product. Hence most discussions of learning dealt only with formal, organized events.
>
> (Eraut, 2011, p. 12)

Buyer learning and development as interpreted in this study, is driven more by buyers' pragmatic assessments linked to their own, ability, motivation and opportunities to produce actions that foremost, drive category performance in line with organisational and individual performance measures as a buyer. This is an observation from the data clearly understood by Jacob who explained:

> Learning action that then delivers results determines not only the success of that range, but also the success of that buyer.
>
> (Jacob)

This was a point also understood by Rebecca who succinctly insisted:

> Well, within a learning environment, it's more about how you structure the discussion or the debate but not the outcome. Whereas in a business…business position the debate, and the discussion is fine, but what you are going to deliver out of it? And that's the difference.
>
> (Rebecca)

Rebeca is suggesting learning activities must contribute to economic and product category-based performance outcomes as a buyer, learning activities this research has found to be predominantly participatory and, on the job, focussed. Notwithstanding the specialist negotiation training and the supplementary generic, off the job learning I have identified (Table, 2.9), few learning activities which develop theoretical outcomes have taken the buyers featured in this research away from the productive processes and activities associated with what I have branded as the core whole category dynamics for any significant length of time.

Owning the category: central cog amongst multiple communities of practice

The evident predominance of on the job learning in the buying occupation points to the pivotal decision-making role the buyers occupy in the end to end trading process of getting products from supplier to the supermarket shelves. Reflecting on his experiences and perceptions gained over 40 years in the retail trading environment, former group trading director at a top 4 UK retailer, Edward explains:

> I was very clear that the buyer should own the category and be accountable for the decisions. But, they needed a good process to make those decisions and they needed a clear division of responsibilities such that people knew what part they played in the process. But the person that ultimately took the decisions and was accountable for the success or failure of those decisions was the buyer.
>
> (Edward)

Edward's comments indicate that buyers do not operate in what might be described as a, "tightly situated" (Fuller & Unwin, 2004, p. 134) community of practice. Rather, I have interpreted Edward's comments to propose, buyers operate 'amongst' multiple communities and interact widely, cross departmentally. With those non-buying departments in part, reliant on the decision-making capacity buyers can be seen to hold in 'owning' the category. My reading of the data has led me to envisage the buyer as a central cog upon which other departments turn, as depicted by figure (2.1) given overleaf.

Fig. 2.1. The buyer as the central cog amongst multiple communities of practice

My interpretation may well be contested and there is certainly strong evidence in the data of departmental "agendas" (Edward) influencing the balance of harmony and tension between the different stakeholders and departmental cogs involved in the end to end trading process. So, learning negotiation matters and not just for use with external suppliers of grocery products. Indeed, the data shows extensive exposure and interaction with internal stakeholders and interdepartmental agendas has required buyers to learn and demonstrate what I have analysed and interpreted to be almost consular levels of diplomatic collaboration, communication and liaison skills. As senior buyer, Rob tactfully describes:

> I mean it's very political, and its selling yourself to the wider business and how you interact with other stakeholders within the wider business as well. Everybody else is trying to…everybody else thinks they've…within the business is trying to have more influence I think.
>
> You've still got a lot of autonomy and a lot of responsibility. But then it probably comes back to a behavioural thing. It's about convincing people as to why you want to do something and getting them to buy into it rather than just doing it.
>
> (Rob)

All the buyers in this research have been given high levels of autonomy and influence in the end to end trading process. Albeit, within the varying organisational constraints of corporate level strategic compliances and guidelines evidenced extensively in corporate policy documents. Compliance to pricing guidelines offers an example widely cited and was conferred by many of the participants. Rob explains:

> We're constrained in certain areas. Yeah, we are constrained. So, pricing, we can't do what we like with that. There are certain elements that you can control, like your promotional package. You can determine a range ultimately, but there are limitations within that in terms of people policing it and vetting it and saying, why are you doing that?
>
> (Rob)

Rob's words might signify that the autonomy and influence of the buyer in the UK top ten retailer, is perceptively being challenged or perhaps, purposefully eroded by an evident division of labour within the end-to-end trading process. Rebecca's insight reveals evidence which explains this developing trend and proposes, "what retailers have done, is to have locked down clear processes within their businesses that buyers have to adhere to". And, though there is no evidence in the data to suggest that all UK top 10 retailers are engaged in such process change, from Rebecca's perspective a, "locked down" operating model comes with dangers to both individual and corporate performance:

> It actually frustrates me, because…because it suffocates business as well. So, you might want to change the way the business operates but you can't because of the processes that have been put in place for people to work to.
>
> (Rebecca)

Rebecca's thoughts are echoed by others and typified further by, Rob who explained how this emerging trend makes him feel:

> Frustrated! Yeah, frustrated…Pissed off at times, you just want to get on and do things and sometimes you're being held back. You're being prevented from doing something you actually believe in.
>
> (Rob)

Edward was likewise outspoken in his view on what he perceives to be buyer constraining trading practices and problematic inter-departmental political agendas:

> I think that there's too many people involved in the process with their own agenda. And the only real agenda is selling more of something and making a profit on it.
>
> (Edward)

The implications from these and many of the comments that emerged from the data in a similar vein, suggest that perceptions and notions of buyer decision making, and autonomy may be changing, giving way or transforming into concepts more akin to softer influencing skills. As a member of what might be considered a new generation of trainee buyers, Josh's perceptions and experiences gives a clearer example of how these softer influencing skills transpire in the workplace.

> It's not taking the stance that it's us against them, it's very collaborative working and getting the suppliers involved. There is a lot of managing the stakeholders as well in terms of managing everyone's expectations now. And it's the people like that who seem to get on.
>
> (Josh)

This trend in the data has implications to the research question because transformation of buying practice and process is likely to change the ways in which buyers learn both on and off the job in the future. For example, the past prominence on buyers learning to become autonomous decision makers looks set to give way to wider collaborative skills that may foster notions of autonomous decision-making teams. Furthermore, rather than their learning opportunities, it is perhaps the buyers' autonomy, influence and leadership that is being restricted against the backdrop of the evolving division of labour, interdepartmental agendas, and changing operating processes. Steven suggests the division of labour within the end to end trading process has created an evolving distinction between the advent of what he terms as the, "new process constrained buyer" and the demise of the, "old fashioned autonomous buyer". In relaying his view, senior buyer, Steven asserts:

> Well they're not actually buyers…the old-fashioned buyer, rightly or wrongly to me, led the category. Because, yes you must work with your colleagues, whether that's merchandising, technical, packaging etc…but if you've got a vision that can drive it [the category] forward, in many ways you should be leading that, whatever process that is and however often you want to review it.
>
> (Steven)

The data provides a general recognition and joint consensus amongst all the participants signifying the advent of the, new process constrained buyer. These thoughts were especially prevalent amongst the older generation of participants with experience of the larger top 4 UK retailers. Nevertheless, despite this apparent shift, all the participants in this research still consider the buyer to be the central decision-making entity within the end to end trading process. Simon provides an expressive, bemused and almost defiant summary:

> I'd been used to buyer is king… and it's difficult to get your head around it. You know, if there is a conflict of interest internally, the buyer will always have the last say.
>
> (Simon)

Consequently, the data infers that a buyer's knowledge of the whole category dynamics and the productive process has traditionally been, and currently remains essential, because buyer decisions are based on KSAOs that rely on broader understandings of how multiple communities of practice work, interact and operate as one.

The buyer as category expert?

The previous section has reasoned that the data set conveys deep routed organisational needs for buyer coordination of the end to end trading process which keeps buyer VET chiefly situated in the workplace and tightly attuned to forming buyers' understanding of whole category dynamics. Many of the participants and much of the corporate secondary data give recognition to buyers' accumulation of category based KSAOs by identifying them with a prominent theme I identified in my analysis, that of the buyer as category expert. As Edward explains, "We had buyers who bought categories and were pleased to be an acknowledged expert in that category for years". A point more modestly recognised by, Steven when asked if buyers were experts in their field, "Well I wouldn't say an expert because you can always learn. I'm always learning". Here, I have chosen to focus on, Edward's remarks because they convey a positive acknowledgement and perception of such buyer category expertise. Yet, Edward's comments also relate strongly to wider participant perceptions and experiences found in the data that caution against me overstating ideas implying all buyers to be category experts. Indeed, the tenure of buyer category responsibility is insufficient to fully master the whole category dynamics, a point I interpret Edward's comments to rather more cynically relay. According to, Steven:

> You know in an area of buying [category] they're not actually gaining the correct skills or product knowledge…Nowadays, even if you take the likes of, Tesco…it's probably an 18-month cycle [between a change of category].
>
> (Steven)

The data revealed, Steven's claim had support, especially so in view of Simon's comments which recounted his own experience of:

> Moving over to [a top 4 UK grocery retailer] as a senior buyer and looking after Confectionary and Produce and Frozen Food. Loads of different areas in two and a half years. In what…six years I've done a lot of food and drink. I've also done Beers, Wines and Spirits, I've done Ambient as we would call it and you know…core grocery, so covered the kind of retail environment within that period.
>
> (Simon)

Steven's perception of category expertise is contrary to, Simon's notions of wider category experience and on consideration of tying timeframes of an 18-month cycle with notions of category expertise, Steven was measured yet assertive in his view:

> It's not long enough. At the end of the day, I still believe and…I worked for [two, top four UK grocery retailers] that had, I believe the right approach…that if you were in a certain sector [category] you had 3 or 4 years at it.
>
> (Steven)

To return to, Edward whose comments below, more so than others, posits a motivationally informed explanation of buyer category expertise gained by using a line of questioning from the research protocol based on notions of P=F (A, M, O) adapted from the conceptual framework. Edward's passion conveys his pecking order of the components of buyer expertise that is engaging and authoritatively put:

> So, there are some buyers who are motivated by being an expert in the field that they operate in.
>
> But a lot of the buyers, or a lot of the graduates that were coming in weren't that interested in what they were buying. They were more interested in what they were buying next. And, they were bad buyers.
>
> Because…they understand the buying process but, they don't understand the product. They don't understand the market they trade in. They don't understand the customer that buys those products. They are not driven by markets, people and product. They are driven by numbers. So, they are just analysts. They're not proper buyers.
>
> If you are in a category that is driven by people's taste or people's fancy then you need people who understand that…You could say that that's driven by marketing and advertising, which you can understand. But those are external factors that will influence people's decision making, but ultimately, it's the buyer who is the one that understands what those influences are going to be in the next six months that will change how people buy.
>
> (Edward)

Steven's and Edward's perceptions are a point of view apparently shared by strategic thinkers in the retail world like, Kate. Kate raised questions challenging short-term views of buying expertise and performance by considering contrasting notions of longer-term learning experience and expertise being tied to longer- term profitability and performance.

> By putting learning criteria in place like…you [buyers] actually have to trade over your category for a year before you can move on. So, starting to put some principles around experience. Because actually, it's quite easy to optimise within 1 financial year when you trade over your own numbers. If you've taken kind of short-term profitability at the expense of long-term profitability that starts to show up.
>
> (Kate)

Concepts and interpretations of expertise found in the literature are diverse and multidimensional. For Evers & Van der Heijden, (2017, p. 86) "expertise is seen as an attribute of individuals who possess a vast amount of knowledge". They go on to add, "experts are aware of their own performance and are able to rationalise it". I have settled on the combined views offered by, Eraut and Hirsh (2010, p. 14) whose description of expertise appears to capture the essence of the type of buyer expertise I have so far uncovered and portrayed and, who claim experts of this type:

> require a wider knowledge base, critical analysis and the ability to develop multiple representations of complex problems as well being able to work with clients and other people with different types of expertise.
>
> Eraut & Hirsch (2007, p. 14)

Category buying expertise: the caretaker and the enthusiast?

Ideas of expertise are important to this research because they kindle connotations of deference by others to the accumulated KSAOs of buyers in the context of the product category they are responsible for. Furthermore, ideas of buying expertise stimulate notions of dependence and trust in buyers to exploit that expertise in the search of category, individual and organisational performance. It is important therefore, to better understand the origins and basis on which notions of category buying expertise is advocated. There is a deliberation here which indicates a delineation and distinction between two types of category buying expertise identified in this study.

First, some buyers, are seen to be, "looking after" (Simon) categories which produces a type of buying expertise analogous to notions of a, caretaker form of category buying expertise. Though Simon's words point toward deficiency in this approach, the term used is not critical. Rather, it is an expression associated with the frequent turnover of buyer product category tenure and which is built on an understanding of process knowledge and a comprehensive devotion to the analysis of numbers and financial measures. This contrasts to, what I have interpreted as the enthusiast form of category buying expertise, tied to perceptions predominantly owing to, Edward and, Steven. The enthusiast form of buying expertise is shaped through time spent in category tenure and devotion to building product knowledge, category market knowledge and customer insight. There is evidence to suggest this form of expertise would be perceived by participants as a more developed form of buying expertise that builds on process knowledge and analytical abilities. Yet, the data set infers that despite tensions which result from making binary distinctions both types of buyer expertise identified co-exist and are being developed and employed by buyers interchangeably within individual, organisational and motivational contexts.

It is highly plausible that certain categories may be better suited to different forms of expertise and buyers will be predisposed to different motivations for category tenure and types of expertise. Indeed, I am not suggesting buyers or organisations should opt in favour of one form of category expertise over the other. But, exploring and better understanding both these concepts of category buying expertise may provide a basis for better understanding how different types of approach to category expertise might be more effectively learnt both on and off the job. This might assist in opening alternative possibilities contrary to a blanket approach to buyer VET and provide further routes for insight into how the relationship between on and off the job learning and performance as a buyer can be better defined.

Buyer performance measures: expertise and learning to acquire social recognition

This study has not uncovered evidence of qualifications which might confer recognition of wider occupational standards for product category expertise. In which case and as, Evers & Van der Heijden (2017, p. 87) point out, "expertise can only exist by virtue of being respected by knowledgeable people in the organisation". This dimension of expertise which they refer to as, "acquiring social recognition" (2017, p. 87) is widely evident in the data and is a prominent feature I have associated with notions of buyers as category experts. As, Tom explains below, there is an evident need for buyers to acquire such occupational respect and social recognition from more experienced colleagues to boost perceptions of their occupational status and competence.

> I think a lot of it is down to the person who is making the call about the individual rather than the individual themselves and…their relationship one to another. I think there is subjectivity on behalf of management or certain managers, and I think this should be elevated from that, everyone should be on an equal playing field as much as possible.
>
> (Tom)

Tom's words seem accepting yet notably critical in tone and attach perceptions and experiences of inequality and inconsistency to notions of buyer category expertise. His insight serves to highlight the presence and role of managerial judgement and discretion in interpreting and advocating category expertise. Thus, portraying senior buyers and more experienced colleagues as gatekeepers and custodians of category knowledge and adjudicators of buyer expertise. It is rational to believe that the cultivation of buyer knowledge and expertise might be best placed in the hands of those more experienced colleagues. Indeed, according to, Eraut & Hirsh (2010, p. 14) experienced workers are likely to, "be more aware of contextual variation and be competent in a wider range of situations". Yet, Rob's comments below, level some criticism and point to potential drawbacks of learning and assessing expertise in this way.

> A lot of it [expertise] now, is behavioural. It's not just the KPI's [key performance indicators]. How you come across…it's all you hear in this place. It's whose arse do you want to kiss really. I think it's unfair a lot of the time, because you could have somebody who just gets on with it, does a great job…but because they're not in the Directors face every five minutes then they're not necessarily perceived as effective as somebody else. Whereas you could have somebody who has got…delivering shit numbers every 12 months and actually they're kind of the star of the show.
>
> (Rob)

Rob's comments are not universal in the data but do draw attention to the influence of buyer self-promotion as a factor in the assessment of buyer learning, KSAOs and expertise. In Rob's estimation, the merits of a buyer's technical expertise can be overlooked, and assessment of occupational competency and expertise may become overly conditional on a combination of an individual's profile, attitudes, behaviours and the subjective opinions of those in senior positions. This was a point noted by, Simon who explained:

> "It's about raising your profile, and it sounds like a management text book but yeah, it's building your brand within the business".
>
> (Simon)

The data indicates a buyer's proficiency in self-promotion cannot be ignored as an influential component in assessments of buyer category expertise and performance. Research by, Eraut (2011, p. 10) found, "encounters and relationships with people at work" to be an important contextual factor in perceptions of successful learning and performance. Taken in the buying context the subjective nature of these relationships would seem to carry significant influence. Perhaps, in some cases, and as the data suggests, more so than other objective and transparent measures of merit such as VET qualifications and in some cases, performance credentials associated with buyer KPIs. Group trading director, Joe offers his stark perceptions and experiences in this respect:

> The reality is that so many businesses are still run by men in grey suits. Who make an assessment of people on through what they hear, what they see…through their belief system. And, they will make an assessment whether you like it or not.
>
> (Joe)

Of course, reliance and trust associated with such subjective modes of assessment depends on a continuum and availability of suitably, knowledgeable people. A potential weakness of buyer on the job learning identified by, John who also revealed an additional, potentially prohibitive, economic cost of situated practice and learning from more experienced others.

> Where I don't think we are that successful at the minute is that we have a lot of inexperienced people and not many experienced people. Because the experienced people are more expensive than the inexperienced.
>
> (John)

Learning self-promotion and learning to build relationships undoubtedly counts when thinking about notions of buyer expertise and performance. The importance of being seen to be seen, naturally lends weight and further logic for the predominance of situated practice in the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Yet, paradoxically, what counts might hide what matters in search of demonstrating a balanced, widely integrated assessment of buyer expertise and which in turn might serve to weaken and not necessarily strengthen the relationship between notions of occupational position as a buyer and expertise as a buyer.

Hitting your numbers: buyer performance measures and incentives for buyers to learn

Acquiring social recognition counts, yet this should not surpass the significance attached by all the participants to performance measurements associated with, 'hitting hard numbers' interpreted to be the primary marker for buyer performance. Indeed, using theme two from the research protocol *(Appendix. 1)* as a line of enquiry to establish perceptions of buyers' incentives to learn and uncover the key occupational measures of buyer performance, a metrics and numbers-based focus was found to run through the data. As, Joe explained:

> I've always said to a degree, it's slightly easier in buying because you can access hard numbers. So, to a degree buying functions…and, buyers are one of the easier functions to assess performance. Because always the most important thing within a buying function is…you have to hit your numbers?
>
> (Joe)

Joe's remarks are explicit and the importance of numbers in relation to notions of buyer performance is made clear. Interpreting and analysing Joe's remarks reveals a participant perception that using metrics and numbers constitutes an ideal way of measuring buyer performance and a point of view he distinguishes further by asserting:

> I think harder areas to assess performance is where the targets are softer…You know, skill-based measures rather than numbers based…Quite easy if you think about my year end performance review!... It's quite easy for the Chief Executive to sit there and say number 1 on your performance review is have you delivered your numbers? Yes, boss I've smashed the numbers…great let's move on. Now, ohhh...the people stuff…that's where you tend to get far more difficulties, because you're appealing to gradings that are far more subjective rather than hard numbers.
>
> (Joe)

The multitude of ways in which numbers and metrics are applied to the assessment of buyer performance targets is not the sole focus of this research. But it is necessary to identify the importance of metrics in relation to buyer targets and performance measures. Indeed, quantitative based metrics can be and are applied to all, or parts thereof, of the constituents of whole category dynamics previously discussed and identified in table (3.0). In this way metrics are used to measure differing aspects of a retail business. In the buying context these will involve metrics associated with operational efficiencies, based on attention to driving out costs in the entire sourcing and supply chain and predictive and indicative based metrics, associated with demand planning, forecasting of sales and rates of market and category growth. The data evidenced the importance of commonly cited and targeted metrics used to routinely measure the growth or decline of: product sales, gross profit, market share, product wastage, product availability and customer satisfaction. Here it would be easy to become embroiled in a discussion on organisational strategy that might argue the contributory importance and benefits of measuring buyer performance against any chosen organisational metric. Indeed, the data set is awash with participant comment outlining contrasting opinions and perspectives on the benefits pertaining to strategic measures. As Joe, explains, comparative measures of performance vary and carry a large degree of subjectivity, uncertainty and conjecture:

> So ultimately this [using numbers and metrics] maybe wrong… so for example, is the measure of performance your performance in your category versus the market place or your previous periods numbers?
>
> (Joe)

It is how individual retail organisations choose to analyse these different metrics that will ultimately determine and contribute to the perception of an individual buyer's performance. Nonetheless, there is a metric associated with buying and wider business outcomes which the data reveals to be the stand out, key performance indicator of overall performance as a buyer cited by participants. The buying category Profit and Loss (P&L), is a performance gauge that indicates the monetary extent of commercial success or failure and is a measure of the organisational variances between cost of goods and rate of sales associated with product categories. Or put another way, how much monetary profit is made on the amount of product bought, manufactured and sold and which is usually expressed in monetary cash value terms or as a percentage figure. Corporate documentation from two of the top 4 UK retailers revealed a significant proportion of a buyer's typical working week is spent engaged in analysing metrics associated with P&L such as sales performance and reporting and reviewing comparative numbers-based metrics that influence weekly decisions. Indeed as, John remarked, "Monday mornings are all about routine…pass me the sales figures". John's remarks may be flippant in tone, but they point to the primacy of reviewing sales metrics first task on a Monday morning, a routine practice I would challenge can be found in any UK top 10 retail buyer. Buying metrics associated to whole category dynamics are therefore, a crucial source of buyer knowledge. The ability to understand, interpret and act on these metrics is therefore an essential skill in endeavours to maximise category P&L and contribute to the wider success of the buying category.

