



The perspectives of learners – How are schools developing employability skills?

Joint Dialogue Phase 2

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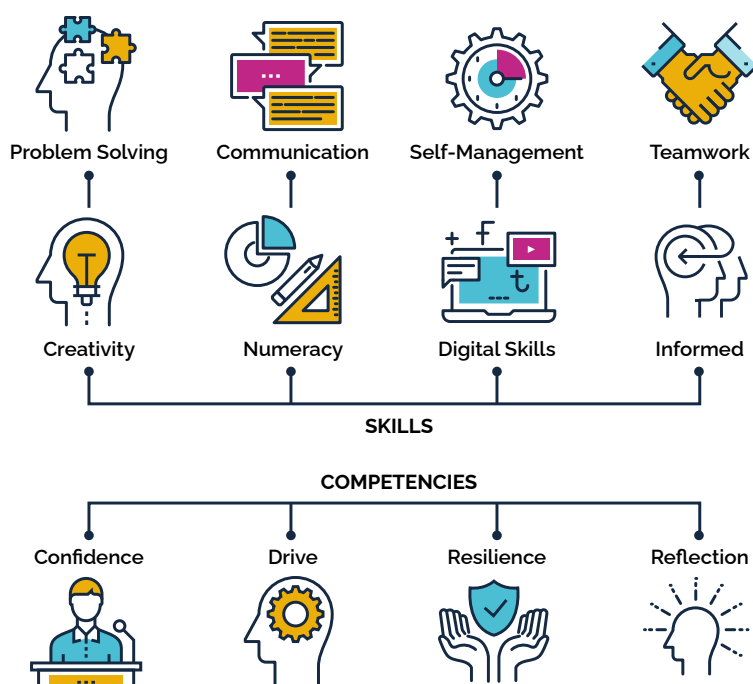
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Preface to the Joint Dialogue Project

The '[Joint Dialogue: How are schools developing real employability skills?](#)' research project started as a collaborative project between Education and Employers (lead partner), the Edge Foundation and the National Education Union in 2017. It was driven in response to an issue frequently raised by employers on the range of 'employability skills' school leavers need above and beyond formal qualifications (DfE, 2017). Yet there is limited shared dialogue and clarity around which employability skills are important, and what they mean to employers themselves. The overarching aim of the Joint Dialogue project therefore, was to identify which skills employers are looking for in young people, and to consider what skills are being developed in different school settings, and how this might translate or transfer into a workplace setting. The project consists of two phases; Phase 1 focus on the perspectives of the employers and teachers and Phase 2 focus on the perspectives of the learners.

Phase 1

- Phase 1 of the project sought to identify the specific transferable skills employers are looking for when recruiting school leavers, where and how these skills are being developed in schools, and how schools can offer students the best chance of demonstrating and evidencing any employability skills they have attained
- A thematic literature review, followed by focus group interviews with a range of employers and professionals with recruitment responsibilities, helped to understand the various employability skills and competencies employers demand and look for in potential employees.
- Through the literature review and interview data, seven employability skills and four competencies were identified as most frequently cited. These were *problem solving, communication, self-management, teamwork, creativity, numeracy, digital skills, being informed (about the world of work), confidence, drive, resilience, and reflection*.



- Over 600 secondary school teachers across England were surveyed for their understanding of how students may be developing the identified skills and competencies while at school, whether through: *classwork, homework, assessments, extra-curricular activities, interacting with peers, at other times/lessons/activities throughout the school day*; or even whether instead they were *not developed within the school system*.

The '[Joint Dialogue: How are schools developing real employability skills?](#)' research report was published in 2018.

Phase 2

This report covers Phase 2 of the research. Phase 2 of this project follows on from Phase 1 and investigates how learners see their skills and competencies developing in school. This project phase started in 2019 and encountered interpretations in the data collection due to the start of the pandemic.

- The second phase of the project, which this report details, sought to understand learners' perceptions and experiences of developing employability skills while at school or sixth form college, as well as identifying which skills they consider vital to their future.
- The aim of this phase of the research project was to understand specifically *where* young people believe they are being supported to develop 'employability' skills in school – for instance, whether through classwork (e.g. preparing a presentation as a team in a geography class), 'extra-curricular' activities such as after-school clubs, or opportunities outside of the school context.
- This phase also sought to investigate whether learners acknowledge employability skills development supported by their schools and whether/how they can articulate and evidence this.

The data for this research project draws on:

- survey responses from 67 learners (between the ages of 14-18) in Years 10 –Year 13
- focus group interviews with 21 learners in attendance at a school or sixth form college in England
- focus group interviews with learners across two schools for learners with SEND.

All learners who participated in this study were those who had remained on an 'academic track' in a school setting rather than pursuing a vocational route (i.e. Further Education college, apprenticeship). The purpose of selecting learners on an 'academic' track was to reflect on the extent to which employability skills are featured within the curriculum and school life.

Some key insights from the second phase of the research suggest that:

- The most frequently noted skills mainstream learners felt they were developing in school were communication skills, numeracy and problem solving. Overall, amongst learners, communication skills were seen as the most transferable and necessary skill needed for careers and working life.
- The most frequently noted skills mainstream learners felt they were not developing in school were digital skills and being informed, followed by drive, creativity and reflection.
- Students felt they developed the most employability skills through interacting with their peers, such as communication skills, teamwork and confidence.
- Extra-curricular activities were acknowledged by most learners as means to particularly develop team working, communication skills and resilience. However, there is a disconnect between learners engaging with extra-curricular activities in the pre- and post-16 phases of education.
- Learners, in general, were confident using the 'skills development' language, and were able to identify – for them - important employability skills.
- Learners, in general, felt it was difficult to articulate real examples of their skills development.

1. Introduction

Employability skills are pertinent to consider at a time when traditional, academic disciplines and rote-learning for exams dominate the education system. Yet employers often highlight a shortage of 'skills' among their younger workers (CBI, 2019). CBI/Pearson (2018) showed that over half of employers (60%) value transferable skills such as problem solving, and nearly three quarters (75%) say they prefer a mix of academic and technical qualifications or that they view all qualifications equally. There is evidence that many young people entering the labour market now will have a portfolio career, expecting to move in and between many different job roles and sectors across their working life. This will require a profile of transferable skills to complement such a varied career.

To add to this, the disruptive effects of the Covid-19 pandemic, the need for a greener economy, and the fourth industrial revolution continue to affect the job opportunities available to young people. While it is difficult to predict future job roles and the specific future skills needed, it is possible to observe a tendency towards an increasing demand for transferable skills. Consequently, it is crucial that young people develop, display and discuss their employability skills with employers. The increasingly agile nature of the labour market means young people must increasingly be able to demonstrate their capabilities and skills beyond simply academic knowledge. Employability skills are seen as distinct from academic (or vocational) related skills – although they are interrelated, these are skills which have value beyond schooling and demonstrate a level of work readiness.

Defining employability and employability skills

Presently, there is limited research on the development of employability skills amongst school-aged young people in the English school context. The majority of research has focused on developing the employability skills of higher education students and graduates (e.g. Emms & Laczik, 2018; Small et al., 2018). The prevalence of employability discourse in higher education is expected given the more pressing concerns amongst graduates entering an increasingly competitive labour market. Furthermore, higher education institutions are increasingly seeking to demonstrate 'value for money' through rates of graduate employment, since the three-fold increase in tuition fees in 2012 (Miller et al., 2013).

The discourse around employability is often broad in scope and variably used across policy and research. For instance, Brown et al. (2003, p.111) argue employability is a relative concept, meaning it is subject to change based on the conditions of supply and demand in the labour market. In this sense, employability skills are defined as the potential to acquire, sustain and move between different kinds of employment. Yorke & Knight (2006) define employability as '*IA* set of achievements, understandings and personal attributes that make an individual more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations.' Indeed, it may be difficult to know to what extent an individual has even developed employability skills until they are employed (Brown and Hesketh, 2004), while others have termed 'employability' as a discourse which places the shortcomings of macroeconomic policy and limited availability of opportunities on to individuals (Atkins, 2013).

Similar to employability, there is no single definition and/or combination of skills (and attitudes and behaviours) of employability skills. As Kashefpakdel et al. (2018) argue employability skills are multi-faceted and multi-layered (p. 6). Moving away from economic perspectives on employability and considering the language around skills in education more broadly, The Sutton Trust (Cullinane and Montacute, 2017) described skills such as confidence, motivation, resilience, and communication as 'life skills'. In addition, employability skills can also be categorised into 'hard' or 'soft' skills, with the former reflecting more technical, measurable skills and the latter reflecting behaviours and attitudes. However, Chell and Athayde (2011) argue such terminology can be misleading as soft

skills also require a higher level of skill, knowledge and awareness of context. The CBI (2019) argue that skills are often 'knowledge specific' so what creativity looks like in one subject will look differently in another. Skills Builder (Crighton and Ravenscroft, 2021) distinguishes between three different types of skills; technical (specific to a role), essential (also termed as transferable) and basic (literacy, numeracy and digital skills). While there are many definitions of both employability and skills, this research has drawn on the definition developed by Fettes et al. (2018) to ground this research. They define employability skills as the *'qualities and attitudes' needed to become employable as distinct from, though interrelated to, the 'basic and personal' skills needed for smooth and successful transitions into work* (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, pp. 6-7). Essentially, employability skills are needed to gain and keep employment, and to move between jobs.

Broad policy context of employability development

Research has highlighted changes to the National Curriculum introduced in 2014 including greater accountability measures (EBacc and Progress 8), in creating a school system which narrowly focuses on examination results as markers of success (e.g. Huddleston and Ashton, 2018). In such a context, it has been noted that the space for skills development within schools is limited - particularly for students pursuing GCSEs and A-Level qualifications where competencies and work experience are perceived to be squeezed out of the core curriculum requirements. For example, Robson et al.'s (2020, p.10) research found that *'senior school leaders believed that they simply could not risk a focus on employability skills or innovative pedagogies if exam success or other accountability measures might be jeopardised.'* The de-prioritisation in the National Curriculum away from applied learning towards the acquisition of content and knowledge, is described as being disconnected from everyday life and the world of work (Daubney, 2021).



2. Methodology

Currently the voices of school-aged young people in how they interpret, understand and experience employability skills is limited in existing research. As such, the aim of this report is to contribute towards an increasingly relevant discussion on employability and skills development and understand how young people themselves perceive their development of employability skills.

Phase 2 builds on the findings of Phase 1 project (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018) and investigates young people's views and experiences of their employability skills development in schools. We set the following research questions:

1. How do young people in schools perceive employability skills?
2. How do young people experience their employability skills development in school?
3. How do young people perceive their skills development contributes to their career development/aspiration/transition to work or further studies?

This research took a qualitative approach and used focus group interviews with learners in Years 10-13 (aged 14-18), in attendance at either a school or sixth form in England. In addition, we also administered a short online survey to learners meeting the same criteria.

Focus group interviews were first conducted with learners between the period of May 2019 and March 2020. However, the disrupting effects of the Covid-19 pandemic meant further focus groups were unable to take place. In response to this barrier, a short online survey was distributed to learners in Years 10-13 to supplement the existing data gathered from the focus groups. The survey responses were collected between November 2020 and February 2021.

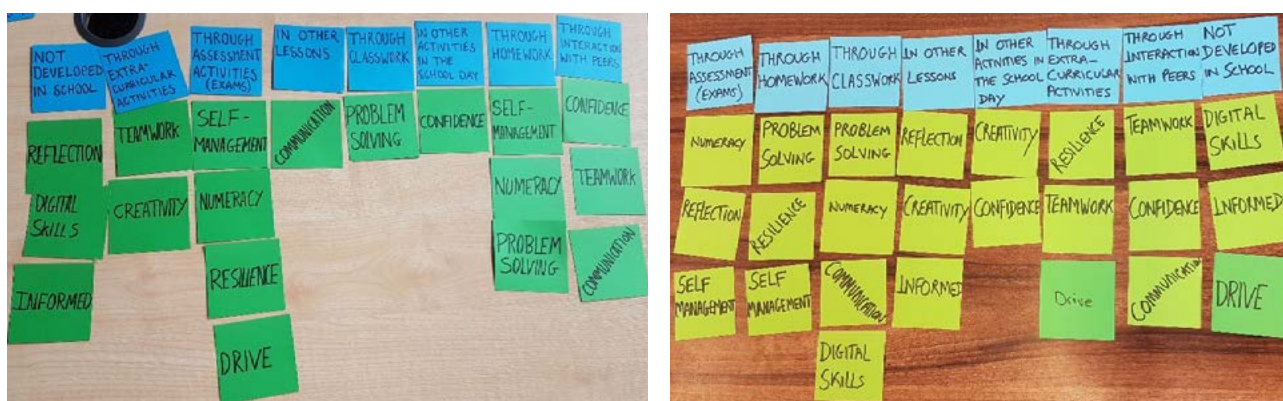
Overview of Data:

- Survey data: 67 young people fully completed a short survey administered online via the surveying tool Alchemer.
 - 37 learners (aged 14-16) between Years 10 - 11
 - 30 learners (aged 16-18) between Years 12 - 13
- Six focus groups: consisting of a total of 21 learners (Years 10 – 13) in attendance at a mainstream school or college participated in focus group interviews:
 - Focus group interviews took place at four different schools in England:
 - Schools/colleges were located in the West Midlands, Greater London and the South East.
- Four focus group interviews with learners at SEND institutions: 18 learners (Years 10-13)

Approach to Data Collection

Data collection during the focus group interviews consisted of two parts. First, semi-structured interviews were conducted with learners encouraging equal participation. Lines of questioning and discussion centred on learners' experiences of developing employability skills; what skills do learners develop that support their future plans (further training, studying or work), how do they develop these skills, and where do they develop and practise such skills within school. Second, further conversations with learners were elicited through a participatory activity which asked learners to think about where they might be developing employability skills in school. Learners worked in small groups of 2-3 and each group was provided with two sets of cards which were used to enhance the discussions. One set (blue cards placed horizontal on the photos) specified examples of where employability skills might be developed either in school (through classwork, homework, assessment, extracurricular activities, interaction with peers, in other lessons, other activities throughout the school day) or not developed in school. The second set contained employability skills (green and yellow cards placed underneath the blue on the photo) identified in the literature and through conversations with employers in Phase 1 of the project (Kashefkapdel et al., 2018). Learners were asked to align the different employability skills with method of development as they saw it (see Figure 1). The learners were also prompted for specific examples of what, where and how they develop employability skills. The purpose of this was to develop a richer understanding of learners' perspectives on employability skills, while also creating a space for learners to engage in dialogue with their peers, as well as the research team. The focus group was supported by two researchers to capture the discussions between the learners.

Figure 1: Card sorting exercise in focus groups



There were some differences in language used and interpreted by the research participants in Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the research. These had to be clarified for learners when using the set of cards. For example, 'Drive' was used in Phase 1 of the research. When the focus groups were carried out with young people in Phase 2, many of the participants were confused by the term 'Drive' and required it to be defined. Therefore, in the survey of young people 'Drive' was changed to 'Ambition/Motivation', to ensure clarity. For teachers 'Numeracy' was understood as skills which stemmed beyond the subject study of Maths, which they admitted was limited as part of the curriculum. It is likely that the learners in this research interpreted numeracy in the context of Maths. These variations in language illustrate the complexity and lack of shared definitions in the language used and applied in relation to skills and their development.

British Educational Research Association (2018) Ethical Guidelines were followed in this project. Information sheets were distributed with invitation letters to parents and learners. Consent for focus group interviews was obtained from parents via the school, and individually from each participant before the focus groups commenced. Focus group interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the research team. All participants

were assigned a number for the ethical purposes of upholding anonymity and are only referenced in this report by their respective number and year of study. Interview data was analysed using a thematic approach, and initial themes and codes were cross-checked collaboratively amongst the researchers. Survey data was cleaned to remove partially completed responses, and descriptive analyses were conducted using Microsoft Excel.

Limitations of the research

The time originally planned for data collection for this research project was impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. While further focus groups were initially intended to take place across England, this was no longer possible, and a short survey was developed in response. This may limit the breadth of data as it reflects a small sample size. However, it is not the intention of this report - nor would it be possible - to be representative of all young people's perspectives on employability skills. Rather, the purpose of the research presented here is to offer some insight into the experiences of young people regarding employability skills.



3. Findings and Discussion

The following section presents key themes emerging from both the survey results and focus group interviews with learners across mainstream schools. This is followed by a separate analysis of focus group interviews with learners with special educational needs and disability (SEND). A decision was taken to analyse and reflect on the focus group interview data in SEND schools because of the emphasis given to skills development in general, and employability skills specifically, reflecting the needs of their learner population. The vision and aims of these SEND schools, and what they have in practice in relation to developing employability skills and life skills, demonstrate a different approach in comparison with other schools. The findings presented here are supported by direct quotes from learners, as well as charts and figures drawn from the survey data.

The structure of this chapter is as followed. First, we discuss how employability skills are understood by the learners and what employability skills they find useful for their further studies, training and work. We then discuss the context within which learners develop employability skills. We follow by devoting a separate section to discussing what skills are not developed in schools. The next section reflects on some socioeconomic factors raised by the research. The final section discusses SEND learners' perspectives on skills development for life and employability.

3.1 How are employability skills understood by the learners?

The understanding of employability and employability skills are key to this research. We have argued that there are competing definitions in the literature for both terms. The quotations in this section highlight the complexity of issues behind employability and employability skills from the perspectives of the learners. Consequently, it was vital to find out what learners think about these terms. Therefore, they were first asked for their understanding of the term 'employability skills.' Some learners offered an understanding in terms of their function and articulated why they might be relevant and important for them to develop while at school. Some of these examples included:

Being able to adapt to any situation. (Year 10, learner survey)

I think for a job you need to be hardworking and to be able to work in a team well. (Year 10, Learner 13)

Some learners during interviews also noted skills not pre-identified directly by this research. These included: adaptability, people skills, leadership, originality (showing one's personality), capability, passion and determination. Many of these skills and competencies are interrelated to drive, resilience, communication and confidence, which illustrates the broad variability of employability skills discourse. The following quotations demonstrate some examples of learners' thinking:

The ability to adapt to different situations and to pick up skills quickly. I don't think you necessarily need all the skills when you first start a job, but you need to be able to pick them up and still achieve and exceed the expectations. (Year 10, Learner 7)

People skills is a big one as well. If you are being employed into a company or any sort of work place you will be working with other people and working in a team or you will be working for someone who is your boss, so you need to be good at having the conversation and understanding what they want from you. (Year 12, Learner 4)

3. Findings and Discussion

I think things like adaptability. If you're able to adapt to what someone has asked you to do or what is required of you, then I think that is so key because it can kind of help people from shifting between doing independent work to doing team work or doing like vocational stuff, or office stuff, things like that. (Year 12, Learner 3)

You need a lot of passion for what you want to do otherwise you are not going to put so much effort in and the job won't be successful if you don't really want to be there. (Year 12, Learner 2)

These skills and competencies were often mentioned during focus groups in the context that 'it can be quite hard sometimes' to overcome potential issues and set-backs in life and therefore such skills were needed to maintain a positive mind-set as general life skills, not just for work. Therefore, the skills could be described as - essential or life skills - not specific to one field of work but applicable more broadly to day-to-day life. In this sense, some learners questioned the language and relevance of the term 'employability' and the purpose of having a pre-defined set of skills that specifically revolve around employment:

Personally, I call it transferable skills, because it's not skills specific to one situation. It's skills that you use throughout your everyday life, so I've never used employability - I mean it's a good word - but I think skills you take into the workplace should be the same skills you learnt throughout your life because they are hiring you as a whole person and not just for that job. (Year 12, Learner 2)

I think they are skills limited to specific environments and in some senses it puts on paper but I think employability skills should be more open because the variety of skills you need is way more open than a few bullet points. (Year 10, Learner 7)

These quotations raise an important issue more generally on the lack of shared language and understanding around terms such as employability, employability skills, or transferable skills, that are often used interchangeably. Yet, many learners framed employability skills as meeting the needs of employers and being able to succeed in a competitive labour market against other potential candidates. In this sense, employability skills were largely understood as being less centred on learners' own qualities, personal attributes or dispositions towards skills development, but more in line with a sense of individualism - competing with others and 'getting a job.'