Multiple levers and the hands-on role of the buyer

Kate, a strategic transformation director at a top 10 UK retailer defines the numerous metrics linked here with whole category dynamics to be analogous to, "multiple levers that you pull that culminate in actions and supplier discussions". Pulling the right levers, is a useful metaphor in the buying context because, Kate is accentuating the centrality emphasised in much of the corporate documentation to the hands-on influence of the buying role across the retail trading process. From an occupational learning perspective, Kate's metaphor helps us to understand why so much evidence is found in the data relating to the situated nature of buyer VET. A buyer's place is evidently located at the heart of changeable occupational conditions where learning is focused towards understanding a transitory version of information metrics and array of buyer KSAOs that requires constant adaptation and reappraisal. As, Patrick, a senior group trading director at a top 4 UK retailer sees it:

> The problem with buying is there are so many different scenarios. To put that into a learning package will take people years and years of study…A buyer is so busy with so many things, and better learning involves more time, and who has the time?
>
> (Patrick)

Patrick's rationale depicts the variable and complex nature of buying, yet these factors do not adequately explain why the data provides so little evidence of codified buying curricula or VET programmes. Rather, the essence of Patrick's assertions points to workplace pressures that constrain time and opportunity for buyers to engage in learning off the job. This is a perspective found to be a common thread throughout the data-set and a point echoed by category director, Jacob who questions the wisdom of not devoting enough time to thoughts of learning in the buying context:

> So often I think in, buying we're so busy running around doing non-value add tasks and our heads filled up with lots of worries and concerns and issues and things we have to deal with that we don't always stop and provide the time to think about these things as we should.
>
> (Jacob)

I have concluded that the same time pressures preventing buyer participation in some off the job learning activities may also be a significant contributory factor in the underdevelopment and codification of VET and occupational knowledge in the sector. Though further discussion of the role of social learning and collaboration will be given in the following pages, I have discovered little evidence in the data to suggest the participants in this research have contributed significantly to the development and codification of formal buying curricula. This is a point of significance that warrants further research and brought out by Joe, a senior trading director, who suggests development, codification and delivery of buyer VET is predominantly a function of Learning and Development (L&D) practitioners in conjunction with Human Resource (HR) departments.

> I've never really considered it until we've had this conversation, but you know, every organisation I've been to have got the L&D team. In the big organisations you've got the L&D team pulling the training together…you know…is that right? Or actually you know, when I think about it shouldn't buying courses be being organised by and delivered by each other?
>
> (Joe)

Learning and development teams: The Panopticon of buyer learning?

Joe's comments are of course, just one perception from a diverse group of participants, but they do provide some evidence from a senior figure of efforts to both develop yet perhaps control organisational VET and knowledge in the buying sector. Furthermore, I propose that organisational knowledge of buying and subsequent VET learning activities is regarded as valuable assets that contribute to the stock of organisational capital of the retail firm. Especially so, given the economic and commercially sensitive nature of the buying function. The use of L&D teams and HR functions, asserts a strong measure of agent led, company approved control over these notions of value arising from organisational capital and represents a significant factor in the relationship between learning on and off the job as buyer and performance as a buyer in two ways. First, the use of L&D practitioners to pull together buyer training helps to keep buyers busy on the productive task of buying and serves to distance buyers from becoming overly involved in the research and wider production of their own occupational VET. Second, by asserting L&D control, buyer VET and learning remains predominantly in-house and firm specific with little evidence in the data of wider sectoral collaboration. Thus, detailed knowledge of the buying occupation and VET for public and wider occupational consumption is seen to be constricted and hard to find as a base for research and development.

Undoubtedly, my interpretation is fuelled by notions of the hidden curriculum. As Garrick, (1998, p. 61) asserts the, "manifest curriculum is always accompanied by the hidden curriculum of work that socialises and shapes workers". Garrick's assertions follow the Panopticon legacy of Bentham (1748-1832) and Foucault (1979) which associates repressive socialisation and organisational surveillance with learning and which challenges the objective purpose of workplace learning and VET. Joe's comments seem to allude to a realisation of such organisational controls. The following excerpt from the data below shows how, Joe also questions his own perceptions and provides a challenge to the rationale of developing buyer VET and learning under the overseeing lead of L&D teams.

> A buyer's psyche is a completely different psyche to the person who generally works in L&D, who are a HR person. You know, so you've got somebody in an organisation trying to create learning but who comes at things with a completely different mind-set to the people they are going to partake the knowledge to…that in itself is an issue isn't it?
>
> (Joe)

Buyer learning, performance and the person

Joe's pattern of thinking suggests buyer occupational learning should not be independent from context. This includes the mind-set and characteristics of people who, over-time, come to embody the practical wisdom of buying. Since buyer learning, and knowledge has not been widely applied to the convention of books and standardised educational systems it is perhaps understandable that, Joe and many of the participants conceive learning and knowledge as being embodied in those people who understand how buying works. Indeed, Joe perceives, danger lies in transferring knowledge from buyers to education overseers who do not possess what he described as the "psyche" or mind-set of buyers. The inference being that knowledge and the transfer of buying KSAOs to others becomes watered down by treating learning as a, “product or a thing” (Hager, 2011, p. 21). I do not claim that the “psyche” or mind-set and personal characteristics of buyers can be generalised from the data of this study. Indeed, participants views were mixed and mostly referred to innate characteristics found to hold common ground with, Kate who proposed:

> Well it’s interesting because…I think, I think some personality types have a pre-disposition and others don’t. And, it’s not that you can’t teach people and therefore somebody who doesn’t have a natural bias can’t do it. But I do think that there are people more comfortable in the role.
>
> So, for instance, I am somebody who seeks to form…compromise. That’s not necessarily what you want when negotiating with at supplier. So, I think certain people are more comfortable naturally than others. And, I think probably, that’s one of the reasons some people do better than others.
>
> (Kate)

Conversely, for former category director, Tom:

> There’s no set personality of a buyer. I’ve worked with introverts, I’ve worked with extroverts. I’ve worked with passive people, I’ve worked with aggressive people, I’ve worked with assertive people, I’ve worked with leaders.
>
> (Tom)

Nevertheless, using questions drawn from the P=F (A, M, O) conceptualisation which probed buyers’ motivations to learn, the data produced insight which points to contributory factors interpreted as significant in the accumulation of ideas relating to buyers’ mind-set and personal attributes. Patrick’s view given below, highlights motivational and attitudinal concerns towards notions of the buyer as custodian of buying knowledge and teacher of occupational KSAOs:

> There’s something attitudinal around this for me. You know some people guard knowledge, not everybody wants to partake knowledge. To some people knowledge is power and some people aren’t naturally giving individuals who want to help people learn.
>
> (Patrick)

There are overtones in Patrick’s comments suggestive of the presence of personal agendas within the buying workplace which places emphasis on managerial discretion and which might lead to inequality of learning opportunity. Indeed, Joe’s comments below, resonate with, Patrick’s and place further emphasis on the individualistic and highly competitive nature of buying:

> People who work within buying functions are not naturally known for giving because they want to win. They can be quite individual you know. They’re looking after their category and they want their category to be in good shape. And that can lead to some behaviours that doesn’t always benefit the organisation.

> You know, sharing knowledge is not always easy when people have the desire to get to the next level, earn the extra money, bit more for the family, better car, all that kind of stuff is quite difficult to get people at a level sharing information.
>
> (Joe)

Joe's perceptions perfectly summarise many such comments made by the participants which appear to attune buyer performance motivations to ideas of winning, personal ambition and power over concerns for the development of wider occupational knowledge. According to category director, Jacob:

> I think by definition buyers are competitive animals. And, competitive animals want to win. You know they want their sales numbers to be better than anybody else's sales numbers and therefore they are like…you know, kids doing a test at school with their arm around the paper. As if to say, you're not looking at what I've got because I've got one over you here. So, I do think they…so in some ways you know, [retail] organisations have to find a way of pooling that expertise.
>
> (Jacob)

Pooling and codifying knowledge to facilitate continuity of buying learning and expertise is a problem apparent in the data and an issue interpreted to be left over from a reliance on KSAOs embodied in people motivated by individualised performance metrics and achieving advancement through on the job attainment. Simon's experiences of assuming new product category responsibilities provides an example to illustrate the scarcity of pooled formal resources to assist new buyers.

> You know when I came into this business I didn't have a handover! And in my experience, that's often the way you know. And that's not great practice really. So, there was nobody to handover anything and so you are learning the business which is brand new and a different way of working and, you're learning the market and category you are working in. You've just got to spend time with people to do that. You've really got to listen and rely on people and trust in them that what they are telling you is kind of what it's like really.
>
> (Simon)

Learning the hierarchical state of affairs

Simon's remarks stress the reliance on the trust, integrity and capability of those more experienced buyers assigned to teach and train others. Indeed, the data does provide many examples of positive acknowledgement towards the value more experienced others bring to buyer VET and learning. Yet, there is also evidence in the data which shows not all those placed in such positions feel well prepared or self-assured as facilitators and leaders of learning in the buying workplace. Inevitably those buyers responsible for others take on a degree of responsibility for leading learning programmes and activities and, as Rob's comments below remind us, there are times when using all that one knows is not enough. When questioned about his experience teaching and training other buyers, Rob was candid about his own feelings and capabilities.

> Sometimes you feel a little out of your depth, in certain situations yeah… Because these people, these guys are looking at you for inspiration and leadership…Am I giving them the support that they want, that they need, that they should be getting? So yeah, you doubt yourself and sometimes question yourself.
>
> I followed up by asking Rob, "do you feel you've got the answers?"
>
> Not always no, but you've got to come across as though you have got the answers even if you haven't.
>
> (Rob)

Interviewing, Rob I recognised he was pleased to discuss his feelings on this topic, but there was a cynical tone in his expression which led me to believe, had Rob's superior manager asked him the same question his openness to his perceived inadequacies would not have been quite as forthcoming. There is an undercurrent identifiable in the data therefore, which exposes the presence of what I relate to as a, hierarchical state of affairs. By hierarchical, I mean circumstances arising where the people with potentially the most knowledge to share are understood to be least approachable because of a subordinate sense of power associated with those holding senior positions. The presence of a hierarchical state of affairs in the buying workplace indicates perceived dangers associated with revealing the extent and strength of individual KSAOs in either direction, both up to senior managers and down to subordinate reports, especially so in such a competitive environment. Buyers who guard their professional reputation in fear of assessment by superior or subordinate colleagues potentially create a scenario of conservatism that might entrap the flow of knowledge, stunt the growth and development of individuals and perpetuate existing knowledge and practice, good or bad. Group trading director, Joe's thoughts perfectly illustrate the point:

> I'm a nice bloke, very approachable and yet when I hear anecdotes from past teams, the number of people…you know, who say…I can't go and ask him, you know he's far up there. And that's always worried me because I've always thought I was really approachable but for whatever reason because of the authority your role gives you not everybody feels like they can approach you.
>
> I probably am one of the more approachable people in senior roles. So, if they felt that about me what are they feeling about the person who wasn't particularly approachable? Then it's [knowledge and learning] not flowing down is it?
>
> (Joe)

Interpreting these examples from the data might infer that buyer collaboration or instances of retail organisations creating positive communities of learning (Reed & Signorelli, 2011) are rare, but this is not the case. Indeed, the following pages discuss what this study has discovered in relation to buyer social learning and collaboration. Yet, it is evident that buyers learn the role hierarchy plays in their organisations and doing so can be seen to hold sway, either positive or negative on buyer performance outcomes. Furthermore, an apparent scarcity of pooled expertise and knowledge in the form of codified reference points and learning resources might represent a flaw in buyer VET and learning and a contributing factor to the, “psyche” or mind-set of buyers’ as they search to plug the gaps in their own knowledge and augment and accelerate the learning and performance of buyers.

Section 3. Collaboration, social learning and changing perspectives

Collaboration, social learning in the workplace and social capital

The ideas expressed in the previous section have outlined participant perspectives and experiences that are interpreted to depict core KSAOs of the buyer and how they might relate to on and off the job learning and performance as a buyer. What also became clear from analysis of the data was the centrality of buyers to the retail trading process and the importance of buyer relationships and collaboration with others in making retail trading processes work. From a VET and learning perspective then, the creation of buyer KSAOs is evidently not achieved in isolation. Buyer VET and learning, whether on or off the job is highly reliant on relationships, integration and social collaboration with others. Collaboration within the retail firm brings people together and creates opportunity to tap into a human network of collective relationships and, “critical mass of minds” (Avent, 2017, p. 122) potentially advantageous or damaging in the transmission, pooling and dissemination of KSAOs.

Using questions derived of the three dimensions of pedagogy (Nind et al., 2016) employed in the conceptual framework to better understand how pedagogic practice and buyer learning is experienced, enacted and specified in the buying context, the data-set revealed that all the participants recognise the significance to buyer KSAOs and performance from learning amongst such groups. Social interaction and ideas of social learning in the workplace therefore forms a major substantive theme in this study.

Of course, ideas of social learning are not new. According to, MacGillivray (2016, p. 27), “social learning is a natural part of being human”, and is a concept therefore, that strides many social contexts of which the workplace is just one. At the heart of definitions of social learning theory in the workplace can be found factors of collaboration, interaction and engagement with others and of sharing tacit and implicit information learned from individuals and groups. My interpretation of buyer collaboration and social learning includes online and virtual exchanges that broaden notions of collaboration and social learning beyond physical face to face interaction. Indeed, Miller & Morris (2016, p. 1545) reminds us that, “individuals may participate in multiple online communities to both gather information and develop the density of their social networks”. The rise and impact of digital technologies such as social media platforms, web-based conferencing and online chat rooms contribute to a multi-connected physical and virtual community of practice from which buyer social learning and collaboration is also informed and must be represented.

Concepts of social learning pioneered by the likes of, Bourdieu, (1977) and Giddens, (1984), "challenge the primacy of learning as a product" (Hager, 2011, p. 23) and emphasise the plurality and organic nature of learning. These ideas contribute to better understanding the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer by supposing associations between on and off the job learning rather than distinguishing a hard line between them. This philosophy of learning is useful because the data-set provides participant perspective and experience which also challenges the primacy of learning as acquisition over participatory modes of learning in the buying context. As the following pages will now present, the participants of this research were exposed to many characteristics of social learning practice in their workplaces and cited many of its features in the buying context.

The changing face of office space: social learning or social conditioning?

The creation of group settings and open physical spaces in the buying environment to foster natural interaction and collaboration between people is a feature of social learning in the workplace experienced and recounted by senior buyer, Simon. I interviewed Simon at his workplace location which added greatly to the contextualisation and interpretation of his insight. Here I was able to validate the utility of combining semi-structured interviews in the workplace with recording hand written field notes to help produce the findings of this study. In particular, reviewing my field notes helped me to recall and contextualise a particular instance, where springing to his feet from his chair in the modern glass walled meeting room, Simon talked enthusiastically about the transformation of his workplace as a learning space and guided my attention round the outside office environment and explaining:

> I tell you what, this place, in terms of when you talk about learning in your environment…This place is streets ahead of [2 named top 4 UK retailers]. So, we are getting rid of the way you see the office now. Obviously, it's a kind of open plan office, but there are lots of cupboards you know, in-between the desks. It's just a standard office yeah. But we're getting rid of all those [cupboards] and we are making it very much kind of an open space for people to work in, collaborate and generate ideas. Even the canteen is being changed! There is nothing wrong with the canteen but it's getting changed into a…err so it's more collaborative. It's going to be an environment focused on generating ideas.
>
> (Simon)

On the face of Simon's comments some evidence may be seen to exist of organisational intent by some UK top 4 grocery retailers to transform buyer workplaces into socially structured learning environments, perceived by, Simon to foster a positive setting for collaboration, buyer learning and the enhancement of buyer and organisational performance. Generating collaboratively driven ideas draws from flows of social knowledge, potentially speeding up the transfer of information and knowledge between social groups. In turn, this process of learning may lessen the dependence on retrieving documentation, archived and stored information in cupboards, files and desk drawers and suggests that some UK top 10 retailers are managing the flows of knowledge socially, “in ways that do not merely reduce it to an object” (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002, p. 11). In this way, some retail organisations may be refining physical and digital buying environments with aims to take full advantage of a principal culture of informal and tacit buyer learning processes like learning by anecdote, coaching and mentoring and dialogs with others which are prevalent themes and widely referenced by participants in the data. Thus, sharing information, knowledge, generating ideas and decision making speedily between work colleagues might constitute a collaborative social learning strategy assumed to provide a competitive edge vital in the rapidly changing field of fast-moving consumable goods (FMCG) in the UK grocery sector.

Yet my interpretation of, Simon’s insight must also account for evidence found in the wider data which indicates a trend towards an increased division of labour and distinct distribution of tasks traditionally associated with the buying role as some retailers look to what Rebecca, a former trading director describes as, “locking down clear processes within their businesses that buyers have to adhere to”. Indeed, though recognising the nuances of different organisational approaches to, “buying throughout the industry” John recalls examples of buying tasks that in his experience of the transformation of trading processes since the time of his entry into the occupation in the mid-1990s, have transferred from buying job specifications to that of different retail employees:

> At [top 4 UK retailer] certainly, a buyer had a hand in so many different pots. So, we had things like, ordering stock, managing inventory levels, scheduling deliveries and all that kind of thing. There was also, actually the marketing side, the creative side. So, if you were going to launch an own label item, you would have a hand in that that item. There was also general administration which [top 4 UK retailer] put a particular emphasis on.
>
> (John)

John is not saying that buyers do not continue to maintain a contribution to these activities, as we have seen buyers can be found at the centre of trading processes. Rather, John is conveying how the practical day to day activity of these tasks is being devolved. A point which John, does not necessarily perceive to be negative in relation to notions that claim may diminish buyer autonomy and as he reflects,

> What I actually found early on thankfully, was the focus [top 4 UK retailer] gave to the role was more about everything bar buying!
>
> (John)

Thus, for evolving trading processes a potentially greater need for positive human interaction and collaboration is required as people are brought closer together through process practices that rely on increased human links in the chain. Applying this reasoning to my analysis of the data inferred acts of integrating social conditioning to physical workplace transformation which could constitute structural initiatives by management to reduce the risk of dependence on individuals within a set process and maximise operational and social controls on retail employees, including buyers. It follows then, to question, if the perceived educational benefits to individual buyers becomes a convenient, yet productive by-product of operational controls applied by the retail firm? After all, portraying supposed benefits of social learning in the workplace and notions of enhanced creativity is a change proposition far more palatable to buyers than that of peddling social collaboration as the link in an increasingly organisationally controlled human productive process.

I am not saying that social learning in the workplace does not benefit individual buyers. To the contrary, and as the following pages will explain, many participants point positively to aspects of buyer social learning and socially derived learning does appear to hold transferable value to buyers. I am saying, my reading of the data indicates social learning in the buying workplace context is designed to benefit the organisation first, buyer second.

Social learning, social capital and ROI

To illustrate this reasoning, I will connect ideas of social learning with concepts of social capital drawn from the conceptual framework and borrow again from Avent, (2017, p. 122) who reminds us,

> While social capital lives in the heads of the people who make the economy go, its benefits flow disproportionately to the owners of financial capital.

As we have already seen from data analysis presented in the previous sections of these findings, participants widely conclude that buyers are competitive animals and can be motivated or pre-disposed to reluctance in sharing information within a competitive buying environment. Such findings linked to evidence of organisational acknowledgment of the economic value personified in the KSAOs of buyers provides motives for retail organisations to find means to coerce and unlock, "the actual and potential resources embedded within, available through and derived from the network of relationships possessed by an individual or social unit" (Nahapiet, 2011, p. 80). The encouragement of buyer knowledge sharing interactions, though considered difficult by some participants, can be evidenced in some retail organisations. For example, through the words of Simon who in the previous section described the transformation of his workplace environment to, "a kind of open plan office" and "open space for people to work in, collaborate and generate ideas". In the buying context therefore, Simon's insight infers these types of open floor plan work environments may offer potential social learning strategies from which to keep buyers engaged in the productive process of buying and encourage the otherwise problematic release and flows of knowledge and information associated with social capital from across social networks and potentially useful in developing buyer KSAOs. Moreover, once these flows of knowledge and information are established, retail organisations may then choose to analyse the productive effect of such knowledge and information gained from social learning against the economic performance of the firm and the prevailing competitive need to invest economically in the delivery of more acquisitional, off the job forms of buyer VET and learning. Producing or procuring off the job learning programmes, learning resources and artefacts involves financial expenditure and further effort which of course, carries direct economic cost and investment implications which data analysis reveals, is approached with caution by some retail organisations. As, Rebecca a former senior trading director of a top 4 UK retailer acknowledged when asked about her views on the economic effectiveness of investing in buyer VET and learning:

> Ultimately businesses aren't going to spend the money unless they are going to see the benefit of it…But I strongly believe if the business accepts that [financial] investment it can add more to the business.
>
> (Rebecca)

Efforts to minimise economic expenditure and investment in individual buyer off the job learning is potentially an important factor in better understanding the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer. Indeed, the scarcity of codified learning material, literature and structured formal learning programmes might point to the perceived economic efficiency of operating social learning strategies of knowledge management in relation to buyer and organisational performance amongst retail organisations. Yet, this interpretation is difficult to quantify or qualify as other than assessing individual buyer category performance targets, data analysis did not reveal any methods of analysis, performance indicators or scorecard metrics used by retailers for assessing and presenting the economic effectiveness of buyer VET and learning and may indicate the need to develop the ability to accurately calculate return on any investment (ROI) of buyer VET and learning interventions. A point which would provide an interesting topic for further research. I emphasise this because, concrete metrics and workforce scorecards that aim to identify, "what matters most with measures of the impact of HR investments" (Huselid, Becker & Beatty, 2005 p. ix) are notoriously complex to develop and costly to maintain. Despite their insistence that effective measurement of HR investments in training and education are achievable Huselid, et al., (2005, p. 210) themselves note problems with such approaches, "We've seen a number of firms spend considerable amounts of time and money on workforce scorecard development only to seemingly run out of energy when it comes to communicating these measures to the workforce and helping managers to use them effectively". The absence of a scorecard approach in the data might conceivably reveal organisational reluctance or uncertainty in the value of such approaches in the buying context and emphasise a weakness of the human capital and social capital paradigms.

Allied to these notions of social capital can be added considerations of commercial competition between the UK top 10 retailers which is notoriously fierce. Firm specific commercial and operational differentiation, which could include buyer learning and VET practices may constitute a valuable source of competitive advantage. Social learning in the buying context might therefore, contribute to organisational efforts to protect intellectual property, commercial confidentiality and operational security by reducing sector and competitor access to intelligence of valuable firm specific knowledge and skills that could be imitated and copied elsewhere.

Of course, there is a counter argument that insists, KSAOs are embodied in the individual buyer and become part of an individual's stock of human capital and is attached to the personal freedoms open to the buyer. This would include industry specific and firm specific KSAOs, but according to (Von Krogh & Wallin, 2011, p. 269), "firm-specific human capital is the least valuable to the individual in the labour market because it lowers labour mobility". The value of social learning and social capital to individual buyers may therefore, in the long-term, offer diminishing returns. Hence such learning strategies may disproportionally benefit the retail firm. This argument may be true of other occupations, in the buying context however, there is strong evidence present in the data to suggest firm specific knowledge and skills do not necessarily diminish the mobility of buyers between top 10 UK grocery retailers.

This can be demonstrated through interpretation of data which shows buyer mobility is prevalent between the top 10 UK retailers. Indeed, nine (9) of the thirteen (13) participants worked for two (2) or more of the top 10 UK grocery retailers at different periods of their careers. Buying knowledge and skills are therefore distributed by buyers themselves creating an active, living cross-sectoral repository of understandings and knowledge. Historically little prerogative has been given by retailers to collectively define what theories and practices count as a baseline of occupational knowledge and codified reference is scarce, a factor which has inspired this study to furthering buyer occupational knowledge. Analysis indicates therefore, that buyer firm specific and sectoral knowledge and skills gained through social learning might constitute an asset of value in the grocery retail sector. Joe, a group trading director at a top 10 UK retailer cites the perceived value of organisational and sectoral knowledge which is likely to have a bearing on his own hiring decisions and buyer selection process:

> Actually, you know, deep knowledge of the organisation and deep knowledge of the industry is far more important to my mind.
>
> (Joe)

Of, course Joe may be wrong in his estimation and though, Joe's comments cannot be generalised, there is reasoning enough to tentatively propose competition between retailers might lead retail organisations to seek augmentation of their implied stocks of social capital with buyers who are free to offer and transfer individual knowledge, skills and experience of wider competitor commercial operations, buying processes and practices. Thus, providing firms with potentially valuable sources of additional insight to existing knowledge and skill structures within a buyer social learning context.

Corporate and firm specific knowledge: becoming one dimensional?

The potential need to supplement social learning with fresh flows of outside buyer knowledge and skills is brought out by, Rebecca who identifies threats to organisational and individual performance as a buyer she perceives to stem from the predominance of learning within the social boundaries of the retail firm. Although, Rebecca is clear to mark the significance she puts on occupational ability to, "pick up the house processes thoroughly" she firmly warns:

> You do become a bit corporate in your outlook. You believe it's right, but you don't always look to challenge that because that potentially slows down the decision making.
>
> I think it [on the job learning] made you as an individual a bit one-dimensional, so you weren't rounded in your point of view. You understood one direction as right and wrong. But as you move forward you could debate; better decisions are made by more rounded views around those decisions.
>
> (Rebecca)

Notably, Rebecca's words speak of her experience developing what she describes as a one-dimensional outlook. Rebecca's interpretation is not in the positive and conveys one-dimensional to mean, a parochial disposition, presented because of her socially derived, on the job learning patterns which conformed to prevailing social norms and trust in the wisdom of those placed in a hierarchy of senior positions. As the data analysis presented as so far has shown, in the buying workplace such acts of conformity are understandable. Especially so, where buyers are exposed to intense levels of internal performance targets, peer competition, pressures to remain employed and by thoughts of enhancing their prospects through acquiring social recognition. Yet, as we have seen, buyers are principally decision makers, synthesisers of multi-dimensional levels of information and, Rebecca's perceptions allude to the pitfalls of what, Wenger et al., (2002) identify with notions of dogmatism, mediocrity and narcissism that might constrain buyer development and performance. As, Joe revealed when asked about the tension buyers face in such prevailing social circumstances:

> You've got to be open to accepting the fact that sometimes other people may say something that may challenge your belief and your current belief system. There are times when you actually don't want it to be right, but you just know it is…they're right rather than me, and that's not always easy for everybody to do.
>
> (Joe)

Joe's and Rebecca's comments convey a nervousness to challenge the social order and prevailing knowledge, even at their elevated senior buyer status. The implication being, social learning in the buying context may leave gaps that might conceivably need learning cultures which foster self-reflection and conditions favourable to challenging the status quo and which provide learning interventions from outside potentially parochial corporate, departmental and category environments. By outside sources, I mean off the job VET and learning in more formal educational settings that could contribute to a larger fraction of their KSAOs and occupational decision-making capacity. Evidence of parochial attitudes towards VET in formal educational settings is a further feature of Rebecca's testimony given below:

> [A top 4 UK grocery retailer] put me through that mini master's in business administration (MBA) and that opened-up my world. And at that point I started to challenge on a different level and it's not so much my peers, I suppose my reporting line. They found it a bit of a threat I suppose.
>
> And actually… there was a lot of negativity around it [MBA] in the business…Well you're off back to school and you're wasting your time! What value is that going to add to us? And that was from quite senior people within the business.
>
> (Rebecca)

Perceiving this type of off the job learning and knowledge acquisition as a threat to senior colleagues, analysis of, Rebecca's insight suggests that acquiring knowledge gained from formal educational settings may contribute to unsettling the cultural power/knowledge dynamics within the buying workplace. Such buyer learning activities, personal enlightenment and perhaps, enhanced credentials appears to hold a level of acceptance amongst Rebecca's peers. But, the perceived contention stemming from senior figures brings attention to a dynamic of competitive buying environments in which displays of broader, conceptual knowledge and perhaps credentials may provoke insecurities and fear, representing a perceived challenge to the authority of the senior gatekeepers of conventional buyer knowledge and learning. Former senior trading director, Patrick gives a rather candid evaluation of such reasoning from his perspective and experience of over 35 years at a top 4 grocery retailer:

> As long as people adapted to the way things got done, but then brought their new skills on top of it they were usually successful. Where they [buyers] tried to rebel against it they didn't fit, because the vast majority of people toed the line.
>
> (Patrick)

Patrick's comments do not fully deter challenge or reject the place and importance of fresh KSAOs, but his comments do impart the consequences for buyers not observing conventional situated knowledge in the buying context. This is important in better understanding the research question because it identifies an apparent relationship between buyer VET and learning which aims to improve KSAOs and performance with the paradoxical potential to be problematic to buyers who may transgress implied power dynamics in the workplace associated with Machiavellian inspired notions that caution subordinates to, "never outshine the master" (Greene, 2006, p. 1) or as Eraut (2001, p. 75) reminds us, ideas which suggest, "you only tell your bosses what you think they want to know". As cynical as this interpretation of the data may seem, the implied presence of this relationship provides some rationale that either tacitly or implicitly may contribute to discouraging buyers from undertaking or utilising some forms of off the job learning and acquired knowledge. When added to pressures which may also mount from being away from the day to day buying job for periods of time, the pros and cons of off the job learning opportunities may need to be carefully considered by buyers to account for these perceived negativities that may disadvantage individuals in ways that in the buying environment, considering on the job learning opportunities do not appear to do.

Despite latent insecurities and the apparent scepticism displayed by some senior colleagues, Rebecca's comments do convey a positive tone and credits this type of off the job learning for widening her workplace perspectives and lessening the impact of her notions of the one-dimensional buyer. Though, Rebecca does not extend details of what specific factors contributed to furthering the dimensions of her learning and performance, Tom provides insight which accentuate positives from his own experiences of attending similar off the job learning programmes in a university setting and useful in widening the understandings from this study:

> I had a number of years retail experience, I'd come in with all the experience and no education. It was every Saturday morning, your syndicate work was during the week, the exams at the end of every module and after 18 months you came out with a Management Diploma. It was hard graft on top of your existing work.
>
> Well what the course gave me was it started putting all the practice into theory if you understand where I'm coming from? So, what I'm saying is, I had the practical skills, but I had no framework to put the practical skills into.
>
> (Tom)

When questioned if he found this type of off the job learning enlightening, Tom went on to say:

> Yeah, so I would turn around and say, "ahh, okay, that's why we do it!" If you understand what I'm saying? That is the true theoretical reason behind why we do it! I sort of understood why we do it…It had a huge impact on me because all of a sudden, I came out of the practical skills with theory behind it and I would be able to debate it with somebody or put a strategy together taking all of those factors into consideration. So, things that I had never touched before from a theoretical perspective, like finance, how to read a balance sheet, okay. Employment law, what did it actually mean? I'd never touched it from a practical,
>
> (Tom)

Positives and negatives of acquisitional learning

Tom's and Rebecca's testimony provide individual perspectives and examples of insight praising perceived positives they associate with this type of off the job learning activity like, turning practice into theory and ideas they linked with opening individual horizons. Yet, by turning to concepts of individual and social capital defined in the conceptual framework the same participant data also indicates the presence and importance of economic outlooks that evidently underpin off the job VET learning philosophies in some retail organisations. This prompted my thinking to consider participant testimony from potentially contrary, individual and organisational perspectives and contributing to a line of enquiry and findings interpreted and themed to represent contrasting views on the positives and negatives of acquisitional learning in the buying context.

Analysed from the retail firm's perspective for example, the data appears to carry the burden of notions so far identified and connected with, unsettling power relationships, safeguarding commercial knowledge, and of returns on investment in general off the job training which is perceived in the data as less productive and cost effective than that of on the job VET. MBA education programmes exemplified by, Tom and Rebecca typify what can be meant by general management training in that it is not necessarily buyer specific in aims, specification or curriculum. Moreover, this type of learning and education is not firm specific and as, Becker (1993) reminds us, general training is likely to increase productivity only marginally when compared to training provided by individual firms for the specific purposes and benefit of the firm. The implication is that although this type of off the job learning may contribute to supplementing the retail firm's implied stocks of social capital, any investment by retail firms in this regard is in individual human capital because it, "loses its value whenever employers leave" (Becker, 1993, p. 41). In such cases it is the individual buyer that might stand to disproportionately benefit from this type of off the job learning, a factor which may conceivably discourage, restrict or even prevent organisational investment if taken from such an economic outlook.

Notably, further analysis revealed MBA programmes and similar types of general management learning and education was offered to participants who can be considered to have climbed the management career ladder and have held or went on to hold senior buyer roles. Buying status therefore becomes a factor to consider in the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. In the buying context, data analysis suggests increased management accountability leads to a reduction in routine buying responsibilities. This transition and change of job purpose and status are exemplified by Rob who with ten years buying experience holds management responsibility for a team of 5 buyers in his role as a senior buyer at a top 10 UK retailer and who explained:

> Yeah, I'm taking a bit more of a hands-off approach and it's more about managing the team, leading the team and trying to influence within other parts of the business. So, I look after Beers, Spirits and Cider. Spirits, yeah, [buyer] has come in an done a good job on that. Really passionate about the products, you can pretty much leave [buyer] to get on with it. Beers,

> because it’s a bigger area, more products, I’m still getting involved with that and I’ve got a slightly less experienced buyer working on that who’s still relatively new into it.
>
> (Rob)

This aspect of the data analysis is insightful because it shows Rob is learning to become a manager by being actively engaged, on the job, with his buyers. He is tacitly and implicitly learning to manage and adjust his involvement in buying tasks or supervisory activities and demonstrates what, Eraut (2001, p. 82) suggests, “most learning about management takes place on the job”. In the buying context the data suggests this to be the case and implies general off the job learning activities are not relied upon as the primary educational route into buying management but rather, may be employed to boost buying management KSAOs for those buyers with supposed management and leadership potential. As, Tom a former trading director at a top 4 UK retailer asserts:

> Why do people send you on courses? Why do people give you the opportunity to go on a course? They don’t stand in front of all the buyers and say, “these are all the courses available, these are the best courses available, we want you all to go on them”.
>
> They pick certain individuals. And the reason they pick certain individuals, they pick individuals who want to progress. They pick individuals who they see something in, yep…they go for future leadership potential.
>
> (Tom)

Though I have previously identified a typology of buyer off the job learning activities in table (2.9), Tom’s insight indicates distinctions that can be drawn between off the job VET and learning aimed at developing the technical/practical KSAOs of buyers, for example: Microsoft Excel, Microsoft Word, negotiation, time management, presentation techniques etc. and general management and leadership courses and programmes, for example: MBA, Business School programmes. And, though distinct technical/practical and management based off the job learning activities coexist and were experienced interchangeably by participants, Tom is proposing not all off the job learning activities are open to all buyers. Indeed, only three of the participants, Edward, Rebecca and Joe cited enrolment to learning programmes that were conducted by independent Universities or Colleges that continued over a week in duration. In the case of both Joe and Rebecca, their learning was continuous in definition through a mix of part-time, day release and independent study conducted in personal time over an extended period of months and years. For Edward, a two-week residential at the Harvard Business School made up a distinctly unique continuous off the job learning episode identified within the data. For most of the participants, off the job learning, practical or management based, was conducted over relatively short periods of time, typically several days, no longer than one week in duration.

In-house retail learning academies

At first, analysis and interpretation led me to consider that prohibitive economic factors associated with high cost HE and FE tuition might provide the predominant limiting factor to participation in off the job buyer VET and learning opportunities for buyers. This may be the case, but it is not clear in the data. In fact, a closer examination of the data shows the presence of what may conversely indicate significant economic investments in VET made by retail organisations in what I have defined as in-house learning academies. By this I mean, centres of learning and development operated by retail organisations themselves that offer their workers a tailored range of off the job VET and learning activities and programmes appropriate to their role and personal learning and development needs. Sainsbury's the UK's third largest grocery retailer, for example, states their commitment to, "continue to invest in the training and development of our colleagues" (Sainsbury's, 2019). Furthermore, Kate a strategic transformation director at a top 10 UK retailer indicates the presence and perceived importance of economic investments made by another UK top 10 grocery retailer in transforming off the job learning and development and VET.

> I think it's important that you have people who are skilled to do the job and perform well. And sometimes that will take quite a big investment in training to help that. So certainly here [top 10 UK retailer] we've had to invest in new people, because…and we've got a big transformation programme that doesn't have sufficient heads to actually deliver it! and we've had to invest in the capability of our existing team, because they are not used to running transformation of this scale.
>
> So, it was important to do a bigger investment than you would have ordinarily done. Other areas they might be more mature and therefore the role of training will be different. It might be more biased to on the job or focussed to new people coming in.
>
> (Kate)

Though Kate's organisation sits outside the top 4 UK retailers, all the top 4 grocery retailers in the UK operate in-house learning academies that are extensive in content. For example, Tesco, the UK's largest grocery retailer offer their colleagues a range of E-learning, blended and what they term as face to face courses. A review of Tesco's Online Academy website (2019) revealed 1046 different course titles were available to employees across the whole Tesco workforce. Of course, without system access privileges to the course repository, determining buyer specific content was limited however, twelve separate buying related off the job modular courses were identified and ranged from, "Product: Planning and Preparing for a Trip" to "Price Health Training" (Tesco, 2019).

Such evidence chimes with the broader observations and assertions of Helyer & Corkhill, (2015, p. 124-125) citing, Mathews (2013, p. 4) who have identified growing trends of organisational transformation in the wider workplace centred on designing and delivering off the job programmes of

VET and learning using employees and the guidance and expertise of in-house and third-party L&D professionals:

> While university scholars were busy researching and arguing over the definitions of informal learning, L&D professionals in organizations were focused on formal learning. Their efforts were primarily channelled into providing formal training programmes to meet the needs of their organization's employees.

Further testimony from, Kate provides evidence of the development of such cross functional learning strategies specific to the top 10 UK grocery retailer context:

> We brought a steering group together and had the conversation about whether we wanted to weigh up an internal versus external [approach]. We agreed we'd need a partner to help us do it. We brought in [large global business consultancy] they looked at what we'd got, bench marked it against their own methodology and then we built our courses off that. And it was a cross functional representative from other business units that agreed the method and agreed the content and we built training packages and started rolling it out.
>
> We wanted a methodology that was right for us and we wanted everybody to speak the right language. And…and we can deliver it more effectively and cheaply in-house than we could have by sending everybody on external courses.
>
> (Kate)

The data analysis shows the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer incorporates what may signify emerging exploration and perhaps, preference of in-house, academy style approaches to off the Job VET and learning over more traditional programmes of learning offered by, HE and FE educational establishments. There is evident intent by some top 10 UK grocery retailers to tailor their approach to off the Job VET and learning, to the prevailing organisational operation and sociocultural environment, the socioeconomic benefits of which are concisely reasoned above by, Kate. In-part, this inclination may account for the scarcity of reference to university or college deigned buyer off the job VET and learning programmes cited by participants. This is not to say I have overlooked the contribution these type of education establishments can and do make in the general retail context. For example, Sainsbury's corporate Training and Development website (2019) illustrates how some in-house off the job learning programmes are, "externally accredited" and promoted to enhance employee motivation through the promise of acquiring a repertoire of implied transferable knowledge and skills endorsed with the credentials of universities, guilds and professional bodies.

Old school and changing perspectives

Yet, despite the evident attention given by top 10 UK grocery retail firms to transforming off the job VET and learning opportunities within the retail sector, according to most participants the buying function appears to be situated on the periphery of new academy style developments in off the job

VET and learning. Insight which may offer explanation of such low receptiveness can be discerned from, Kate who in leading and rolling out transformation projects identified, “the potential for biases to on the job learning” in some mature retail functions and from what, Simon describes as the prevalence and preference in the buying function for the, “old school way of teaching”.