The idea of what makes you a good person to employ over someone else. (Year 12, Learner 3)

It's also about capability...sorry I'm just adding things on here, but you need to be able to do the job you can't just be a lovely person [mutual laughing amongst participants] ... it's not going to be very useful at a surgery table is it. (Year 12, Learner 4)

So I would instantly assimilate employability skills with a corporate environment. (Year 10, Learner 6)

In this vein, some learners even as early as Year 10 described a challenging, competitive job market they would likely enter in the future. As one learner says: 'It is hard, especially for our age, to get a job' (Year 10, Learner 10). Subsequently, the concept of employability skills was framed as a way of acquiring advantage and standing out from others, as opposed to being able to transition in and out of different job roles. It is also crucial to be aware of employability skills development and be able to display this:

I'd say there is a great importance on having good employability skills...because it is pretty crucial to look appealing to employers and with the skills that we have talked about already, if you can't display them in any way, then you are not going to get employed at the place you want to work. (Year 12, Learner 4)

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As such, learners generally perceived employability skills as something necessary to develop for the future. They were aware that some employability skills were developed in school while others outside school, such as during extra-curricular activities and family/friends' gatherings. There was still some awareness and appreciation amongst learners that employability skills stemmed beyond academic knowledge and qualifications:

I think employability has kinda developed on from secondary school - it was what GCSEs are you going to get, what A-levels are you going to get...whereas now, it's about you as a person as well. (Year 12, Learner 3)

However, one learner noted that the emphasis and greater weight placed on academic qualifications prevailed over employability skills:

I think employability skills are important, but I feel that at the end of the day I think the qualifications will always be seen as higher, and it's a bit unfair for those people that don't get the chance. (Year 10, Learner 7)

This chimes with the teacher views found in Phase 1 of the research, where many believed the 2014 reforms of the secondary curriculum has restricted the ability to develop a broader set of skills in young people. One teacher stated: *'I think the 2014 changes are too restrictive and inhibit valuable skills. There is too much focus on terminal assessment, and not enough consideration for vocational or creative opportunities'* (English teacher: Phase D1 (2018), p44).

To add to this, some learners noted that their engagement with employability skills more generally, and participation in extracurricular activities, were constrained by the requirements of the academic pathway they were pursuing. Learners were not encouraged by their sixth forms to continue with their extra-curricular activities and learners considered it natural to follow this advice. This meant there was limited time and space to develop some skills in the curriculum because of examination pressures. This view was shared by many of the Year 12 participants interviewed:

It depends what pathway you want to go through when you grow up. Medicine and Healthcare in general are so grades-focused and that is all you can think about and you forget about all the activity you have to do alongside of it. (Year 12, Learner 1)

Learners were asked during interviews if the skills needed for university progression would be similar or different to those needed to go into employment. Learners largely identified employability skills as being helpful in relation to gaining access to a university, as opposed to being necessary for successful study whilst there:

Communication is really important because there is interviews before you get into university and sixth form. (Year 10, Learner 5)

I went to an open day at the weekend and he said if you don't get your grades we can judge it on what you have done and your personal statement says what you have done. I think that comes into it but it is largely to do with what you can academically achieve. (Year 12, Learner 1)

Overall, learners noted that university progression was focused more on academic achievement and developing the skills to live independently away from parents. In this sense, employability skills were seen as somewhat separate to, or less of a requisite of, degree level study.

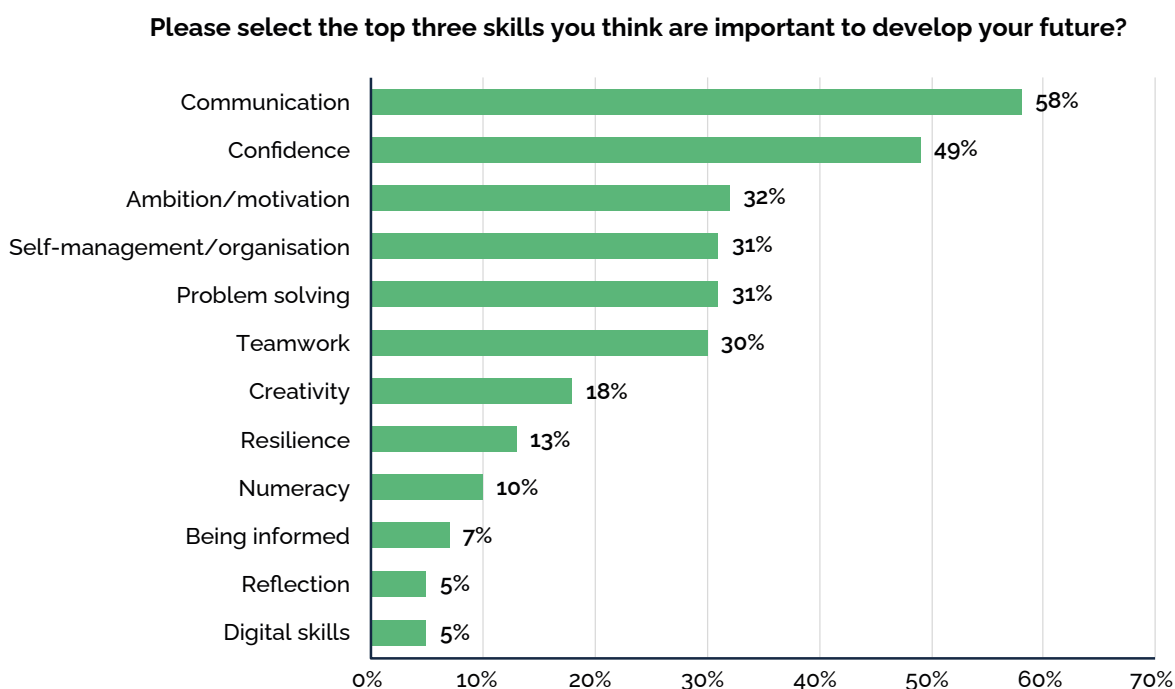
3.2 What employability skills are valued by the learners and why?