My attention was drawn to Simon’s use of the term, “old school way of teaching” as a theme because I interpret its meaning to contrast with notions of transformation and the rise of academy style off the job initiatives present in the data. Connecting its meaning to Simon’s own experiences of being self-reliant and dependant on, on the job learning I also discovered a semblance to the wider perceptions and experiences of buyer VET portrayed by the testimony of all the participants in this research. That is not to say the term, “old school” should be viewed in the negative because of connotations to the past, history or specific points in time. Indeed, Patrick contributes a perspective suggestive that notions of old school learning on the job are highly relevant to the past, present and the future. For example, as retailers battle with intensified levels of competition brought about by the growth of German based discount chains and the rise of online retailing, “the de-stabilising factors in the grocery market have increased” (Patrick). Patrick’s perspective infers that performance as a buyer is increasingly dependent on learning to adapt to transitory ideas of what counts as relevant market knowledge in the occupation and cites the importance of notions he refers to as, “the latest brief based learning”.

> Today, learning has become, the latest brief based learning. So, this is what we are doing now…for example, you bring in somebody like [Group commercial director top 10 UK retailer] who has very strong views about how things should be done. So, all of a sudden you go from a business that has built its business on say…9 and 5 product price points for example, to everything other than 9 and 5 price points. It’s all about knowledge that is relevant to today’s market.
>
> (Patrick)

Patrick’s notions of, latest brief based learning introduces a concept which allows for the dynamic nature of buying knowledge which encompasses changes in the relevance and circumstances of the UK grocery market place and the beliefs and understandings of the person(s) in charge of the commercial function at the time. Accommodating and dealing with such ever-present knowledge dynamics typifies the frontline role of the buyer, who in taking responsibility for the commercial success or failures of their categories must adapt to new and changing factors. This foundation provides further reasoning to explain the propensity for buyers to focus their learning on addressing the here and now and to staying close to the familiarity of perceived tried and tested systems of VET and learning that are adaptable to their on the job workplace environments and that the participants relate to as the old school tradition.

If Patrick's notions of, the latest brief based learning are to be understood as a more widespread phenomenon in the buying environment, the capacity to design and produce a universal, specified core curriculum for buyer VET and learning stands to be hindered by such notions of market instability, individual and corporate level interpretations of that instability and different attempts by top 10 UK grocery retailers to find learning formulas and strategies that address it. Yet, as Wenger, et al., (2002, p. 10-11) assert:

> Knowledge is not static [and] dynamism does not mean that a domain of knowledge lacks a stable core. In all fields, there is a required baseline of knowledge. One of the primary tasks of a community of practice is to establish this common baseline and standardise what is well understood so that people can focus their creative energies on the more advanced issues. Meeting this baseline is essential even to be in the game; you must be on the leading edge to hold a competitive advantage.

Wenger et al., evoke a scenario valuable in better understanding the data and research question because, their assertions infer that buyers themselves may be best placed to facilitate the accumulation of knowledge and set the agenda for effective development, design and delivery of all types of buyer VET and learning. Yet, data analysis shows the participants of this research rarely take time to routinely engage in sustained purposeful conceptualisation, development, design and delivery of buyer on or off the job VET and learning as part of their roles. In fact, for some, participation in this research provided a rare opportunity to engage their attentions to buyer VET and learning. As, Joe a senior trading director candidly revealed:

> So, you know, today, coming to the University and talking to you about this is making me think about the way learning is happening within my current function and my current organisation.
>
> (Joe)

Headspace and achievement motivation

As a senior leader in his organisation, Joe's previous remarks are open, candid and may reveal the distant nature of his relationship with those responsible for VET and learning within his organisation. They may also reveal the effects of factors previously discussed, and which identify with Panopticon like influences of organisational control in maintaining the productivity of buyers. Equally, Joe's comments may simply expose his previous personal ambivalence to championing VET and learning. Yet, Joe also speaks of what might be considered less cynical perspectives that owe more to the weight of his occupational responsibility and the call of his personal motivations within the competitive realms of the buying environment. As Joe explained:

> It's that piece again…I talked about it earlier, about headspace. You get so close to what you're doing that you don't actually step back and ask these questions sufficiently and give them enough time to think about them.

(Joe)

Joe's testimony and notions of headspace appear to offer a headline statement in this study that attempts to reconcile evident tensions he identifies between his cognitive capacity to focus on the demands of his job, his headspace, with an awareness that voices logic to devoting enough headspace and time to advancing KSAOs. A reasoning that Covey (2004, p. 291) would argue to be a, "way that will preserve and enhance our capacity to work and adapt". Joe's testimony informs the research questions because it implies significance to factors of contrasting motivational tensions that some buyers may face. The origins of these tensions I have linked to theories of human motivation that acknowledge the worth of achievement, need and expectancy thought to be significant factors behind the motives of human actions and behaviours and associated with the work of, McClelland (1961).

Principles of McClelland's work originating in, *The Achieving Society* (1961) resonates with this research expressly, because it reminds us of the significance of, "Man's self-interest" (McClelland, 1961, p. 8) and the strength of what McClelland terms as, achievement motivation (McClelland, 1961, p. 36). Miner (2015, p. 47) gives a concise and contemporary summary of the principles of McClelland's concept:

> The achievement motivation construct has been stretched to include not only hope of success, but also fear of failure and even fear of success. In addition, at least two other motives-those for power and affiliation- must now be considered part of the theory.

As presented in earlier pages, hope of success and fear of failure provide strong motives for buyers to learn that resonate strongly with many of the participants. As do motives of power and affiliation, for example; with size, prestige and profile of product categories as summed up by Josh below, who was a trainee buyer when interviewed for this research:

> Okay, well obviously financial incentive is quite strong in terms of the pay grade for a graduate and the true buyer package which is very strong, and a very, very reasonable wage…especially for what is going on in the graduate world. Probably quite a bit to be honest, to do with the accolade in terms of the size of the category area you manage for the business…does that make sense?
>
> (Josh)

Like Josh, Simon's motives for achievement are just as candidly revealed:

> You are in control of the business that you operate in. It's massive business you know. It's £150 million a year and I take a lot of pride in the fact that I manage that level of business. And that motivates me.
>
> (Simon)

Edward's words below, offer a senior interpretation behind Josh and Simon's perceptions of motivation to learn as a buyer:

> That is what they [buyers] are being conditioned to think. Because they see…you know, take [trainee buyer's name] as an example. He's a trainee who has been given a £1 million per week category to look after and he knows what all the other trainee's turnover per week is for their areas. And, because he is one of the bigger categories, he thinks it's a good thing.
>
> Yeah, there is a lot about you know being…The fact that you've got a big cheque book means that you've got a lot of influence.
>
> (Edward)

Of course, motivation varies by individual, but it is conceivable that Joe's headspace capacity and that of others may be attentive to an underlying, "hierarchy of value" (Peterson, 2018, p. xxxi) consciously or subconsciously placed on the primacy and immediacy of achieving work-based outcomes and status in the buyer pecking order. This reasoning perhaps, indicates a motivational response induced partly by psychological factors of achievement motivation and the consequences of what I interpret to result from exposure or as Edward puts it, "conditioning" to competitive, high achievement-based buying environments. For example, when questioned on his perceptions of, what makes a great buyer? Tom, a former senior trading director evokes the striving orientated nature of the buying environment:

> Somebody who is able to win, okay… When I say win, there is no winning in buying there is how much you are prepared to lose. Somebody, who will turn around and say, this is what I do and nothing else, the influences around me will not impact on what I do. It's that whole, that I am not going to give up.
>
> So, this is me…having a plan, numerous twists and turns, not deviating from the goal, and over the period, hitting that goal. That sense of achievement that you set out to do something. You chased it down and you got there. And it's that emotional feeling of actually achieving that.
>
> It's self-motivation as well, I didn't need that…I needed some motivation at work, but this was more of me wanting to achieve.
>
> (Tom)

Tom's words are typical and consistent with most participant responses revealed in the data. And, if Peterson (2018, p. xxx) is to be believed such widespread perceptions of buyer motivation should be considered an expected phenomenon as, "people who live by the same code are rendered mutually predictable to one another. They act in keeping with each other's expectations and desires". I am unable to categorically accept Peterson's assertion as it simplifies and generalises motivation and cultural concepts. But, the possibility of such motivational and psychological based factors provides a logic for inclusion and discussion in these findings that aim to better understand the relationship between leaning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer because, ideas of achievement motivation in the buying context, may implore buyers to the immediacy of achieving short-term performance results. This may predispose some buyers to consider aspects of on and off the job learning as, "a big hindrance to getting the job done" (Edward) and to retaining "old school" perspectives with low receptiveness to championing wider exploration and engagement with on and off the job VET and learning.

Here the data offers a warning obtained from a provoking supplier perspective revealed by, Rob which reasons that buyers may unwittingly inflate perceptions they may hold about the standards of their own KSAOs through correlation with the size and influence of their category responsibilities. This could mean, the overriding influence in some buyer's performance may lie with the high profile, economic power of the category and the organisation rather than the overt capability of the buyer.

> You know I talk to suppliers, you know people I've become quite close to over the years. You know, they would often say, the buyer that's sitting in front of me in the multiples [top ten UK grocery retailers] isn't that good. And the team that we are fielding is, you know, calibre wise is miles ahead of them. But the buyer still gets the result because the volumes are so big we can't ignore them. So, you know, you're getting the result, but you could get an even better result if you had a more skilled individual in there.
>
> (Rob)

Interpreting Rob's insight has led me to contemplate that buyers may be susceptible to underestimating the need to augment and develop their KSAOs because of misinterpretations brought about by factors of achievement motivation and inflated perceptions of their own knowledge.

New perspectives? preparation, acceleration and continuation

> You can teach anybody anything, but you can't necessarily make them good at it.
>
> (Edward)

Edward's remarks above convey ideas that buyer VET and learning should be applied to the real world of UK grocery buying. He is suggesting performance as a buyer is wrapped up in the results of practical application and not necessarily in accordance with conceptual participation in VET and learning or the achievement of qualifications and academic credentials. More than any other testimony I identified in the data, Edward's remarks tie together the views of each participant in this research to a state of positive perception to the correlation between learning on the job and performance in the buying environment. The overriding principle being conveyed, that teaching and learning in the buying context is, according to, Jacob, "best informed by practical examples". This would provide a contrary perspective to human capital ideas which propose that, "qualifications are proxy measures for the expertise (expressed as skills) employers are looking for when they recruit new workers" (Guile & Unwin, 2019, p. 19). In the buying context, the inference being that application and utilisation of KSAOs has a greater bearing on notions of buyer performance than stocks of formal qualifications and education credentials.

Yet, as strong as these principles prevail in the data, such emphasis belies testimony given by some participants which somewhat counterbalances the weight of bias towards on the job learning in the buying context. As, Rob posits:

> I'm probably a great believer of learning on the job. I personally feel I have learnt more from listening and reflecting on what colleagues over the years have said. Both people who at the time were perceived to be further up the food chain than me and further down the food chain from me. And it's just that ability to have the openness to take that knowledge on board and not feel inadequate because I didn't know it at the time. So, yeah, I'm a great believer in the workplace. But, I think the question you posed earlier about how do you capture all that and make sure the whole organisation learns from it?... I think there are things as well, you know that in the workplace you can't learn.
>
> (Rob)

Rob is acknowledging the strength of off the job learning in relation to his own performance and occupational progression. Yet, he is also recognising potential to improve buyer performance through facilitating greater access to buyer knowledge and the wider experimentation with both on and off the job VET and learning. His comments are questioning of the nature of buyer VET and he intuitively hints at the suggestion that conventional buyer wisdom can be challenged and augmented through conceptual and practical development and transformation. In this way, Rob's comments are consistent with Wheelahan (2019, p. 104) who claims, that, "both sites of learning are needed". Rob's comments are therefore open to what I have themed as new perspectives many of which can be found in the data.

Rebecca, a former grocery trading director turned retail industry consultant diagnoses what she sees as the opportunity for developing new perspectives on VET and learning in the buying context and claims:

> The challenge is how you get senior people within retail businesses to buy into that learning piece because they have very much come through this in-house training which is not a purist learning point of view.
>
> It's making something fit what the buyer does and what tools they need, but then you need to push their thinking.
>
> There is not enough strategic thinking about the balance of information and how you're going to utilise that information, you are driven off data not hearsay! It needs to be evidenced and although I think there is more of it now…it's not embedded in retail businesses.
>
> (Rebecca)

Rebecca's tone was noticeably critical of some senior people and what she perceives to be their conservative approach to buyer VET and learning. She offers a perspective which places emphasis on the importance of achieving a balance of practical skills, strategic thinking and decision making founded on evidenced based data analysis. Contrary to widely held beliefs acknowledged by most participants, Rebecca is challenging the effectiveness of old school notions like learning by anecdote and possibly of the human instinct of gut feel when applied in the buying context.

Unlike many of the participants in this research, Rebecca's learning experience has included significant mid-career off the job learning which has exposed her to external occupational and education environments outside her immediate workplace and may be a factor in the strength of her perspectives. But, her thoughts further provoke notions I have considered widely in these findings which suggest there is a present transition towards IT and evidenced based data analysis which may accelerate as a new generation of IT orientated senior buyers replaces the old.

Despite having spent over twenty years learning how to be a buyer in the conservative traditions of what, Rebecca has described as, "this in-house training", John's reflection on his learning experiences revealed thoughts of how, "putting the building blocks in place to get there" may have helped his early career learning and performance as a buyer. John is pointing to the perceived value of pre-existing knowledge and prior theoretical and conceptual preparation appropriate to the buying occupation and environment, as he put it:

> It was a very, very steep learning curve! Because essentially everything that would have helped me in that… that university could have prepared me for, or school could have prepared me for in terms of what choices of A levels or choices of GCSEs …. All of that I kind of bypassed.
>
> (John)

John's words and notions of, "building blocks" links a participant perspective signifying the worth of both secondary and post-secondary education pathways and suggests buyer VET and learning could be advanced, sequenced and combined more effectively with existing educational institutions. In-turn this may better inform educational and vocational options. Of course, this would require better public understanding and access to core buying theory, practice and occupational knowledge and perhaps, a coordinating institutional framework which might sit between occupational and policy levels that would contribute to an independently recognised system of VET and learning (Mulder, Messman & König, 2015) for the grocery buying occupation.

Such a fit might be found within the wider aims of retail industry groups like the Institute for Grocery Distribution (IGD). "IGD is a research and training charity which sits at the heart of the food and grocery industry" and who, "came together to improve and develop professional standards and deliver training in grocery management" (IGD, 2019). Furthermore, to conceive the formation of an independent institutional body for UK food and grocery buying would not be an imaginary concept for many of the participants of this research. Indeed, and as Jacob states, "why isn't there an institute for buying and selling or something?" A point also more than hinted at by Simon:

> I don't think it's [buying] got the profile it deserves. I think it's such an important role and it's well paid, you know it's a good job. I don't think it has the same level of profile as maybe, you know, an accountant or you know, a stock broker, someone like that. Actually, the level of importance that you've got in comparison to you know a lawyer, an accountant whatever…. it's comparable for sure. If you look at the FTSE 100 yeah, look how many retailers are in there? Who are the most important people in retail? It's really kind of shop floor and buyers really. I might come across as a bit you know, kind of a little bit disrespectful to other areas but they are all supporting functions, aren't they?
>
> (Simon)

Like many occupations and professions, the framework of such an occupational institute may enhance the profile of UK grocery buying and facilitate the development of buyer education and learning. And, though data analysis depicts participant perceptions which strongly suggest training of buyers should reflect the thinking of the business they serve, bespoke organisational training can be underpinned by principles that according to, Edward, "are the same whether you are buying food for Sainsbury's or food for Morrisons". Edward goes on to insist:

> I think there is a huge opportunity to accelerate [buyer] learning…A degree or a formal qualification that accelerates learning, that comes from years of experience. At least in a three-year programme of these are the things you need to study. For example, I had to teach [buyers] how to work out a gross margin and net margin and all this stuff and how to include, you know VAT and not VAT!
>
> (Edward)

John's, Simon's and Edward's perspectives bring together ideas of how theoretical preparation is perceived to fortify practical on the job VET but also, how from their perspective, education and training programmes based on core theory and practice may hasten buyer learning and, in principle, contribute to enhanced performance. In Edward's case above, he is arguing that the ability to calculate gross margin is a universal buying skill that could be acquired in education settings and later applied in the workplace. Furthermore, there is implication in Edward's remarks to suggest participation in such off the job programmes of education and learning could potentially benefit him further by relieving some of his responsibility for teaching buyer KSAOs. Here, Edward's perceptions perhaps reveal ideas that buying practitioners may not necessarily consider teaching or training others as a primary focus or skill of their occupation. This brings into question the access to quality teaching and training buyers receive and the effects this may have on performance as a buyer. When questioned, does a good buyer make a good teacher? Edward noted:

> No…but a good teacher could make a good buyer!
>
> (Edward)

Nevertheless, all three participants perspectives I have used appear to correlate with those of, Tom who succinctly remarked:

> I do believe you need…instead of saying I'm going to do buying, just take a step back and say, a part of my education should be learning to enable me to buy.
>
> (Tom)

Tom's remarks chime with those of Wheelahan (2019, P. 98) who prompts us to consider that people, "need access to the theoretical basis of practice in their occupation if they are to be fully participating agential workers". Wheelahan's view may be true but her judgement relies on the premise that accepted levels of consensus exist on what counts as recognised theory and knowledge in the buying occupation. To achieve such consensus, requires significant levels of sectoral and organisational collaboration. And, although I have previously shown some evidence of sectoral level collaboration for buyer VET through the development of apprenticeship standards, data analysis reveals little evidence of routine cross sectoral attempts to research, debate or codify what counts as buyer KSAOs as, "the basis for practice" (Wheelahan, 2019, p. 98) for grocery buying in the UK. Indeed, the data analysis suggests contributions to the widening of public knowledge in the buying occupation are rare and reliant on the efforts of research like this and the development of bespoke packages of research education and learning by private and third sector organisations. My findings identify therefore, that the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer must account for limited evidence of codified or recorded sectoral consensus on what counts as universal KSAOs from which to measure notions of universal performance.

Continuation

Notions of preparation and acceleration discussed above can be added to participant perceptions also found in the data interpreted and linked to concepts of continuous buyer development and learning, which I will now discuss. To explain my ideas of continuous buyer development I draw parallels to concepts of continuous professional development (CPD). According to Melesse & Gulie (2019, p. 82) CPD is a, "notion rooted in the constructivist philosophy which claims that a person's constructions and views of the world are not stable but are in continuous change". CPD as a concept is a framework for individuals to routinely plan, do and review learning and development activities as an initiative aimed at boosting individual performance outcomes and results. Furthermore, the idea being that not everybody learns or can be trained in the same way or at the same speed. The CPD concept therefore places emphasis on a self-assessment approach to better understanding the relevance and utility of all learning opportunities and episodes in the development of professional and occupational KSAOs. For the CIPD, (2019):

> We're not concerned with how much time you spend on training courses or how many boxes you tick on a form. Instead, our approach is focused on outcomes and results. CPD is about capturing useful experiences and assessing the practical benefits of what you have learned.

Though not directly referred to as so, evidence resembling notions of CPD thinking is given by, Joe who provides a descriptive account of his own systematic approach to continuing his occupational knowledge and development in a way that perceptibly extends beyond organised and recognised learning activities:

> One of the things, I've been a great doer of over my career is reflecting on my day as I go home. You know, what's gone well, what hasn't gone well? You know, what did I want to get from the day and what did I actually get from the day? And just trying to you know, suck up knowledge from people, but think about it. And to be honest…I did!
>
> One of the things I've always learnt, felt I learnt from people over my career was quite often, write things down. Because sometimes you come across stuff and then forget it! And, actually if you write it down it's quite interesting because you build up a sort of knowledge bank of thoughts and phrases which from time to time, if you go back to can be quite interesting.
>
> (Joe)

In better understanding the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer, Joe's testimony is important because it provides a participant case of what I interpret as a form of CPD practice. Joe is not thinking of his learning in fixed binary terms that might distinguish between on and off the job learning, his approach is integrated with notions of on and off the job learning. His thinking is fluid and incorporates personal reflection and his practice involves recording written notes on his own learning and experiences. Joe's approach to better understanding, "what's gone well and what hasn't gone well" provides a case in this study which demonstrates a relationship between continuous self-assessment and performance which extends beyond organisational measures and KPIs such as "hitting your numbers" and sales performance and which encompasses evaluations of day to day and longer-term learning experiences as well as more formal or planned activities.

Joe stops short of providing direct insight that provides an evaluation of the level of effectiveness he equates to developing his KSAOs through his own approach to CPD, however, the persistence of his practice throughout his career suggests merit can be found. It is difficult to discern if, Joe displays a natural aptitude to the CPD approach or if his approach is a result of learnt behaviour. But, there is little evidence in the data to suggest CPD is a practice grounded in buyer learning and development as it is in other occupations and professions like teaching, and the medical professions. In the UK context these professions provide typical examples where CPD is a firmly established method used by individuals to routinely plan, do and review learning and development activities as an initiative aimed at boosting individual performance outcomes and results and fostering the development of occupational and professional practice.

The question then arises, could thinking about ideas I have discussed of preparation, acceleration and continuation as new perspectives be set against what might be considered old school outlooks be explored to expand the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. The participants of this research as practitioners or former practioners are seemingly best placed to contribute to advancing the new perspectives they have revealed in the data. Yet, despite these well-meaning perspectives, many of which advocate that the basis of buyer qualifications, theory and knowledge should be constructed from, "years of experience" (Edward) I have found that the data reveals an underlying reluctance for the participants of this research to stray too far from their day job. Perhaps developing new perspectives in buyer VET and learning might be someone else's job.

Chapter Five: Answering the research question

The relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer

Introduction

As previously advanced in the introduction chapter and throughout this thesis, UK food and grocery buyers' matter. They are important and influential social agents whose occupation stretches far beyond the boundaries of the retail organisations who employ them and who collectively contribute £190.3 billion to the UK economy (IGD, 2018). Until now, little has been written about them, their occupation and the VET and learning which informs buyer development and potentially underpins their occupational performance. This research therefore, claims originality and value amongst existing works with a contribution to knowledge that has sought to identify and better understand factors of on and off the job learning and performance as a buyer which might inform the development of occupational standards, competencies and knowledge for the education and training needs of UK food and grocery buyers.

The findings discussed in the preceding chapter have emerged from qualitative analysis of data drawn from the perceptions and lived experiences of a unique purposive sample of thirteen practicing and former buyers from the community of top 10 UK food and grocery retailers. Documentary analysis of occupational based literature has further supported the scope of participant data and research design including semi-structured interviews, coding and thematic analysis was brought together through the synthesis of an original conceptual framework combining human capital thinking with conceptualisations of on and off the job learning (Sfard, 1998), performance (Appelbaum, et al., 2000) and pedagogy as widely understood by, Nind, et al., (2016). Here I will restate the supplementary research questions from which the protocols used in this research have been framed to establish the findings.

1. How do people become grocery retail buyers?
2. What do grocery retail buyers learn on the job?
3. What do grocery retail buyers learn off the job?

The ten major substantive themes which emerged in the findings were found to be interconnected, overlapping and non-linear and were consolidated, introduced and have so far been discussed in the findings chapter under three relatable section headings of:

- Pathways, learning cultures and traditions.
- Learning the core: KSAOs, performance and the person.

- Collaboration, social learning and changing perspectives.

Attention now turns to further distilling and prioritising the themes discussed to directly address the central research question this study has sought to better understand, explicitly; what is the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer? In so doing, secondary findings can be found nested amongst conclusions which, in the stickiest terms, sit outside the direct scope of the research boundaries. Most notably these include ideas indicative of what buyers do, their roles and responsibilities, processes and practices and, participant perceptions which relate to measures of buyer performance. Furthermore, at appropriate points throughout, my own reflections are included which have helped better understand instances relatable to my rationale for this research and previous experiences of learning and performance as a buyer. Though effort has been made not to overstate secondary factors, such linkages could not be ignored because they augment the overall contribution this research aims to make to the UK food and grocery buying occupation by raising and connecting incremental opportunities that might potentially extend this research beyond its current scope.

What is the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer?

Shifting career status, development agendas and relevance

The relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer shifts and evolves between a buyer's differing occupational status, future development needs and the perceived relevance of on and off the job factors of learning I will now explain. To do this, I have tied the four underpinning theories of the conceptual framework that have guided my inquiry throughout this research with, the four career statuses that span the buying occupation. The summary matrix given at (Fig. 2.2) on the following page provides an at a glance illustration of how the conceptual framework and career status of the buyer have been used to map and draw together the extensive findings and concluding factors that represents the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer, relative to the variability of buyer occupational status.

Fig. 2.2. Factors and dynamics affecting the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer

Factors and dynamics affecting the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer

UK food and grocery retail buying occupation - career stages and occupational status

Conceptual framework theories	1. Pre-entry potential buyer status	2. Trainee buyer status	3. Buyer status	4. Senior buyer status
P=f (A,M,O)	• Buying is not a career of first choice. • Limited visibility of buying occupation in Post-16 or HE establishments. • Buying as an occupation hidden in plan sight. • Struggle between structure and agency: handpicking buyers?	• Common ground of a two-year learning transition to becoming a buyer. • Establishing occupational status and identity. • Learning the core category dynamics. • Learning to acquire social recognition. • Hitting numbers: buyer performance KPIs • Competing motivations: graduate Vs non-graduate divide.	• Tension between establishing category credentials and portfolios and being a category expert. • Buyer as 'enthusiast' and 'caretaker'. • Hitting numbers: buyer performance measures KPIs • Competitive nature of buyers. • Minimal CPD – Individualism, short-termism and pragmatism?	• Reduction in routine buying activities. • Becoming one-dimensional? • Widening work place perspectives. • Old school and changing perspectives. • Headspace and achievement motivation. • Training the next generation of buyers?
H/C KSAOs Tripartite relationship	• Influence of Post-16 education policy. • Massification of HE. • Unrelated HE degrees. • Pro-qualification paradox? • Illusion of shop floor to top floor? • Rise in analytics and data management.	• Collaboration, social learning in the workplace. • Marginal value of off the job learning opportunities vs learning on the job. • Safeguarding social and intellectual capital.	• Category based credentialism overrides qualifications. • A group of disparate individuals: the value of social learning social capital. In developing KSAOs. • Safeguarding organisational and intellectual capital. • In house learning academies.	• MBA's, Business Schools – investment in training. • Return to the value of qualifications and credentials? • Lack of formalised buying knowledge is not available at the 3 prior stages.
Three dimensions of pedagogy	• No specified buying curriculum. • No institutional body of learning. • Minimal levels of buying related literature or codification of knowledge.	• Organisational specific leaning approaches. • No specified curriculum and little evidence of codified occupational knowledge. • Buyer VET is not mandated. • Self directed learning or submissiveness? • In at the deep end/sink or swim. • Struggle between structure and agency. • Mentoring and coaching.	• The changing face of office space: social learning or social conditioning. • Keeping buyers on the job. Learning and development teams: the panopticon of buyer learning. • Latest brief based leaning. • Data management and IT as surrogate teacher. • Inconsistent levels of on the job teaching and assessment.	• Focus on teaching and developing others. • Conformity, "old school" and new school. • Parochial attitudes. • Homogenisation of buyers – situated, process and control as curriculum?
2 metaphors for learning	• **Acceptance of variance and diversity of previous participatory or acquisitional learning pathways and qualifications on entry.** • HE or degree levels useful but not necessary. • Acceptance of participatory learning and experiential knowledge. • Participants would welcome buying qualifications.	• **High Relevance of on the job participatory learning** • Valorisation of experiential knowledge. • Supplementary off the job – learning to negotiate and mandatory GSCOP. • Establishment of on the job learning mindset. • **Restraint from** acquisitional off the Job learning.	• **High Relevance of on the job participatory learning.** • **Increased valorisation of experiential on the job learning** • **Restraint from acquisitional off the job learning but engagement to tailoring on and off the job learning to category** • **Latest brief based learning: buyer learning and performance is not static.**	• **Greater engagement with and exploration of off the job learning opportunities.** • Corporate and firm specific knowledge: becoming one dimensional. • Putting practice into theory. • Of broadening horizons. • Threats to peers.

As can be seen, a summary representation of the headline findings that have consistently emerged and respond to the research question throughout this study are given and identified by cross matching the connecting career status and conceptualisation. Though the findings are extensive, the matrix at (Fig 2.2) should not be considered complete or a reductionist view of the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Rather, the matrix represents the diversity of factors found to be associated with each occupational stage of the buying occupation which taken together, should be considered interrelated and overlapping and likely to vary by individual and organisational contexts.

The following pages explain the foundations of these findings and provide further focus on the key findings given priority in this study which are headlined in turn and start with notions that depict the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer and which posit;

Buying is a mostly hidden occupation and there is participant and organisational acceptance of diversity and variance towards pre-entry buyer VET and learning. This precludes participant claims that higher education is useful but not a guarantee of future performance as a buyer and explains what is described as the paradox of pro-qualification trends in the buying occupation.

The common ground of a two-year period of learning to survive as a trainee buyer is then discussed and followed by an explanation of how a buyer's product category profile and notions of self-interest, achievement motivation (McClelland, 1961) and expectancy (Vroom, 1964) appear to underpin buyer behavioural motivation and create the foundations of an on the job learning mindset.

How buyer development agendas are intertwined with their prevailing occupational status and career stages of buying precludes further conclusions which question if buyer product category profiles and portfolios are a proxy for competency and explore contrasting notions of skill and performance as enthusiast and buyer as caretaker.

The role of social learning to offset individual buyer learning and development agendas and the perceived reluctance to engage in off the job learning is advanced before concluding on how reaching senior buyer status is marked by a greater level of engagement and wider exploration with off the job learning opportunities.

Starting with an acceptance of variance and diversity in pre-entry VET and learning

Despite the importance of the buyer in the retail context, investigations did not unearth a single authoritative document which explicitly defines and explains the progressive career management stages and VET and learning pathways of food and grocery buyers in top 10 UK retailers. These conclusions have not therefore drawn from codified comparison, but from interpretation of findings which strongly indicate that the participating buyers in this study were all grown from the roots of their own unique career and learning trajectories. The biography of each participant previously given in table (2.5) reveals the variance and diversity of their educational backgrounds, most of which had little or no pre-determined connection with the buying occupation. In fact, for all participants, buying was not a career of first choice and for more than half of all cases, buyer status was achieved without possessing a graduate level of higher education. Taken without further context this comparative look at the mix of graduate and non-graduate participants draws conclusions which may be difficult to develop because of what might be interpreted as statistical instability. Nevertheless, this research counts as valuable, the perceptions and experiences of participants because they are best placed to provide insight for interpretation and from which to draw inferential conclusions from their accounts. All of whom, regardless of their education background, were undivided in asserting that a degree level education might prove useful but was not a necessary step or requirement on the route to becoming a successful buyer and as emphasised in the finding chapter, certainly not a guarantee of future performance as a buyer. Analysis of the start of participant careers in this study therefore, conveys an appreciable acceptance of most participants to the diversity of VET and learning pathways from which a potential buyer might be developed. Entering directly into the buying occupation without the credentials of post-16 qualifications was not a seen as a barrier to entry. Indeed, the findings chapter documents participants perceptions which, irrespective of previous levels of higher education and learning, shows those with prior retail knowledge and experience of customer facing, shop floor work experience competed just as favourably in relation to demonstrating potential future performance as a buyer to some retail organisations.

The paradox of pro-qualification trends in buying

Yet paradoxically, most participants noted a change in attitudes from retail organisations in recent times and were found to be accepting that the route to becoming a buyer will in future, include the expectation if not necessarily the need, for a degree level education or form of standardised occupational post-school qualification. These perceptions may owe more to notions associated with, "mass higher education and massification" (Tight, 2019, p. 98) which the findings reveal to have also influenced the HR practices some retailers use to recruit and select buyers and according to, Cook, Watson & Webb (2019, p. 1256),

> has led us to both perceive and use HE differently, using it less and less to become learned and increasingly to signal our competence to potential employers to secure a well-remunerated job.

Graduate recruitment schemes are now common in retail organisations and, Josh a graduate trainee buyer with an impressive HE degree in Medical Biology provides this research with a typical example of the variation of occupationally unrelated HE qualifications which are increasing likely to be found in the educational backgrounds of future buyers. Participant scepticism surrounding the relevance and credentials of some graduate level higher education to the performance of buyers was explicitly highlighted by senior buyer, Steven in the findings chapter and, taken in the context of buyer education might be critically looked upon as a, spill over of human capital thinking (Battu, Belfield & Sloane, 2003) and counter to the theorisations originally professed by Shultz (1960) and Becker (1993). Yet, despite these doubts and the appreciable rise in apprenticeship programmes visible in organisations like Tesco (2019) that provide educational pathways requiring lower levels of qualification, for most participants, opportunities for people to become buyers without first gaining HE or post-school qualifications are likely to be limited in the future and according to Edward, "especially in larger retailers". This shift in expectations identified by participants indicates that the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer reflects an underlying transformation towards a pro-qualification culture partly driven in recent times by, human capital informed UK Government post-16 education policy and increasingly legitimised by retailers. Hence, in future, this inclination may prove less accepting of the diverse educational pathways most participants in this research undertook on their transition to becoming buyers and begs the question; is the shop floor to top floor culture of learning and career progression in the buying context illusionary and becoming a thing of the past?

Furthermore, I have since reflected that the feelings of marginalisation I often experienced as a buyer, initially working without HE qualifications may have owed much to the consequences of the rise in pro-qualification culture and massification of HE traceable to my own experiences in the 1990s and 2000s. As I saw it then, an invasion of the workplace by those fortunate to have had access to HE and gained the benefits and credentials of qualifications. Despite my legitimate place in the buyer community of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991) the apparent, "growing importance of qualifications" (Fuller, 2001, p. 234) at the time, led me to believe that my place and performance as a buyer lay closer to the occupational periphery than the centre.

Yet, the findings of this study are enlightening in both answering the research question and better informing my own previous experiences as a buyer because they provide contrasting perspectives useful in critical evaluation. Participant and former group trading director, Edward for example, contends that his previous on the job retail experience placed him at a positive advantage to those graduates with no, hands on, on the job retail experience. And group trading director, Joe explained how he used the apparent divide between graduate, non-graduate (but experienced) status as a, possibly divisive but motivational management technique when he observed graduate buyers being, "outworked" by non-graduate buyers. Using the cases of this study as a barometer, there are indications that suggest the mix of graduate and non-graduate buyers in retail organisations may have some potential bearing on individual buyer and organisational performance. Parallels might be drawn here to the value of extending Vygotsky's guidance and formulation of Zone of Proximal Development which according to, Eun (2019, p. 20):

> has led to instructional approaches that provide support from more experienced and knowledgeable person until the less competent person can internalize the skills and knowledge from the assisted performance and begin to perform individually.

But here, my thinking is fuelled more by ideas of the competing motivations and KSAOs derived from buyers from different learning pathways and from the blend and dispersion of the social and organisational capital generated by their interactions and social contexts. This I believe to be a little understood factor in the complex relationship the research question seeks to answer, and its presence warrants further investigation. After all, and as the human capital tripartite relationship helps us to understand, performance depends on social interaction and as Battu, Belfield & Sloane (2003 p. 577) point out, "workers do not generally work autonomously, and own productivity may also depend on the education of co-workers within the workplace".

Of common ground and trainee buyer status

Nevertheless, and regardless of the diversity of post-school education, experiential pathways, or their employing retail organisation, no participant in this research evaded common ground in their transition to becoming a buyer which did not first involve what is documented in the findings and summarised again here as, a two-year tradition: of not making big mistakes with small categories. To better understand this, it is important to remember that food and grocery buyers exist to perform a crucial and highly commercial function for their organisations. They operate in what has been described in this thesis, as a VUCA (CIPD, 2015) environment, where they must be quick to anticipate and respond to changing trends and the fast-moving conditions of the UK food and grocery sector. Thus, buyer VET and learning is intuitively shaped by and bound to the centrality of the productive process of buying and the sensitivity of achieving distinctive organisational needs and commercial objectives. As trainees, buyers are very quickly introduced and orientated to what matters in terms of their organisational performance indicators and as we have seen, even at the initial stages of their careers, buyers are made responsible for the commercial profit and loss of multimillion Pound (£) product categories. Yet, despite mostly managing economically less risky product categories at first, they are nonetheless expected to straightaway deliver performance results in line with significant levels of economic expectation. This approach is reflected in the testimony of participants, many who regardless of their pre-entry learning pathway, described their learning transition to buyer status as being an in at the deep end, two-year rite of passage to becoming what, Josh described as, "a fully-fledged buyer". For many of the participants their experience was described as a period of struggle between structure and agency where buyer performance can be as much a measure of their expertise to acquire the social recognition of their senior colleagues as it owed to their product category expertise or, as discussed in section 2 of the findings chapter, of hitting their numbers.

Understandably therefore, their prevailing occupational status as a trainee buyer may shift their development agenda and motivation to learn to the relevance of their needs. Most of a buyer's time, especially in the trainee stage of development is necessarily spent staying close to their product categories, and motivation to learn is intensely focussed on coping with high performance demands and mastering what has been previously identified and described in section 2 of the Findings chapter as the core category dynamics and productive tasks of buying, most of which is learnt, predominantly on the job. Though some participants like, Edward excelled and achieved buyer status within eighteen months of entering the buying occupation and others like, Simon needed more time, the depiction of a successfully completing a typical two-year initial period of buyer training is a compelling conclusion of effective buyer performance from the findings.

Buyer status, category profile and performance: foundations of an on the job learning mindset?

Despite the primacy given to on the job learning activities by participants, off the job learning opportunities were made widely available to participants, (table, 2.9) many of which were availed through in-house learning academies. Yet, the overwhelming testimony of participants indicates off the job learning in the buying context to be a largely self-directed pursuit with what this study finds to be low levels of engagement and interest in activities driven by buyer future development agendas. Here, the relationship between learning on and off the job encounters identifiable competing tensions between the self-directed approach to off the job learning and the ever-present problem of what, Patrick described in section 3 of the Findings chapter as the, "latest brief based learning". Revisiting Patrick's testimony is important because it provides reason gained directly from a participant's perspective which helps to explain the dynamic nature of food and grocery buying and at the same time, raises awareness of competing tensions some buyers may face in making decisions about prioritising off the job learning opportunities over potential periods of separation from addressing the here and now of their jobs. Buyer learning, and performance then is not a static concept, it can be linked to changing briefs, for example, that require buyers to self-assess and reappraise what is known and what new needs to be learnt. As Eraut (2001, p. 20) reminds us:

> Learning takes place during use, and the transformation of knowledge into a situationally appropriate form means that it is no longer the same knowledge as it was prior to it first being used.

Indeed, the centrality of the buying role ensures a buyer's attention is often expressly divided and group trading director, Joe emphasised, time and, "headspace" is at a constant premium for most buyers. Reason can be found therefore that accentuates these conflicting tensions as factors conducive to laying the foundations of a distinctly on the job focussed learning mindset from an early stage of buyer development stated by many of the participants in this study.

This distinctly on the job outlook can be further understood from the analysis of responses given by participants to questions inspired by the AMO model which directly broached the subject of their motivations to learn as buyers. Most participants, especially in the trainee and buyer stages of their development were motivated to learn, first by the prospect of gaining social and occupational recognition by becoming a fully-fledged buyer, then by achieving enhanced status as a buyer through advancing to buy higher profile product categories. An exploratory conclusion can therefore be drawn which infers; if off the job learning opportunities were not mandated or denied, then the perceived relevance and credentials of off the job learning opportunities available held marginal levels of value to participants in their pursuit and attainment of first becoming a buyer and then of achieving tenure of higher profile product categories. In this respect, notions of self-interest, achievement motivation (McClelland, 1961) and expectancy (Vroom, 1964) appear to underpin buyer behavioural motivation towards the primacy and relevance of potentially more rewarding and performance relative on the job learning activities. There is a notable contrast to report therefore between the relevance and valorisation of experiential learning and knowledge and the perceptible restraint shown to ideas of off the job learning by participants in the buying workplace when thinking about performance as a buyer. In fact, except for mandatory and specified (Nind, et al., 2016) GSCOP training, only negotiation training courses were positively identified as an essential component of off the job learning and education by all the participants at the trainee and buyer stages of development.