In the survey, learners were asked to select the three skills/competencies they considered most important for their future. The full breakdown of results is presented in Figure 2. The top three skills learners considered most important to develop were: communication (58%), confidence (49%), and ambition/motivation (32%) (also referred to as drive in the context of focus group interviews). During focus group interviews, learners frequently raised communication as a key skill for them to develop, which is discussed in greater detail in section 3.2.1. In relation to confidence, learners generally noted it as being important in the context of exams and academic performance:

Confidence. Need to be confident for exams. You can perform better when [you are confident].
(Year 10, Learner 8)

The three skills learners considered least important to develop according to the survey results were: digital skills (5%), reflection (5%) and being informed (about future career opportunities) (7%). As the learners surveyed were those on an 'academic' track perhaps being informed was considered less important because they may already be well informed about their academic pathway and progression into higher education. Greater discussion specifically on digital skills from focus group interviews is discussed in section 3.2.2.

Figure 2: Survey results: 'Select the top three skills you think are most important for you to develop' (n=67)



During interviews, learners explained the importance and relevance of some of the other employability skills pre-identified in this research:

Creativity because you can't be like a machine, they [employers] want a unique person. (Year 10, Learner 14)

On the topic of resilience, a Year 10 learner argued that resilience was a particularly important skill to develop *'because you are going to have set backs and people you don't get along with and things you can't do'*. This learner's broader understanding of resilience however, was less reflected amongst other learners interviewed. Rather, resilience was understood in the context of improving academic performance in assessments and exams. This is supported by the results of the survey which showed that learners felt they most developed resilience through assessment (17.7%).

3.2.1 Communication

While learners offered a range of examples of different skills, the majority of learners frequently raised communication as a key employability skill:

You need to have these skills if you are going to an interview, things like confidence and communication.
(Year 10, Learner 7)

The perceived importance of communication skills was also reflected in the learner survey. Communication was considered the most important skill amongst learners for their future, receiving 58% of all responses. During interviews, some learners emphasised the importance of good communication skills as a fundamental part of working life and being competent:

Communication is important because you are always going to talk to people. You have to be a good communicator. (Year 10, learner survey)

It is worth noting that learners in the survey were asked more generally about 'communication' rather than being broken down into different components such as listening, speaking, presenting and writing skills. For example, in the Youth Voice Census 2021 (Youth Employment UK, 2021), 75.95% of 14–18-year-olds felt either 'confident' or 'very confident' in their listening skills – the highest levels of confidence than any other skill. However, only 36.1% of learners felt the same level of confidence towards their presenting skills. It is not possible to determine in this research exactly how learners interpreted the somewhat umbrella term 'communication', although some interviewed learners did note that communication varied by context and could encompass writing, speaking and interpersonal skills, including confidence:

With communication, you may be confident but do not know how to talk to people. (Year 12, Learner 3)

It can be how you write. A written way can be taught. (Year 12, Learner 2)

It's such a big skill so in different circumstances you could be better talking to people in big and small groups. (Year 12, Learner 4)

Examples learners provided of delivering effective communication skills included succeeding at job interviews, working successfully as part of a team, and fostering relationships more generally. Communication skills were also mentioned in the context of being able to follow instructions from an employer, delegate tasks to employees and as part of taking on more leadership roles:

If you have a customer who is worried about what is going to happen with their pet, you need to be able to talk to them about what is going to happen and stuff. (Year 10, Learner 10)

As illustrated above, learners linked communication skills to work-based examples and explained how they can be interlinked with other employability skills such as confidence (leadership/decision making), and reflection (adaptability/people management). This was likewise exemplified in Phase 1 of the research where employers highlighted the interconnectivity between different skills and competencies (see Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p.20).

Based on the results of the survey, the top five ways learners felt they most developed communication skills is contrasted with the perceptions of teachers surveyed in Phase 1 of the Joint Dialogue project (see Figure 3).

Figure 3: Table comparing the top five ways teachers and learners felt communication was developed

	Where are communication skills most developed in school?				
	1	2	3	4	5
Learners	Peers	Classwork	In other lessons	Extra-curricular	In other activities
Teachers	Classwork	Peers	Extra-curricular	In other lessons	In other activities

Although generally the results are very similar, 92% of teachers indicated that communication skills were developed 'through classwork', compared to just 23% of learners indicating this. Instead, learners felt they most developed their communication skills through 'interaction with peers' (33.8%). This was the second highest agreed upon category where learners believed they were developing employability skills in school, with the first being numeracy skills 'through classwork'. Overall, amongst learners, communication skills were seen as the most transferable and necessary skill needed for careers and working life.

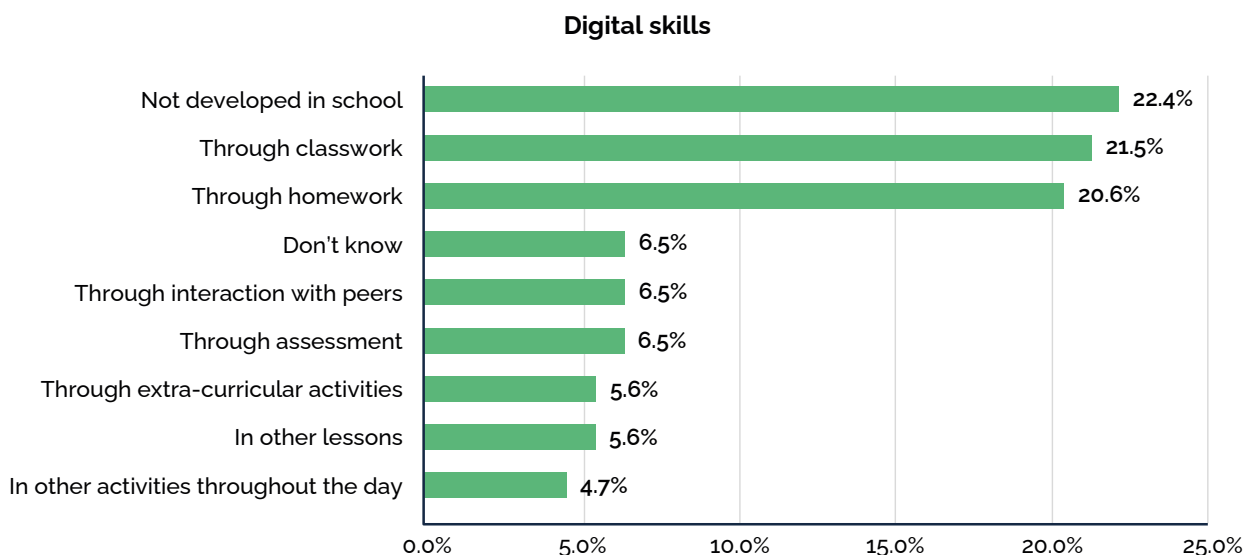
3.2.2 Digital Skills

From the survey results, learners deemed digital skills as the least important skill to develop – with only 5% feeling it was one of the most important skills to develop. However, one learner during an interview noted the general growing importance of digital skills to the workplace:

I think digital skills are important, most jobs now you need knowledge of computers. As time goes on it is more important now to use it. (Year 10, Learner 5).

Yet, a significant number of learners surveyed said digital skills were not developed in school (22.4%) (see Figure 4). This could suggest that learners may well feel that digital skills are important but that the development of this skill happens largely outside of the school context and therefore of lesser importance as part of their school lives. Alternatively, learners may consider themselves to have well-developed digital skills already given they are the digital native generation, and therefore do not believe that they need to develop these skills further.

Figure 4: 'Where is this skill developed in school?' (n=67)



Learners struggled to specify clear examples that demonstrated an understanding of what digital skills and competencies looks like in practice, particularly in the context of work – as this conversation with a Year 10 learner illustrates:

Learner: *So for digital skills, a lot of the stuff that I've learnt about, like how to utilise technology best, is stuff I've asked my friends and they've taught me about that...*

Interviewer: *Such as...?*

Learner: *Such as how to use computers better. For example in music, a lot of the stuff is done on computers, and some of my friends are better at it and I can for example ask them about it and we can help each other...and something like digital skills is quite new and our generation is the first to have such big access to it so speaking to peers is the best way to do it because everybody knows different softwares [sic]'. (Year 10, Learner 7)*

There were some examples where learners noted that digital skills were either predominantly used at home to complete homework, or were being developed at school through classwork and interaction with peers. Word, PowerPoint and Google were applications noted by learners in this research, as was the Extended Project Qualification (EPQ) as a means to developing digital skills, although it was not explained how the qualification was specifically supporting digital skills:

We have our laptops, Google docs and make presentations, and then have to work on communication, and teamwork. (Year 10, Learner 6)

On the topic of digital skills during interviews, there was an underlying belief amongst some learners that digital skills were more innate amongst learners of their generation:

We do have lessons and get taught, but we grew up with technology from a young age and have been able to use computers. (Year 12, Learner 2)

The assumption that the 'net generation' of younger learners are seen as 'digital natives' through day-to-day exposure to technology has been termed a myth and one which poses a negative impact on the education system and the skills needed for the future of work (Kirschner and Bruyckere, 2017). It is not possible to discern how learners interpreted 'digital' skills in the survey research – whether it was understood as simply the ability to use a computer for day-to-day tasks or whether it encapsulated more technical skills and knowledge (e.g. data analysis using Excel, Adobe Photoshop, database management, coding), that may have greater relevance and growing importance to the workplace.

In addition, the issue of limited access to computer suites during school was also raised. Some learners noted that there was also less time in conjunction with limited resources available at school to develop digital skills:

Most of the time we don't get IT rooms in lessons and we are not much on the computer, it [is] more written work. (Year 10, Learner 12)

It may be that having less access to computer suites may reinforce the idea amongst learners that digital skills are not as important or necessary to develop, in addition to limiting opportunities for all learners to develop digital proficiency. Research has highlighted the realities of the digital divide, where young people from less advantaged backgrounds have limited access to the internet at home and equipment to support the development of digital skills (Bowyer, 2019; Wilkin et al., 2017). The effects of the Covid-19 pandemic and the switch to remote learning evidenced the extent of the digital divide in England, rooted along lines of socioeconomic inequality (Coleman, 2021). This means it is increasingly necessary for schools to provide sufficient access to IT resources for all learners.

Responses from teachers in Phase 1 of the research highlighted the lack of importance placed on digital skills in the 2014 National Curriculum, and also raised issues with the lack of funding within schools to support teaching and learning of digital skills development. It is important to situate these findings in a general context of declining uptake of ICT subjects at GCSE level and concerns around digital skills shortages (Learning and Work Institute, 2021). The Learning and Work Institute (2021) recommends greater efforts are needed in schools to improve the attractiveness and relevance of digital skills to future life.

3.2.3 Being Informed (about the world of work)

Given the recent emphasis on employable graduates (Emms & Laczik, 2020) it is equally important for learners to be aware of and knowledgeable about how the world of work actually operates. The results of the survey showed 'being informed' was largely developed in other lessons (24.6%) and through other activities throughout the school day (18.5%). This very much resembles the results of the teachers' survey in Phase 1. Over 75% of teachers responded that 'being informed' was developed in other lessons, and almost 40% of them suggested this was developed through other activities throughout the school day. In the survey, teachers mentioned careers day, featuring visits from employers and mock interview practice sessions. School trips were mentioned by 14% of the respondents, with reference to careers fairs, enrichment days and visits to university open days.

Many learners emphasised the role of teachers and events as being a valuable source of support in feeling informed about the world of work:

Teachers are constantly notifying us about work experience opportunities. (Year 11, learner survey)

Our school also offers many extra-curricular activities and we are constantly being emailed by members of staff about new career opportunities and webinars we can join to learn more about them. (Year 12, learner survey)

I talk with peers and teachers on what I should apply to and the choices I have. (Year 12, learner survey)

We have attended career days in the past where we meet people of different professions and talk about how they got that job and the requirements. (Year 11, learner survey)

Learners also discuss preparation for university in addition to general 'career' focused activities. One issue was raised by a learner during a focus group interview on their limited access to information on alternative progression options such as apprenticeships:

I think personally if you want to go to university they have so many things that will help you get there. There are workshops and things available but I know it was only until 2 months ago that I wanted to change to go to university. Things like apprenticeships. There are things there but not as much as there is for university. If you want to do an apprenticeship they will give you some skills but you will find your own way. That's my personal opinion. (Year 12)

During focus group interviews, there were some suggestions from learners on how to improve the development of being informed. One learner expressed that more could be done to improve careers guidance in school although did not specify whether this was an issue around accessing services or resources, or whether this related to the quality of information and relationships with staff. Another learner mentioned wanting more general 'careers weeks' in school while another specified that it would be more helpful to:

look at different careers and learn about what skill you actually need for jobs in the future rather than exam based. (Year 10, Learner 11)

Here, the learner suggests that greater occupational mapping of skills against future possible careers and pathways would be helpful. This suggestion is also reflected in one of the top responses from Youth Employment UK's Youth Voice Census (2021) in relation to ways employers could help young people develop their skills. Many 14–18-year-olds felt employers needed to 'be clear on what skills are needed for jobs' (p.37) in addition to offering work experience, open days and employer talks.