Of intertwined career stages, relevance and restraint

This increased valorisation of experiential knowledge and orientation to on job learning opportunities emerges when buyers take responsibility for the buying performance of their product categories immediately following entry at the trainee stage of the buying career. This is where social acceptance and learning to survive by performing the productive process of buying conceivably matters more than unlocking the influence of propositional knowledge (Eraut, 2001) and theory on buying practise. It is unsound to suggest therefore, that any level of restraint shown towards off the job VET and learning activities by participants at this career stage is disproportionately biased, conformist or unconsidered. To the contrary, the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance is intertwined with buyer motivations wrapped up in the prevailing occupational status and career stages of buying against which perceived relevance and restraint is applied to on or off the job learning opportunities by buyers according to the dominant performance and development factors and dynamics which are presented in these conclusions. There is an individualistic, personal dimension that should be counted here, that suggests individual buyers interpret and experience the relationship between learning on and off the job differently. Generalisability is therefore problematic, yet Dreyfus (2004) offers valuable insight which might indicate that buyers may become overwhelmed by trying to understand the primary markers for buyer performance against a complex occupational backdrop. In such context, decision making becomes difficult and if Dreyfus is correct (2004, p. 178) may be, "nerve-wracking and exhausting" for buyers. Dreyfus's assessment correlates very strongly with the lived experience and testimony of many of the participants in this study whose learning experiences repeatedly encountered feelings of living in fear of failure. To support claims of increased valorisation of on the job learning at this occupational stage and wider claims of intertwined, shifting buyer learning motivations I will tie conclusions in the buying context with the reasoning of Dreyfus who posits:

> to achieve competence, people learn, through instruction or experience, to devise a plan or choose a perspective that then determines those elements of the situation or domain that must be treated as important and those that can be ignored. As students learn to restrict themselves to only a few of the vast number of possibly relevant features and aspects, understanding and decision making becomes easier.
>
> (Dreyfus, 2004, p. 178)

Category profiles and portfolios as a proxy for competency and expertise?

This pattern of applying shifting relevance or restraint to learning opportunities by buyers in line with occupational status and future development agendas is a central aspect of the relationship between on and off the job learning which can be further observed once occupational status to buyer has been achieved. When, according to most of the participants, buyer motivation to learn turns from concerns about learning for practical application, occupational survival and establishing occupational status towards enhancing buyer status, rewards and career prospects through developing their occupational profile by advancing their product category portfolios. This means buyers compete for opportunities to buy different, and if possible higher profile product categories which over time build a product category portfolio of buying experience.

Though achieving economic metrics remains an uninterrupted central marker of buyer performance regardless of product category, it is the relative economic size or market status of product categories in the food and grocery buying occupation that can be seen to offer high value markers indicative of perceived buyer status and competency, akin to a form of category credentialism. Caution must be exercised in developing this conclusion however, because participants were split on criteria for acceptable levels of KSAOs required in tenure for buyers to claim or demonstrate category expertise and competency. This clash of views was discussed earlier in the Findings chapter, section 2 under the heading of, buyer as category expert and cannot be ignored in conclusion. Such discourse amongst participants strongly indicates that the portfolio approach of accumulating category experience is a potentially illusionary marker for buyer performance and a proxy for buyer expertise and competency. Yet, with little evidence of specified organisational or institutional product category learning and assessment standards in place across the industry, the accumulation of broad portfolios of category experience acts as currency for expertise, competency and provides a marker of buyer performance. Though tacit in nature, this type of buyer on the job experience counts as human capital for buyers because it is found to be widely transferable and easily modified in practice at different organisations across the sector.

It is reasonable to understand therefore, how high value might be placed on experiential on the job learning by most buyers and which despite the rise in organisational in-house learning academies, helps to explain the high levels of reluctance shown by participants to participate in off the job learning at the buyer career stage. But, this reasoning is problematic if, and as I have found throughout this study, inconsistent levels of time, effort and skill are given to teaching new skills and, "perfecting old ones while on the job" (Becker, 1993, p. 31).

A group of disparate individuals? how social learning might offset buyer development agendas and learning motivations

This challenge for on the job teaching and learning in the buying occupation was accentuated by Joe, who emphasised the competitive nature of buyers. Joe's insight revealed an inferred propensity for buyers to become what I will advance as, a group of disparate individuals with an intense product category focus and an inclination to guard knowledge and distance themselves from sharing knowledge and developing the KSAOs of others. These behaviours are, in-part driven by the career stage development agendas of buyers proposed in these conclusions and could create circumstances where teaching, pooling, codifying and unlocking knowledge becomes problematic. This provides some reasoning to explain the apparent lack of available buying related literature and specified occupational syllabi and assessment method. Furthermore, despite coaching and mentoring said to be a prominent method of buyer teaching and learning, the compelling evidence from participants highlights the inconsistent approaches buyers may both employ and receive in this respect. Indeed, and as revealed in the Findings chapter, when asked directly, if a good buyer makes a good teacher? Edward, a former group trading director was clear in his response, "No…but a good teacher could make a good buyer!".

There is however, convincing evidence to suggest retail organisations are alert to the effects of self-directed on and off the job development agendas and learning motivations of buyers and identify the value of social learning theories as an effective way to offset the issues discussed above. Examples in the findings of this study point to organisational efforts to take advantage of on the job orientated learning by changing the configuration of office space and IT infrastructure to draw together buyers in the physical and digital workplace to encourage collaboration and the development of social and organisational capital and responsive autonomous teams.

Senior buyers and wider engagement in off the job learning

The correlation between a buyer's prevailing occupational status, future development agendas and the shifting, evolving relevance of on and off the job learning is again compelling at the career stage where occupational status changes from buyer to senior buyer. Attaining the status of senior buyer is marked by a reduction in routine buying activities and assumed responsibility for the management of other buyers and their associated product categories. At this juncture of occupational status, wider exploration of off the job learning opportunities is more commonly cited by participants. The relevance of part-time MBA programmes, general management courses and in-house learning academy activities are widely quoted as potentially meaningful ventures into the realms of off the job VET and learning that can mitigate parochial notions of becoming, "a bit corporate in your outlook" and, "as an individual a bit one-dimensional" (Rebecca). The increased relevance of off the job learning at senior buyer stage of development can also be traced to additional needs for senior buyers to develop general management and leadership KSAOs that might be used to enhance the performance of themselves and others. Of course, management and leadership are established subjects and disciplines for which there is widespread access to literature and sources of codified knowledge. Such knowledge can be easily tailored and delivered by educational establishments and in-house learning academies in accordance with prevailing individual and organisational needs. Accordingly, the number of relevant off the job knowledge and learning opportunities are boosted at senior buyer status which becomes a stimulating factor increasing participant engagement in off the job learning activities. This stands in contrasts to the three earlier stages of the buying occupation where the focus of off the job learning falls on developing less relevant and more generic KSAOs.

The relationship between learning on and the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer therefore changes at different stages of occupational development, “in-part on the amount of formalised knowledge available” (Becker, 1993, p. 51). As we have seen, there is evidence of little codified and formalised buying occupational knowledge. This stifles the prospects of transferring occupational specific knowledge from the workplace to wider educational establishments and learning providers and perpetuates the tendency towards developing buyer KSAOs by learning on the job. This perhaps motions continued organisational attempts to control and adapt learning and knowledge that fosters competitive advantage and helps guard notions of organisational and intellectual capital rather than boost the available amount of formalised occupational knowledge in circulation.

These conclusions are perhaps contrary to emerging human capital, pro-qualification trends that are noticeable in pre-entry stages of the buying occupation and evidence shows that many of the participants would welcome buying specific VET with accredited qualifications. Indeed, this research points to attempts by some top 10 UK food and grocery retailers to accredit their internal learning programmes through education establishments like universities and trade institutions, though there is no evidence to claim that external accreditation and qualifications can be claimed for UK food and grocery buying related on or off the job learning.   As of writing these conclusions therefore, learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance and a buyer can be seen to be predominantly wrapped up in the results of KSAOs achieved through participation in work based learning and practical application, and not necessarily in accordance with conceptual acquisition and achievement of occupational qualifications and academic credentials.

Chapter Six: Summary conclusions and recommendations

Introduction

This research has shed light upon the complex and multi-dimensional occupation of the UK food and grocery buyer and the shifting relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer across the career stages and working lives of buyers. Summary conclusions that depict the central factors and dynamics of this relationship at each occupational stage of buying will now be presented in turn and specific recommendations for buyer VET and learning are advanced. Additionally, the importance of harmonising three distinct agendas in the struggle for, "what is to be learned" (Illeris, 2011, p. 33) that emerge in this study are considered and which precludes the closing thoughts of this thesis in which a brief commentary on what this study might contribute more broadly to workplace learning theory is discussed. In particular, reflections are offered on the resonance of this study with notions of a, "landscape of practice" (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2015).

The summary matrix previously given at (Fig 2.2) provides an accompaniment to these conclusions.

Pre-entry potential buyer status: summary conclusions

The pre-entry stage of the UK food and grocery buying occupation is marked by general acceptance of participants that potential buyers can be successfully developed from a variety or mix of previous acquisitional or participatory learning pathways. Though some participants suggest previous on the job experience gained in the retail context may give a performance advantage to new entrants, all were undivided in their assessment that post-16 qualifications and a degree level education is useful but not a marker of future performance at the pre-entry stage. From this, a tentative supposition can be drawn that infers propensity for buyers to learn can be just as great in the workplace as in educational establishments. Yet, there is a paradox found in this study that infers potential buyers of the future will however, require post-16 qualifications and potentially a degree level education to enter the occupation. This reflects the influence of post-16 education policy, the massification of HE and the ostensible legitimisation of a pro-qualification culture in the retail buying occupation. National occupational standards for buying apprenticeships are being developed, yet there is no evidence of a specified grocery buying curriculum that draws together codified occupational knowledge and forms pre-entry qualifications to the occupation. There is however, strong evidence to suggest most participants would welcome the development of grocery buying qualifications that might serve to better prepare buyers for entry to the occupation and provide the potential to "accelerate learning" (Edward) at trainee and buyer stages of occupational development.

Evidence from this study suggests little attention has previously been given to researching and developing an occupational knowledge base that sits independent of retail organisations and which can be used specifically for the preparation of potential food and grocery buyers in the UK. As a result, there is limited levels of representation for the buying occupation in schools and other post-16 education establishments, including universities promoting the food and grocery buying occupation as a career. These circumstances may perpetuate notions that emerge in this study suggesting buying is an occupation hidden in plain sight and is not currently likely to be a career of first choice for most new entrants. Yet, the appetite shown by participants for food and grocery buying specific qualifications and the observable trend for retailers to recruit talent with credentials of graduate level education suggests that off the job learning in the buying context is not considered unimportant. The development of specific preparatory VET and learning programmes for the buying occupation would therefore appear to offer opportunity to integrate meaningful occupational learning with credible qualifications for individuals at the start of their occupational learning pathways. Indeed, a period of pre-entry preparatory study may provide potential buyers with a valuable bank of off the job learnt knowledge that helps to mitigate the intensity of sink or swim participatory learning experienced by most participants of this study at the trainee buyer stage. As Joe sees it, providing preparatory, "Learning to enable me to buy".

Acquiring a firm grounding on the fundamentals of; CSR, GSCOP, data management, data analysis and the principles of negotiation and food and grocery category management could all potentially provide the basis of such foundational specialist food and grocery buyer knowledge that can later be modified in practice and would theoretically support potential buyers and their future socialisation into differing organisational buying processes and practices of competing UK retailers.

Trainee buyer status: summary conclusions

The status of trainee buyer is generally characterised by what this research finds to be the common ground of an intensive two-year period of learning, predominantly but not exclusively spent participating in on the job, work-based learning activities. This is a period of learning where trainee buyers are expected to share comparable performance measures and occupational working conditions as more senior colleagues, for example, such as individual responsibility for product categories and their economic and market performance. At this stage of buyer development therefore, the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer appears to be strongly influenced by buyer motivations to learn situated in-house processes, practices and social behaviours which conceivably further what Lave & Wenger (1991) may consider as the evolving construction of their professional identities to becoming fully fledged buyers. Though episodes of negotiation and GSCOP training provide evident exceptions of what participants consider to be meaningful and relevant off the job learning for buyers, the findings reveal compelling levels of valorisation towards on the job learning and a perceptible resistance to off the job learning activities that develop what this research has identified as more generic KSAOs.

As we have seen, there is little evidence of codified organisational specific or sector-wide occupational standards for food and grocery buying and a scarcity of pooled resources to assist new buyers. These factors may offer some explanation for the valorisation given to learning on the job as a buyer and the restraint shown to off the job learning opportunities. Furthermore, I submit that self-directed and non-mandated approaches to trainee buyer VET learning identified by participants potentially encourages or reinforces the social reproduction (Lave & Wenger, 1991) of such prevailing attitudes to on and off the job learning at this juncture of the buying occupation, irrespective of previous participant learning and education pathways.

Yet, participant ideas of buyer learning as being self-directed may be both, deceptive and problematic in the buying context. On this point of self-determination, the data analysis was compelling in identifying many instances of participant perceptions and experiences which relate to notions of submissive behaviour and social imitation at this stage of the buyer learning trajectory. Indeed, fear of rebuke from senior colleagues regarding trainee buyer learning and development decisions suggest that at this occupational juncture, notions of self-directed learning may be a partially powerless concept. A concept that conceivably serves to mask independent choice to a submissiveness that retreats to organisational norms and reliance on prevailing on the job learning practices. Thus, the relationship between learning on and off the job as buyer and performance as a buyer restricted through self-imposed conformity. This may pose potentially counterproductive consequences for buyer and organisational performance. Especially so, in a sector assessed to be, “going through a time of profound change” (BRC, 2019) in terms of digital technology, on-line channels and store formats that are increasingly changing the way shoppers shop and the way buyers buy. In such an environment, the findings of this research lead me to question if unmonitored conformity to learning situated practices at such a formative stage of buyer VET might be anti-progressive in that leaning may become over reliant on past practices and experiences that may, “decay over time” (Eraut, 2001, P. 41).

Exploratory conclusions therefore emerge which submit that some trainee buyers may benefit from a guided blend of pooled learning resources and on and off the job learning approaches that maintains emphasis on the primacy of operational continuity yet does not restrict engagement with broader, more nuanced and rapidly emerging occupational concepts and knowledge in the sector. Further consideration should be given therefore to investigating the feasibility and design of such a blend of VET and learning that encompasses a more complementary balance of participatory and acquisitional methods of delivery.

Buyer status: summary conclusions

The findings of this study strongly suggest participant valorisation towards on the job forms of learning grows as occupational identity shifts from trainee buyer to buyer status. At which stage, evidence suggests buyer motivation to learn becomes distinctive for its propensity to be fuelled by competitive notions of achievement and expectancy which links perceived strength of product category credentials to ideas of competency and performance as a buyer. Tailoring learning to product category related activities which rely on the predominance of on the job learning therefore becomes a key feature of this occupational stage. A stage of the working and learning lives of the buyer where category credentials override the credentials of formal qualifications and the graduate non-graduate divide is less visible. Furthermore, the competitive nature of the buyer and the buying environment spreads a fixation with achieving individualised category performance measures and KPIs. Many of these performance metrics are attuned to attaining economic measures that are product category specific and trade over comparative year on year or intervallic periods. In turn, these performance measures can create a scenario that champions individualism, where buyers may tend to approach work and learning in a way I have previously advanced as, a group of disparate individuals. In such circumstances of intense category focus, time spent off the job, away from productive buying activities is widely seen to be problematic in sustaining efforts which achieve such short-term performance objectives. As a result, incentive to develop and share wider occupational KSAOs may become a conflicting proposition as buyer attention targets category performance and addressing what I have previously introduced as the latest brief based learning. As Joe explained:

> Buyers generally are competitive individuals and, if their categories are going better than others then…you know, who's likely to get the next promotion within the business? Sharing knowledge therefore, is not always as easy when people have that desire to get on to the next level, earn the extra money, bit more for the family, better holidays, better car, all that kind of stuff is quite difficult to get people at a level sharing information.
>
> (Joe)

Buyer knowledge and skill therefore, appears widely spread and locked in amongst a group of intensely focused but competing disparate individuals. Social learning interventions which encourage physical and digital collaboration and knowledge exchange are apparent methods identified by participants to be used by retailers as means to mitigate such intense periods of operational focus from buyers at this occupational juncture. Yet such interventions, though aimed at enhancing and securing social and organisational capital appear to perpetuate ostensible buyer resistance and incentive to engage in conventional education and off the job learning activities. Relevance of off the job learning to performance as a buyer at this occupational stage is typically perceived as a low by participants, yet many like, Joe suggest retailers need to do more to find ways of developing, pooling and sharing occupational knowledge that goes further than the reliance on the social learning practices unearthed in this study.

Indeed, such a proposition reveals indicative notions which infer buyers may be prone to reason that developing occupational knowledge and skills might be someone else's job. Such apparent low levels of engagement and participation in off the job learning as a buyer identified in this study might therefore be a contributing factor in the underdevelopment of codified occupational knowledge and be driving a discernible gap between buying practioners and their commitment to make contributions to the research and development of buyer occupational knowledge and skills. It is accepted that, "In the main the industry does not have much time" (Blackley, Resnick & Cassidy, 2017, p. 6) and I can testify first-hand to the intense commercial pressures faced by buyers. Furthermore, I agree that these observations are made with the benefit of reflexion, time and inclination. But experienced buying practioners with little disposition to engage with alternative conceptual and process views that might exist outside their immediate sphere of occupational influence holds potential hidden consequences that Eraut (2001, p. 71) might consider makes them susceptible to becoming, "prisoners" of their earlier experiences and perceptions.

Furthermore, there is little evidence in this study that demonstrates systematic, formal approaches to practises of continuing professional development (CPD) resembling those pursued by professions like, teaching medicine or engineering, for example which might contribute to notions of shared responsibility for developing occupational VET and occupational performance at the buyer practioner status level. This study therefore indicates perceptible levels of individualism, short-termism and pragmatism evidently being liberally applied to approaches of learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Preference being given to drawing on experiential knowledge from within the sphere of their occupational influence or alternatively in keeping with retail organisations propensity to buy in knowledge, data and information from outside commercial consultancies (Blackley, et al., 2017) and a reliance on self-directed learning through in-house L&D departments. The findings of this study show there is less awareness of the extent systematic approaches to CPD might play in the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. Better understanding such implications might therefore warrant further investigation.

Senior buyer status: summary conclusions

Those participants who attained senior buyer status reported a reduction in routine buying responsibilities and increased responsibility for the management and performance of others. Here, participants strongly conveyed the increased relevance of acquiring management training and education to supplement experiential knowledge as a buyer. As Edward, a senior trading director with over 35 years' experience recalled his own transition:

> Well, it went from being a buyer of product to be a buyer of product and a manager of people! They said, well you look after that buyer and that buyer. So that's when it suddenly went from being a purist buying role to a bit more of a management role of people as well.
>
> (Edward)

There is therefore, a noticeable shift evident in the relationship between learning on and off the job as buyer and performance as a buyer as transition or change of occupational identity to senior buyer status necessitates the expansion of KSAOs beyond credentials of category profiles or notions of expertise as practioners. Though valorisation of on the job learning remains high, participant testimony evidences greater levels of engagement with off the job VET and learning opportunities. Indeed, the value of periods of off the job learning was cited by, Tom who explained how attending a part-time MBA contributed to conferring the legitimacy of his previous experiences and knowledge by enabling him to scaffold his previous learning and to put what he described as, "practice into theory".

> It had a huge impact because all of a sudden, I came out of the practical skills, with theory behind it and I would then be able to debate it with somebody or put a strategy together by taking all these factors into consideration.
>
> (Tom)

Widening personal horizons and workplace perspectives and mitigating notions of becoming parochial and potentially one-dimensional were also cited as performance inducing benefits of participation in formal off the job learning as senior buyers. Furthermore, evidential value and significance is attached to achieving formally recognised qualifications and credentials like, MBAs and management diplomas which are less obvious factors at the trainee and buyer stages. Yet, despite the perceived relevance and benefits given, few in this study participated in learning off the job that extended beyond a period of one week in duration or resulted in formally recognised management qualifications. This is indicatively explained in-part by experienced senior buyers and participants like, Rebecca and Patrick who suggest some off the job learning may present threats to the continuity of organisational culture, situated processes and practices and senior colleagues and peers who are their custodians.

As this research has found, though still considered to be an autonomous decision-making occupation, food and grocery buying in the UK is becoming increasingly tied to strict integrated process and practices. Operating in progressively controlled environments arguably relies on increased situational knowledge and skills which might conflict with ideas of enhancing individual conceptual knowledge that might serve to challenge organisational adherence or the operational status quo. Frustrations are therefore evident from the data analysis which contends:

> So, you might want to change the way the business operates but you can't because of the processes that have been put in place for people to work to.
>
> (Patrick)

This might explain the ostensible preference for UK top 10 retailers to steer buyer off the job learning at all career stages to internal learning academies that are concerned with situational, process and control (Eraut, 2001) based knowledge and skills over more conceptual knowledge that might traditionally be acquired in outside education settings. Of course, the requirement for such situational knowledge may serve to entrench the valorisation of situated on the job learning and perpetuate what some participants referred to as, one-dimensional and "old school" perspectives on buyer VET and learning typified by the remarks and attitudes displayed by some senior executives' comments revealed to, Rebecca when talking about her attendance on an MBA programme:

> Well you're off back to school and your wasting your time. You should be working; what value is that going to add to us?
>
> (Rebecca)

Here, there is evident suspicion and negativity portrayed in some quarters of the UK buying occupation which questions the legitimacy of learning opportunities that provide individuals with conceptual knowledge and qualifications. Such ideas aim negativity towards the relevance of conceptual types of off the job learning activities and perhaps spurn ideas of self-gain and individual human capital over notions of contributing to situated practice. This might be indicative of attempts to transition the buying occupation from notions of buyers as autonomous decision-making individuals, to buyers as constituent to autonomous teams. Thus, concepts of one-dimensional, homogenised buyers employing increased levels of data savvy analysis and advances in information technology as what I have described as surrogate teachers to guide buying decisions might be the underlying aims of a hidden curriculum that some retail organisations may find more palatable in furthering their commercial and operational aims, as Rebecca explained:

> I suppose it's what the business requires, and if it's for delivering a process you just train them on the process. But then what plays out is that you don't get the innovation within category management, you don't get them challenging the quality technical side of the business and you don't get them looking at the bigger picture. They're just there to do a job and I have to say…that's the structure at [top 10 UK retailer].
>
> (Rebecca)

If the homogenisation of buyers is indeed an increasing part of the operational evolution of the UK grocery retail sector, further consideration might be given to what impact decreasing levels of differentiation between individuals might play in notions of buyers as a source of competitive advantage. Entrenched approaches to learning situated, process, practice and control knowledge and skills in the buying context might conceivably serve to support operational processes and practices but choke other characteristics that were found to be valued factors of performance held up by many of the participants. As, Joe a senior trading director a top 10 retailer pointed out:

> I think there are somethings as well, you know, that in the workplace you can't learn. One of my reports I still regard as the best natural trader I've ever come across. Yeah, he was just a natural trader. For somebody to come up with buy 1 get 1 free it was just retail genius wasn't it? The year that he launched that completely took the market by surprise and we had a fantastic Christmas on the back of it. He was a natural innovative thinker, a guy with not much formal education, he just had a knack around trading and got results.
>
> And, you know…I'm not so sure that you can always train in…organisational, process skills he just wouldn't want to work that way he'd feel stifled and I don't think you can train that natural trading ability.
>
> (Joe)

For, Rebecca and many of the participants in this research buyer performance is not just about learning to execute the process. Performance as a buyer is also about individualism, enthusiasm and expertise built around expertise and knowledge of the product and the output of the process itself. For all the senior buyers in this study, the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer holds a perceptible dichotomy between learning to accept and embrace growing levels of change to organisational process conformity and standardisation and adapting deep-rooted historical associations that value buyer autonomy, creativity, ability to challenge and a feel for the bigger picture.

Harmonising three agendas across occupational status to support the working lives of buyers

The dichotomy discussed above exposes a tension evidenced in this research which reveals a struggle for control over notions of, "what is to be learned" (Illeris, 2011, p. 33) in the buying occupation between two contrasting agendas; on one hand the UK food and grocery retailers and on the other, the individual participants themselves. To this struggle a third agenda can be added, that of the UK government and what has been referred to throughout this study as its human capital led, pro-qualification education agenda. All three agendas have permeated throughout this thesis and, though the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer is shown to shift relative to occupational status and learning relevance, it is also intertwined and bound to these three contrasting agendas which collectively contribute to the framework of what is learnt and understood as a buyer.

To summarise these agendas in turn, this research has found evidence of UK food and grocery retailers being first concerned with commercial objectives and, “workplace viability and continuity” (Billett, Dymock & Choy, 2016, p. 294). This agenda is understood to be progressively pressing the valorisation of on the job learning and social learning practices that keep buyers, regardless of status, predominantly fixed on learning through the productive process of buying. The rise of in-house learning academies is an evident off the job learning strategy that is found to build buyer learning on what might be considered, vanilla post-16 qualifications on entry to further standardisation and conformity to situated practices. Yet this scientific management agenda appears to conflict with that of a generation of participants in this study who, as buyers and learners are conceivably being forced to adapt personal intentions with deep rooted ideas of shop floor to top floor entry to the occupation where buyer autonomy, creativity, ability to challenge and a feel for the bigger picture which for many of them represent factors of what makes a great buyer. Furthermore, there is palpable participant frustration at experiencing a perceived reduction in individualism and increased homogenisation of the buyer and buyer performance measures, this is despite notions of self-determination in accessing learning opportunities. These contrasting participant and organisational agendas seem to be infused with the UK government’s human capital led agenda which promotes greater productivity and transferable individual knowledge and skills through, “qualification focused learning” (Fuller, et al, 2004, p. 7).

What is evident, is all three agendas live together and have a stake in a three-way relationship that influences approaches to learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer. I cannot deny that if time and resources allowed, I would wish to conduct further investigation into how each of these three agendas can be promoted and harmonised against the shifting relevance and, “distinct demands for continued learning” (Billett, et al., 2016, p. vii) that this research has identified at each occupational status across the, “working lives” (Tyler, Dymock & Henderson, 2016, p. 251) of buyers. The implications of this research therefore initiate a call for action that I will argue would perhaps serve to better inform the development of food and grocery buyer VET provision at individual, organisational and state policy levels. For this, the founding of an independent cross sectoral level, working group, institution or body with the following remit might be considered highly ambitious but nevertheless, a way to address the recommendations so far given in this research which advocates greater coordination through;

- A framework or body for the promotion and development of VET and learning in UK food and grocery buying.

- A framework or body between policy, legislation, regulations (GSCOP) and organisational, institutional layers.
- A lead body for qualification structure, core accredited curriculum and assessment of food and grocery buyer learning.
- The provision of guidance and expertise on occupational teaching and pedagogy.
- Research and development of occupational theory and practice. Developing links between retail organisations and academic researchers (Blackley, et al., 2017).
- Improving of occupational standards in UK food and grocery buying.
- Promotion of the buying community, careers, communication and best practice.

Furthermore, the implications of this study have generated many questions and amongst advisory recommendations for further independent research, collaboration or joint activities might include topics investigating:

- The evident ambiguity relating to the quality of on the job instruction, teaching and learning in the buying occupation.
- The challenge for the buying occupation of developing education and training that can keep pace with the VUCA buying environment and the changes in technology.
- Factors affecting the scarcity and underdevelopment of codified buyer occupational knowledge.
- Increasing process orientated practices and the impact on buyer learning.
- Surrogate teachers, the role of IT as a means of buyer pedagogy.
- The relationship between competing interactions and motivations of buyers on performance.
- The relationship between mimicry and performance as a buyer.
- The effect of increased public scrutiny on UK retail buyers and the future of mandated policy-led VET and learning.
- Can buyer learning be accelerated? the potential role of universities in developing buyer VET and learning.
- Buyer learning beyond the top 10 UK food and grocery retailers.
- How buyers might become more involved in the development, maintenance and delivery of more formalised programmes of learning.
- Occupational assessment criteria for product category expertise and competency.
- The buyer/supplier relationship: buyer learning and the supplier.

Some closing thoughts

I have not claimed the conceptual framework or methods employed in this research constitutes an exhaustive model that can fully unpack the black box (Chowhan, 2016) of interconnected factors of learning which may yield effective performance outputs of buyers. Yet, through searching for a better understanding of how people become buyers and what grocery buyers learn on and off the job, this research has produced what might be considered a, "tool for thinking about workplace learning" (Fuller et al., 2004, p. 305). As a tool, the conceptual framework has proved systematic in yielding large amounts of primary data (table, 2.3) revealing theoretically informed factors of buyer on and off the job learning, performance, pedagogy, KSAOs and notions of individual, organisational and social capital. The interconnected nature of these factors has revealed the multi-dimensional nature of food and grocery buying in the UK and meant much judgement was required in its application, especially in relation to thematic data analysis which undeniably stretched the experiential knowledge, time and resources of a single researcher to his limits. Yet, I would like to advance a conceptual framework and template that has potential adaptability and scalability for investigating the changing environments and contexts of learning in different competitive occupations and respectfully invite further critique for development.

Amongst the limitations of this research I would retrospectively address include; gaining the perceptions and experiences of an equal number of participants who were not successful as a buyer. It is a frustration that this research can only hint at how precarious the life of an unsuccessful buyer might be relative to the findings and conclusions advanced in this study. Furthermore, achieving access to a greater number of female buyers might have enabled a wider gender-based comparison of the findings and conclusions of this study. On further reflection, incorporating a longitudinal element investigating a small number of trainee buyers developed over the course of a three-year study might have provided a greater level of contrast to the perceptions and experiences of participants, most of whom were well established in the field of food and grocery buying.

To close this thesis, I return to its main purpose; to identify and better understand factors of on and off the job learning which may inform the development of occupational standards, competencies and knowledge for the education and training needs of UK food and grocery buyers and, make a scholarly contribution to the development of food and grocery buying occupational knowledge in the UK.

In addressing these aims, I would like to propose a modest input to the furtherment and development of UK food and grocery buying occupational knowledge, through a unique approach that has formed an original contribution to existing literature on UK grocery buying. One that provides a representation of the individual learning pathways, social learning cultures, traditions, KSAOs and performance measures of food and grocery buying in the UK, largely drawn from the experiences and perceptions of a diverse group of buyers themselves and wider documentary analysis.

Indeed, though no generalisations have been made, it has been clearly found, no two participants in this study share the same personal background, learning history, or workplace experiences. Their workplace learning trajectories have crossed over multiple organisations, met with multiple communities of practice, peer groups and they have bought diverse product categories at different times in their careers within the context of the top 10 UK food and grocery retail sector. Each participant's learning journey has been different and their understanding of the relationship between learning on and off the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer has therefore been found to be individually unique. Each participant has contributed a nuanced perspective to the whole study. Yet, all of them can claim a legitimate share of participation in the UK buying occupation and for some, to share similar occupational identities and status. Perhaps then, reflections on this study of the UK buying occupation contributes to our understanding of workplace learning theory more broadly, because it reveals not just participant's collective knowledge and experiences, it tells as much about buyers learning to navigate through notions of what Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner (2015, p.19) might propose as a, "landscape of practice" and who submit,

> As a trajectory through the social landscape, learning is not merely the acquisition of knowledge. It is the becoming of the person who inhabits the landscape with an identity whose dynamic construction reflects our trajectory through that landscape.

This is important because throughout this thesis, I have referred to theories of situated learning and of notions of communities of practice. Yet, the findings of this study may allude, even in a modest way to debates which suppose, "The notion of a single community of practice misses the complexity of most bodies of knowledge". (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner 2014, p. 19). Indeed, according to Baerheim & Raaheim (2020, P. 61),

> Landscape of practice may serve a very fruitful, dynamic and spatial metaphor for professional learning and professional development. In such a landscape the learner will, at any point, find herself in a specific, sub terrain, being challenged by the stones, corners and precipices which are there.

Such theorising, I propose, has resonance and can be found in the context of furthering the body of knowledge in UK retail buying, as found in this study at least. In my attempts to uncover new occupational knowledge, the participants of this research have provided a better understanding of what might be considered the, "sub terrain, stones, corners and precipices" of workplace learning activity to be found in the landscape of practice of the UK grocery buying occupation. The multiple voices in this study might therefore signpost that boundaries between notions of learning as participation and learning as acquisition may share common ground by thinking of workplace learning in a broader learning landscape context. Such reflection promotes the potential value of expanding beyond the boundaries of theories of situated practice and communities of practice when considering the stimulus of workplace learning in multidimensional occupations like UK grocery buying.

There is still a great deal more work to be done. In this way, it is sincerely hoped this thesis might find application informing further preparatory or investigatory looks at developing and supporting buyer learning across the landscape of practice and different career stages of buyers and, find a small degree of relevance to those interested parties and owners of agendas who set the direction of VET and learning at the individual, organisational and policy level.

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Appendix. 1 Research question protocol

SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Darren Schofield
UNIVESITY OF HUDDERSFIELD PhD (Education)

Question bank and themes for semi- structured interviews and supporting questionnaire.

Theme 1. Thinking about you and your career transitioning to a buyer….

Key Q. looking back/reflecting on your career can you recall how you became a buyer?

Ask to explain what motivated you, why and how you entered the world of buying and how long it took you to achieve the status of buyer

- How do you know when a buyer can be called a buyer?
- How long did/does/should it take you to achieve buyer status?
- Is there a buyer qualification? (Assessment of specification)
- In your opinion and given your experience how long in time terms does it take to achieve buyer status?

Theme 2. Thinking about the relationship between buying performance and learning and teaching.

Teasing out Performance *(Purpose of learning as a means to enhance individual, organisational and social performance) Human capital tripartite theory and equation of P=F (A, M, O). And, the adaptation of Thompsons EVR congruence theory.*

Key Q. Can you explain what you consider to be the key professional measures of performance are for UK grocery retail buyers?

Key Q. In your opinion, what makes a great buyer?

Ability

- Does a buyer require formal academic qualifications?
- Can you explain to me any national occupational standards for grocery retail buyers? Why and How?

Motivation

- **What are the incentives for buyers to learn?**
  Prompt the factors – Want or need to learn, Competition, consequences, self-esteem, recognition, reward, quality of life, promotion, self-actualisation, security of job, professional competence, and professionalism, interesting, do they find it important,

Opportunity

- As a buyer or senior buyer is there opportunity for planned time 'Off the Job' learning and education within an educational environment? Ask what and why 2nd level questions. How frequent are the opportunities. How valuable are the opportunities?
- Can you describe in as much detail as possible how learning and teaching is either supported, denied or constrained

- Is the opportunity to learn restricted to workplace learning or through educational establishments?
- How are learning opportunities acquired or awarded? Are learning opportunities discretionary/o merit/or on operational need?
- What types of learning spaces and facilities are there where buyers can learn within the workplace? Are they practical?

Theme 3. Thinking about how buyers might learn, are trained and depicting the relationship between on the job and off the job learning – I'd like to contextualise learning as on the job and off the job. (Use the prompt)

Teasing out the relationship between on and off the Job learning. *(Content of Learning, Skills and Knowledge) – Based on Sfard and the acquisition and participation metaphor and learning theory.*

Key Q. In your experience can you explain how buyer learning and teaching occurs?

- **Can you give me examples of what and how buyers learn on the job or within the work place? (Informally or formally)** ***(Do you know or perceive if speaking to associates)***

- **Can you give me examples of how and what buyers learn off the job or outside the work place? (Informally or formally) – Perhaps** ***in a formal education setting or as part of a correspondence course (Do you know or perceive if speaking to associates)***

- **In your opinion which is the most important-(on the job or off the job) in relation to buyer learning and education and could you give me examples of why?**

Theme 4. Thinking about aspects of Teaching and Learning (Pedagogy)

Teasing out Pedagogy *(Interaction, relationships and methods of teaching and learning) – Based on Nind and the 3 Dimensions of Pedagogy.) A useful analytical tool to explore dynamics of pedagogy.*

Experienced

Key Q. Can you describe and explain your experience of buyer learning and training throughout your career?

Key Q. In your opinion what constitutes great buyer teaching and learning.

Key Q. What is your best and worst teaching and learning experiences as a buyer of manager?

- Can you give me examples of how you think your experience of buyer training has transformed you?
- Can you describe your experience of training buyers?
- Have you perceived any changes to buyer training and education in the historical context?

Specified *(What aspects of learning and teaching are important)*

Key Q. In your experience can you explain what aspects of buyer training and education should be specified (is there a curriculum)?

Key Q. What aspects of buyer training

- Is there a formal or informal buyer apprenticeship or programmes of learning for example?

Enacted *(what is an appropriate pedagogy might differ)*

Key Q. How do you (is) plan buyer education and training?

- How is knowledge and learning shared within the buying community? (Organisational Capital)
- Can you give examples of the teaching and learning methods you may have experienced or used? For example; IT, Books, Online…..
- Who is responsible for buyer training and education? How would you rate their competency? What training do buyer trainers receive?
- How do you perceive the quality of buyer training? (Relate the question to the history, experience and competence of teachers/managers)

Appendix. 2 Informed consent form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Darren Mark Schofield

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD PhD (Education) Research

Conducted by: D M Schofield – PhD Research Student, University of Huddersfield.

Research for: DM5700 PhD (Education) Full-Time.

About this research Interview and questionnaire.

This research interview and questionnaire has been specifically designed in order to collect primary data in support of my Doctoral level study entitled: *Learning on and off the job: vocational education and training in the UK grocery retail buying profession. Buyers' perspectives.*

Purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study is outlined on the summary sheet attached.

Participation and participant confidentiality.

The following information is provided for you to decide whether you wish to participate in the study.

- This Interview and questionnaire will take approximately 1 hour to 1 hour 30 minutes of your time.
- Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. By participating you kindly give your informed consent to use of the data for the purposes of this study only.
- You are free to decide not to participate or to withdraw at any time without prejudice.
- Please do not hesitate to ask any questions about the study either before or during your participation.
- Assurance is given that full confidentiality and anonymity will be respected.
- Data collection procedures will involve the recording and transcription of audio material from this interview, a survey questionnaire, Journal entries and field notes made by the researcher. The data collected will not be altered or decontextualised.
- I will be happy to share research findings with you after the research is completed.
- There are no known risks and/or discomforts associated with this study.
- Details of your name or any persons mentioned in the conduct of the research will not be disclosed.
- Responses and data recorded in this research will fully comply in all respects to the University of Huddersfield and public data protection policy. The research method complies fully with the University of Huddersfield's ethical standards for research.
- Data collected is intended for the benefit of academic research purposes and it will be the researcher and publishers right to publish. Personal information will not be shared and all data will be archived securely for the duration of the study. Upon completion of the research the data will be destroyed.

Thank you

Thank you for kindly taking the time to be interviewed for this research. Your participation is a valuable qualitative contribution to the successful completion of my research project and is greatly appreciated. Please sign your consent with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of this research.

Darren M Schofield

Post-Graduate Research Student, University of Huddersfield.

Summary strategic reasoning and purpose of this research

1. Appeal to and combine personal research interests.

- Lifelong Learning – (*PGCE from Huddersfield 2015/16*)
- Vocational Education and Training and Work Based Learning
- UK Grocery Retail Sector
- Relationship between formal and informal learning
- Relationship between human capital and education

2. Answer the research primary question:

- *What is the relationship between learning 'on the job' and 'off the job' as a buyer and performance as a buyer?*

3. Conduct achievable research by operationalising:

- Deep insider knowledge – 22 year as a retail buyer and trading manager
- Mobilising a collegiate and identifiable peer group study from within a professional retail network
- Credibility of research population and researcher

4. Achieve an original contribution to knowledge in the field of VET and WBL by:

- Synthesis of human capital thinking, concepts of formal and informal learning and the 3 dimensions of pedagogy as a conceptual framework to inform UK retail buying pedagogy
- The use of a unique data set, perspectives and experiences drawn from retail buyers and associated professionals in UK Grocery retail industry.

5. In order to:

- Inform pedagogy for the training of grocery retail buyers
- Explore with retail professionals, individual, organisational and social factors which might inhibit or enhance buyer performance.
- Contribute to contemporary debate shaping wider VET and WBL policy within the UK.
- Inform and stimulate follow up research

6. Report by submission of a Doctoral Thesis Sept 2019 under the anticipated research title:

- *Learning 'on' and 'off' the job? Pedagogies for vocational education and training and work based learning in the UK grocery buying profession.*

University of HUDDERSFIELD

University of HUDDERSFIELD

PhD (Education) Research Interview Consent Form

Conducted by D M Schofield – PhD Research Student, University of Huddersfield.

Research for: DMS700 PhD (Education) Full-Time.

Research Title: *Learning 'on' and 'off' the job? Pedagogies for vocational education and training and work based learning in the UK grocery retail buying profession: A retail buyers' perspective.*

Consent of Participant:

I …………………………………………………………………………………… hereby voluntarily consent to participate in the research conducted by Darren M Schofield (Post-Graduate Researcher) with full knowledge of the nature and purpose of the research and my rights as a participant.

On this the ……………..day of the month of ………………………… 2017.

Signature: ………………………………………………………………………… (Participant)

Signature: ………………………………………………………………………… (Interviewer)

Name: ……………………………………………………………………………… (Interviewer)

A copy of this consent form will be given to you to keep.

Appendix. 3 Research survey

RESEARCH SURVEY

Darren M Schofield

UNIVERSITY OF HUDDERSFIELD PhD (Education)

The Research Questions

1. Using the scale below, please indicate your estimation of the percentage of all UK grocery retail buyer learning and training activities which take place **'off the job'**.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

2. Using the scale below, please indicate your estimation of the percentage of all UK grocery retail buyer learning and training activities which take place **'on the job'**.