The extent to which learners are being informed about the world of work is vital as the general discussion about employability is intensifying. As some learners highlighted being informed about progression opportunities and how to get there is similarly of great interest to them.

3.3 Where and how are employability skills developed?

As part of the survey, learners were asked to consider where they may (or may not) be developing employability skills at school. The responses are shown in Figure 5:

Figure 5: Table displaying survey results in response to: 'Please select where you believe you are developing each skill/competency'

	Through classwork	Through homework	Through assessment	In other lessons	Through extra-curricular activities	In other activities throughout the day	Through interaction with peers	Not developed in school	Don't know
Problem solving	27.7%	16.4%	12.6%	3.8%	13.2%	3.8%	13.8%	5%	3.8%
Communication	23%	4.1%	1.4%	16.9%	13.5%	4.7%	33.8%	2%	0.7%
Self-management	15.9%	25.8%	15.2%	10.6%	9.8%	3%	4.5%	12.1%	3%
Teamwork	28.5%	4.2%	0.7%	9.7%	16%	9.7%	27.8%	2.8%	0.7%
Creativity	23.1%	18.8%	6.8%	6%	13.7%	2.6%	8.5%	17.1%	3.4%
Numeracy	38.2%	21.5%	18.1%	4.9%	6.3%	2.1%	2.8%	2.8%	3.5%
Digital skills	21.5%	20.6%	6.5%	5.6%	5.6%	4.7%	6.5%	22.4%	6.5%
Being informed	12.3%	4.6%	4.6%	24.6%	12.3%	18.5%	12.3%	9.2%	1.5%
Confidence	15.5%	5.4%	3.9%	13.2%	10.9%	5.4%	24%	20.2%	1.6%
Ambition/ motivation	13.1%	8.8%	13.9%	9.5%	13.1%	8%	15.3%	14.6%	3.6%
Resilience	14.5%	15.3%	17.7%	6.5%	8.1%	5.6%	8.9%	15.3%	8.1%
Reflection	12.6%	15.7%	26.8%	10.2%	3.1%	9.4%	8.7%	11%	2.4%

Some notable responses suggested that:

- Numeracy (38.2%) was the skill most developed through classwork, receiving the largest number of responses overall.
 - This may be because numeracy was likely interpreted by learners as being synonymous with the subject of Mathematics, which all learners will study up to age 16/GCSE level. This differed from the teachers surveyed in Phase 1 with whom it was clarified that 'Numeracy' related to applied numeracy and not only the study of Mathematics. Consequently, a direct comparison of the teachers' and learners' perceptions is not possible.
- Problem solving (27.7%) was most developed through classwork.
- Communication skills were most developed through interaction with peers (33.8%).
- Teamwork was most developed through classwork (28.5%), closely followed by interaction with peers (27.8%)
- Self-management was most developed through homework (25.8%)
- Digital skills were the skill least developed at school (22.4%)
- Resilience received the largest number of 'Don't Know' responses (8.1%).
 - It could be possible that some learners do not fully understand the meaning of resilience when we compare the 'Don't Know' figures for other skills such as Teamwork (0.7%) and Communication (0.7%).

During interviews some learners were able to list different employability related skills, but were often unable to provide clear examples of how they were developing such skills. Patterns of conversation in some focus groups were often similar to this exchange between a Year 10 learner and the interviewer:

Interviewer: *Do you think the school is helping you to become more dedicated and more motivated?*

Learner 12: *I think so, personally for me... I can't speak for everyone else.*

Interviewer: *So how are you developing dedication?*

Learner 12: *Errm...this goes back to Drama. A school production gives you a deadline then you just become... like... dedicated.*

Although learners found giving examples for skills development difficult, this could also reflect that Year 10 learners may be less expected or encouraged in school to think specifically about their skills development.

Nonetheless, there was a general understanding among learners that 'displaying' or putting employability skills into practice was important. As such, some learners recognised that it would be difficult to know their real capability in a work environment, without having had the opportunity to test such skills in situ:

These are skills that only experience can give you. (Year 10, Learner 8)

You can't like learn these things overnight, you have to develop them over time...so like being able to organise your priorities, organise your time err...being able to understand how to talk to people, being able to sell yourself as a person. (Year 10, Learner 7)

I don't think it's one of those things you necessarily know you've developed them until you get to a point where you use them and kind of look back. (Year 12, Learner 3)

There was some understanding amongst learners that skills needed to be contextualised and applied to situations. For example, one learner did note that while problem solving may be learnt in theory in the classroom, how this then applied to day-to-day life was less clear:

3. Findings and Discussion

Problem solving is definitely something we develop, you do it in maths but that is not applicable in real life. (Year 10, Learner 9)

In this sense, what was being learnt in the classroom was less situated in the context of real life i.e. functional skills. Fettes et al. (2020) argue that learners would need to identify and understand the relevance of such skills to begin with, to then begin to apply their knowledge and develop their capabilities. For this, learners need support and encouragement to reflect on their skills development periodically. Likewise, employers in Phase 1 of the research also expressed that these skills and competencies should be seen as 'interdependent', with certain skills and competencies growing and developing alongside others.

Meanwhile, focus group discussions with Year 12 learners raised the issue of the concept of employability skills being broad and variable. Further, learners noted that it could sometimes be difficult to objectively determine what skills they were particularly good at and to what extent:

You can't really get graded for [communications skills]...being a people person, you can't get a mark so it's more qualitative I think. It's harder to understand where you are at when it comes to talking to people about how good you are because it's such a big skill. So in different circumstances you could be better at talking to people or worse – in big groups of people, small groups of people – it all ranges. (Year 12, Learner 4)

So if someone listed a load of skills I could possibly go 'oh I can do that,' but I wouldn't necessarily think about 'oh am I more of a team worker or an independent worker? It's just there (Year 12, Learner 3)

Despite this, learners in both the interviews and survey offered some examples of specific activities and opportunities both in and outside of school where employability skills were being developed and how. This is structured into four themes which follow; (3.3.1) school curriculum and assessment, (3.3.2) extra-curricular activities, (3.3.3) interaction with peers, and (3.3.4) being informed.