0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100

3. What is the appropriate level of formal academic qualification for a UK grocery retail buyer?

○ **No formal academic qualifications are necessary.**
○ **GCSE's**
○ **A-Levels**
○ **Graduate**
○ **Post-graduate**

4. Should there be a nationally recognised programme of vocational learning and professional standards specifically for UK grocery retail buyers?

○ **Yes**
○ **No**

5. Assuming little or no previous training or experience, how much time would it take a person to acquire the key skills, knowledge and other attributes to achieve buyer status?

○ **0-6 months**
○ **6-12 months**
○ **12-18 Months**
○ **18-24 months**
○ **24-30 months**
○ **30 + months**

6. In your experience, how influential has any acquired **'off the job'** academic learning and qualifications been in relation to the success of your career?

◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Not influential at all	Moderately influential	Influential	Very influential	Highly influential

7. In your experience, how influential has any participatory **'on the job'** learning and training been in relation to the success of your career?

◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Not influential at all	Moderately influential	Influential	Very influential	Highly influential

8. Choosing from the list below, please indicate the 3 main motivating factors for UK grocery retail buyers to learn.

◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Recognition	Monetary reward	Professional Competence	Promotion/career prospects	Consequences	Peer competition
◯	◯	◯	◯	◯	◯
Security of job	Find it interesting	Managerial pressure	Self-esteem	Enhance quality of life	Intrinsic need to learn

9. Should those responsible for the delivery of UK grocery retail buyer training and education at work be formally qualified to teach or train?

◯	◯
Yes	No

10. How do you currently perceive the overall quality of UK grocery buyer vocational education and work place learning?

- ○ Extremely poor
- ○ Very poor
- ○ Poor
- ○ Neither good nor poor
- ○ Good
- ○ Very good
- ○ Extremely good

About You

11. Into which one of the following categories is your age?

- ○ 18-25
- ○ 26-34
- ○ 35-39
- ○ 40-44
- ○ 45-49
- ○ 50-54
- ○ 55-59
- ○ 60-65
- ○ Over 65

12. Please indicate your gender.

- ○ Male
- ○ Female

13. Please state below your highest level of academic or vocational qualification.

____

14. Please indicate below your highest managerial level within a UK grocery retail.

- ○ Trainee buyer
- ○ Buyer
- ○ Senior Buyer
- ○ Trading Manager/ Category Director
- ○ Department Director
- ○ Group Director

Appendix. 4 Extract from Purposive Sample Planner (PSP)

Purposive Sample Planner

No	Name of Respondent	Category	Group Characteristic	Comments and Criteria	Date of Initial Response	Planning date for interview	Date time and location of confirmed	Group Characteristic Definition
Category A - Primary Buyer (learning as understood, experienced and perceived from a current or recent learner's perspective)								
1	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Current Top 10 multiple retailer** - initially contacted by text.	14-Feb-17	W/C 17th July	Monday 24th July (11am) Huddersfield University	
2	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Previously Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - now buying within the food export industry. Initially contated by Linked-In	10-Feb-17	W/C 7 Aug-15 Aug	Thursday 17th Augusrt (9am) Ossett.	
3	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Previously Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - now buying within the water industry. Initially contated by Linked-In	17-Feb-17	W/C 21st or 28th Aug	**No interview**	
4	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Previously Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - now a National Account Manager within retail sector. Will also have a supplier perspective. Initially contacted by Linked-In	10-Feb-17	W/C 7 Aug-15 Aug	**No interview**	
5	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - Initially contacted by Linked In	10-Feb-17	W/C 04 or 11th September	Monday 04 September (11am) Huddersfield University - **No interview Cancelled due to illness**	
6	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - Initially contacted by Linked In	10-Feb-17	W/C 14 or 21st Aug	Agreed Weds 23rd Aug at Co-op Manchester 12pm	"**Primary Buyer** means, in relation to any individual Supplier, the employee or employees within a Retailer's Buying Team who are responsible from time to time for the day-to-day buying functions of the Retailer in respect of that individual Supplier" (GSCOP, 2009, p. 4).
7	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Previously Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - Initially contacted by Linked In	11-Feb-17	Any day Aug/Sept	Interviewed at Liverpool 02 August 2017	
8	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - Initially contacted by Linked In	12-Feb-17	W/C 04 or 11th September	Agreed - Telephone Intervies	
9	Participant	A	Primary Buyer	**Previously Top 10 Multiple Retailer** - Initially contacted by Linked In	10-Feb-17	W/C 21st or 28th Aug	Agreed - 11 am Tue 05 Sept	
Category B - (Senior Buyer learning as understood, experienced and perceived from a historical learner's, teacher/trainer and managers' perspective)								

Appendix. 5 Primary data table

	A	B	C	D	E
1	Participant	Transcription Word Count	Number of Pages	Time/Duration of Interview(Minutes)	Date of Inteview
2	1 -	13396	22	83	18-Jul-17
3	2 -	9807	16	59	24-Jul-17
4	3 -	6850	12	40	02-Aug-17
5	4 -	11580	20	84	07-Aug-17
6	5 -	5603	12	45	15-Aug-17
7	6 -	9686	15	64	17-Aug-17
8	7 -	10857	22	99	18-Aug-17
9	8 -	5463	10	33	23-Aug-17
10	9 -	13159	19	84	25-Aug-17
11	10 -	9920	17	60	05-Sep-17
12	11-	6735	11	41	13-Sep-17
13	12 -	3876	6	27	23-Feb-18
14	13 -	10201	23	66	20-Mar-18
15	**Total**	117133	205	785	
16				Hours = 14.01	

Appendix. 6 Semi-structured interview Aide-Memoire

INTERVIEW AIDE-MEMOIRE

Interview Aide-Memoir

1. Welcome and thank the interviewee for their participation
2. Fire safety brief and health and safety brief (depending on location)
3. Clearly explain and define the purpose of the research (Refer to informed consent form)
4. Clearly explain that the format of the interview will be Semi-Structured and a short questionnaire

Remember:

> "Which means that the areas of interest have been predetermined and the key questions to be asked or information to be obtained have been identified. The interviewer has a check list but does not follow it rigidly. This approach enables the interviewer to phrase the questions and vary their order or choice in order to suit the special characteristics of each interviewee". (Armstrong, 2014, p. 577).

5. Clearly explain the high ethical standards applied to this interview
   a. The protection of the interviewee's rights
   b. Comments made will not be altered and decontextualized
   c. Assurance given that full confidentiality and anonymity will be respected
   That the interview fully complies in all respects to public data protection policy. The research method complies fully with the University of Huddersfield's ethical standards for research.
6. Clearly explain that the interview will be recorded to aid the accuracy of the data collected.
7. Obtain the interviewee signature on the consent form provided.

Types of Interview Question

Introductory Questions
Can you tell me about .....?
Do you remember an occasion when.....?
Could you describe in as much detail a situation......?

Follow up Questions
Tell me more about that.....
How could you explain......?
Thinking about a time.......?

Remember to use expressions, nods, mmm's, signals.

Probing Questions
Could you say something more about that....?
Could you give me a more detailed example....?
Could or how would you describe....?
What did you learn from that....?

Specifying Questions
What did you actually do.......?
Have you also experienced this yourself......?

Structuring Questions
I would now like to introduce a new topic or ......?

Direct Questions
Have you ever.....?
When you mention.......?

Linguistic forms of Question?
Can you describe to me....? What happened...?

What did you do...? How do you remember it....?

How did you experience it? What do you think about it ?

What is your opinion..? How do you conceive of this issue?

How do you judge it today?

- **Ask what people did rather than what they thought**
- **How would you explain to someone who doesn't know about buying**

Kvale &Brinkman(2009, p.135).

Remember! Don't talk - Listen to (a) what he/she wants to say (b) does not want to say (c) cannot say without help - Give your full attention to the participant and Never **argue or give advice.**

Appendix. 7 Example transcription

Extract from transcription of a semi-structured interview with participant (Edward) conducted on Monday 07 August 2017 at (University of Huddersfield). The extract is given of a typical example of transcriptions illustrative of all 13 semi-structured interviews conducted with the participants as part of this study.

DS. 51.49	So, effectively what we're saying is if you haven't got that experience then you know, the performance....could suffer if you're just analysing stuff?
ED. 51.53	Absolutely.
DS. 51.55	And do you think that's. Do you think the role of the buyer is perhaps changing because of the nature of business? In the sense of it's about today rather than tomorrow?
ED. 52.10	Yes, it's a far more **short termism.**
DS. 52.12	And do you think that, do you think that has influenced your idea of how you might go and train buyers in the future?
ED. 52.21	I think it, I think it......You have to....It's more fundamental than that, I think you're training of your buyers needs to reflect the thinking of the business that you're buying for. So the people that are running the business need to understand how they want to buy and then train the buyers accordingly.
DS. 52.47	So that's interesting from a knowledge point of view. So what's true in certain organisations might not be true in another organisation.
ED 52.54	Correct.
DS.52.55	So the training the teaching the knowledge base is therefore different. So how does the role then of somebody's formal qualifications and credentials come into the world of buying?
ED. 53.22	**It doesn't**
DS. 53.24	So, taking that.....
ED. 53.27	Well, no that's a generalisation. People who are trained in...have training around the process of buying and selling. I.e. business, numbers, you know understanding you know, you have to buy cheaper than you sell it, cos that's called a profit!
DS. 53.56	It is, it is!
ED. 53.57	And you have to understand all the elements that could reduce that profit. Which is the cost of selling.
DS. 54.07	And is that something that you would be willing to teach somebody as a senior person. Or is that a job for an organisation to prepare that person?
ED. 54.20	Well it's a bit like marketing. There is a role for formal teaching of the process of buying and selling. **But all teaching is best informed by practical examples.**

DS **Darren Schofield**
Short termism in business and the effect on the buying role and therefore the nature of the knowledge required. Who needs experts when business is here today gone tomorrow. Who needs experts when its all about sales today and trends

DS **Darren Schofield**
Social and cultural influences on the approach to buying and therefore the approach to training and how this links together.

DS **Darren Schofield**
A good aspect to consider – Cost of selling as well as cost of goods!

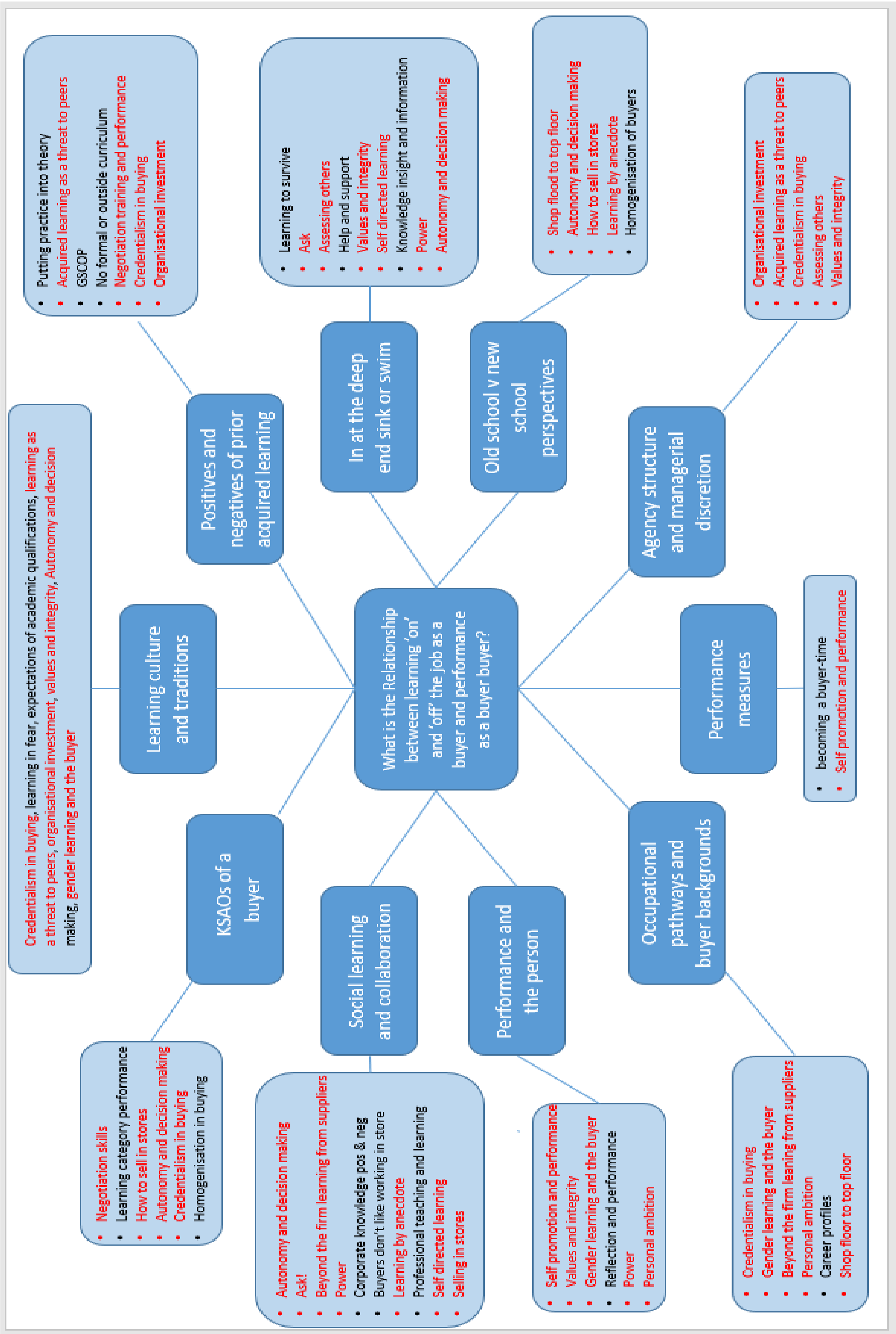
DS **Darren Schofield**
Pedagogy – Practical examples. Exemplifying.

Appendix. 8 Minor overlapping themes

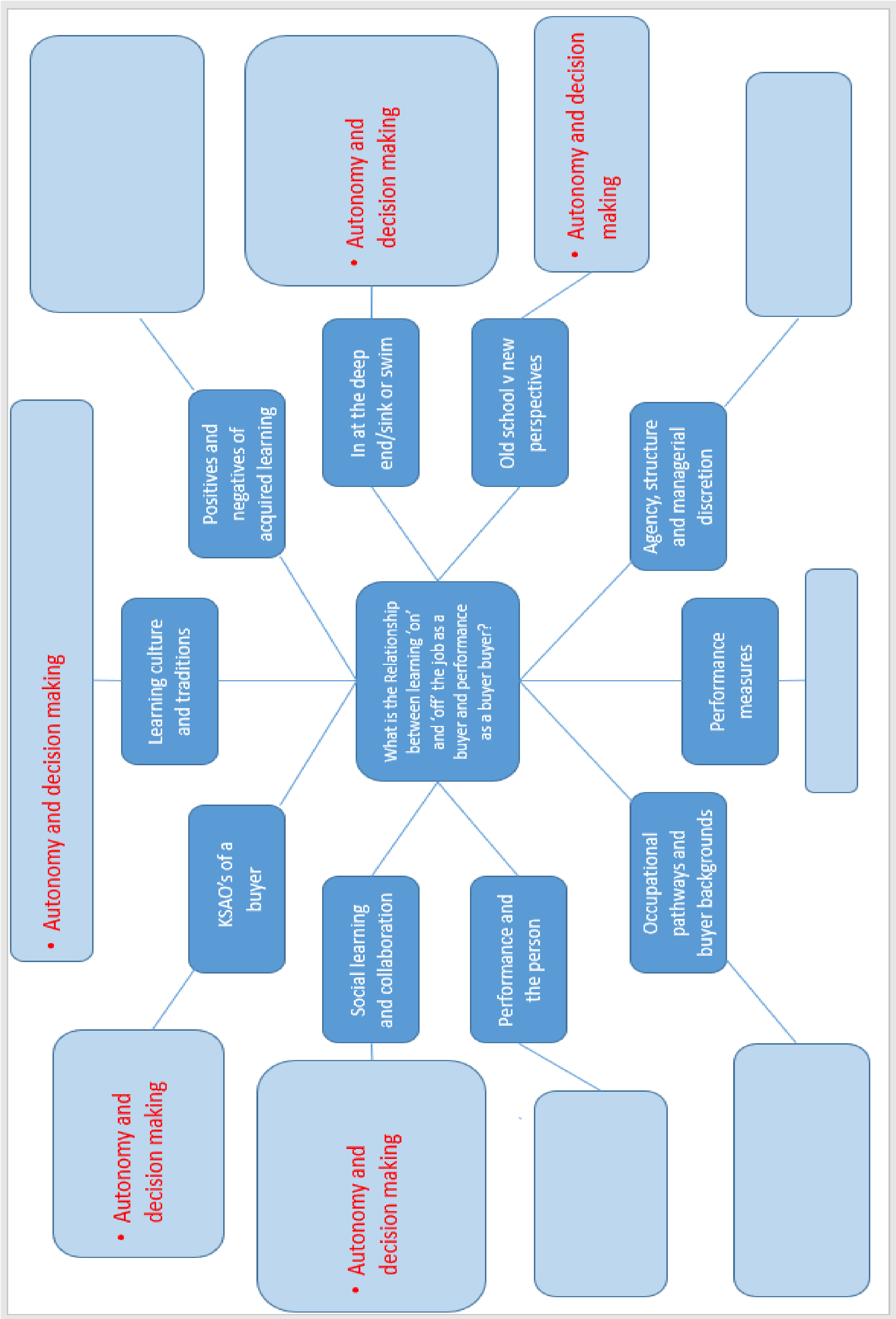
Seventeen overlapping themes
Negotiation skills
How to sell in stores
Autonomy and decision making
Credentialism in buying
Ask
Beyond the firm, learning from suppliers
Learning by anecdote
Self directed learning
Selling in stores
Self promotion and performance
Gender, learning and the buyer
Personal ambition
Shop floor to top floor
Organisational investment
Acquired learning as a threat to peers
Assessing others
Power

Notes:

- These seventeen themes overlap with the 10 major substantive themes used in this thesis. Their relationship to the primary research question and each major substantive theme is illustrated on the map given overleaf.
- On the map, each overlapping theme is identified in red.
- These themes demonstrate the interconnected nature and multiple relationships between the major substantive themes identified in this research and the multi-dimensional nature of better understanding the research question.
- It should be noted that 17 separate maps were created to identify the overlapping relationship between each minor theme to the 10 substantive themes. An example map of a minor overlapping theme is also given.



What is the Relationship between learning 'on' and 'off' the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer buyer?
Learning culture and traditions
Credentialism in buying, learning in fear, expectations of academic qualifications, learning as a threat to peers, organisational investment, values and integrity, Autonomy and decision making, gender learning and the buyer
Positives and negatives of prior acquired learning
Putting practice into theory
Acquired learning as a threat to peers
GSCOP
No formal or outside curriculum
Negotiation training and performance
Credentialism in buying
Organisational investment
In at the deep end sink or swim
Learning to survive
Ask
Assessing others
Help and support
Values and integrity
Self directed learning
Knowledge insight and information
Power
Autonomy and decision making
Old school v new school perspectives
Shop flood to top floor
Autonomy and decision making
How to sell in stores
Learning by anecdote
Homogenisation of buyers
Agency structure and managerial discretion
Organisational investment
Acquired learning as a threat to peers
Credentialism in buying
Assessing others
Values and integrity
Performance measures
becoming a buyer-time
Self promotion and performance
KSAOs of a buyer
Negotiation skills
Learning category performance
How to sell in stores
Autonomy and decision making
Credentialism in buying
Homogenisation in buying
Social learning and collaboration
Autonomy and decision making
Ask!
Beyond the firm learning from suppliers
Power
Corporate knowledge pos & neg
Buyers don't like working in store
Learning by anecdote
Professional teaching and learning
Self directed learning
Selling in stores
Performance and the person
Self promotion and performance
Values and integrity
Gender learning and the buyer
Reflection and performance
Power
Personal ambition
Occupational pathways and buyer backgrounds
Credentialism in buying
Gender learning and the buyer
Beyond the firm leaning from suppliers
Personal ambition
Career profiles
Shop floor to top floor



What is the Relationship between learning 'on' and 'off' the job as a buyer and performance as a buyer buyer?
Learning culture and traditions
Positives and negatives of acquired learning
In at the deep end/sink or swim
Old school v new perspectives
Agency, structure and managerial discretion
Performance measures
Occupational pathways and buyer backgrounds
Performance and the person
Social learning and collaboration
KSAO's of a buyer
• Autonomy and decision making
• Autonomy and decision making
• Autonomy and decision making
• Autonomy and decision making
• Autonomy and decision making