3.3.1 School Curriculum and Assessment

There were a number of academic subjects mentioned by learners in relation to where learners were developing employability skills. Maths was frequently mentioned in relation to 'problem solving' and 'numeracy', as were Geography and the Sciences:

I think in Science we like do evaluations of different methods which I think is really useful for figuring out the most useful solution for things. (Year 10, Learner 11)

I think for problem solving, like in Geography where you come up with issues in the world and you have to find a solution and evaluate that. (Year 10, Learner 12)

An open comment provided in the survey explained how classroom activities in Maths and Science subjects were leading to the development of specific skills:

Through plentiful class work and homework, for mathematics and physics especially, I have developed numeracy skills and problem-solving skills regularly and therefore lead to an improvement in my capabilities...Also, I developed team working skills through practical experiments in physics, for example, where we'd work in groups to complete the practicals. (Year 13, learner survey)

One learner noted the transferability of skills and their application between subjects:

Lessons overlap so you learn different skills. Say in science, maths statistics, both skills overlap. You learn it in one thing and it helps in another and you can apply it to different things. It gives you an advantage. (Year 10, Learner 8)

Other subjects noted by learners during interviews were Drama and Media Studies. Learners described these subjects as helping support the development of communication skills by gaining a greater awareness of managing different audiences and working as part of teams:

Like media especially you have to look at a magazine cover and you have to communicate meaning and how different people will take that information. You have to be really careful how different people will take that information. (Year 10, Learner 5)

Overall, learners were confident using the jargon of language of skills. However, the majority of learners during interviews were unable to draw on specific examples of activities to support their understanding of skills development within the subject-based curriculum. As a result, some learners struggled to communicate how they would evidence their skills competence in an interview scenario. In addition, other subjects studied by learners, such as History, Business Studies, Sociology, Religious Studies and Physical Education, were less discussed in the context of skills development – if at all. Daubney (2021) argues the range of skills learners do develop within academic subjects is not articulated enough in the National Curriculum. This subsequently makes it challenging for teachers and then learners to recognise the skills they may in fact be developing and how these may apply to their broader lives and future careers. In response, Daubney (2021, p.113) proposes that a 'framework of transferable skills that defines [skills] clearly and consistently across all curriculums' and within and across different subject contexts, is needed.

In relation to the formal school curriculum, learners felt they were least developing employability skills 'in other lessons'. 'In other lessons' was defined in interviews as Personal Health and Social Education (PSHE) and tutor/registration time – lessons which feature as part of the formal school day but have little to no assessment or examination expectations attached. One example of such a lesson was mentioned in the focus groups by one Year 10 learner who described a weekly lesson in school 'to learn skills, first aid, debating.' According to the survey, learners believed they were most developing the skill of 'being informed' (24.6%) about careers/pathways in these other lessons, over any other skill.

However, the following exchange between an interviewer and a group of Year 10 learners in a school during the card sorting activity, suggests that 'other lessons' are either received poorly or held in lower esteem in relation to the development of key skills:

Interviewer: *So can I ask you about 'other lessons' which we discussed as PHSE and tutor time – you didn't put down anything?*

Learner 7: *No.*

Interviewer: *And neither did you?*

Learner 6: *Definitely not!*

Interviewer: *So you think there are no skills development happening there?*

All five learners: *Yeah! [in general agreement].*

In terms of pedagogy and assessment, some learners noted that the EPQ was aiding the development of communication skills and confidence in particular. The EPQ is a standalone A-Level qualification which requires learners to design, research and present on a project of their choosing:

EPQ, we have to do a presentation at the end explaining what we did for our EPQ topic and do a 10 minute presentation. That requires good communication and learning how to give a presentation properly and formally. It made me more confident. (Year 12, Learner 15)

Other learners undertaking the EPQ commented that they were also developing 'research skills' and 'critical thinking skills' which are interrelated to the employability skills of creativity and problem solving – although this link was not identified by learners themselves.

The requirement to present or speak in front of an audience more broadly through classroom activities was noted by some learners as facilitating greater levels of confidence:

In school we develop confidence when teachers encourage us to answer questions and say our opinions in front of the class. (Year 10, learner survey)

Presenting in class helps develop confidence and improve communication skills. (Year 13, learner survey)

I am developing employability skills in school by applying what I have learnt within school to the workforce such as practising public speaking as I have conducted several presentations about issues I am passionate about such as Black History Month and hate crime as an advocate for human rights and believe this has enabled me to articulate myself better and would aid in communication within the work environment. (Year 13, learner survey)

These examples highlight the valuable relationship between classroom pedagogy and assessment in the development of employability skills and competencies.

In relation to assessment more broadly, the learners surveyed believed that it most facilitated their development in reflection (26.8%), numeracy (18.1%), and resilience (17.7%). Developing resilience through feedback on assessments and examinations was also echoed by several learners during interviews:

Interviewer: *So you said, resilience through assessment in exams? How do you develop these?*

Learner: *By failing pretty much. (Year 10, Learner 9)*

Well especially in GCSEs you have so many subjects, it's hard to focus on every single one and do well in every single one 'cause you have them all the same time, and even if you get a bad level you've got to have the resilience to keep on going. (Year 10, Learner 7)

Something happens you learn from it and become more resilient and [learn] how to avoid it. Homework and deadlines you know. What to do and when to get them in by. (Year 10, Learner 6)

Some learners mentioned homework in supporting the development of self-management skills:

Homework and preparation for exams gives me the ability to manage myself. (Year 12, learner survey)

This was also echoed in the results of the survey as 25.8% of learners felt homework most facilitated the development of self-management skills. Many learners noted that competencies, such as resilience, were developed through completing homework on time, as well as taking and revising for examinations.

3.3.2 Extra-Curricular Activities

Extra-curricular activities were widely acknowledged amongst learners as being important in the development of employability skills and these were most confidently discussed by learners with clearer examples given. These extra-curricular activities happen both in and outside of school. Examples of activities learners were engaged in within school included music and learning instruments which supports creativity, drama clubs which aid the development of communication skills, and participation in team sports which facilitate teamwork, resilience and drive within the context of its competitive nature.

3. Findings and Discussion

In the teacher survey in Phase 1 of the research it was also demonstrated that teachers believed that extra-curriculum activities were beneficial for developing skills and competencies, particularly confidence, creativity, teamwork and communication skills. However, a consistently higher proportion of independent school teachers highlighted that young people developed employability skills through extracurricular activities, compared with those teachers from maintained schools and academies.

Examples of other extra-curricular activities organised through schools included the Duke of Edinburgh (DoE) award and other enrichment activities. The DoE silver expedition was noted to facilitate the development of resilience, teamwork and problem solving, while the compulsory volunteering experience attached to the award, learners claimed, developed their communication skills:

When I do my Duke of Edinburgh I need to do volunteering. With my volunteering I help out with cubs. You need to communicate with them clearly and need to make sure they are all in control because you need to make sure they are enjoying it. (Year 10, Learner 14)

There were also some examples of competitions, events and projects within school that led to skills development:

So I think my communication skills have been boosted very well through the school because I've undertaken lots of different projects and events in the school – learner organised. (Year 10, Learner 6)

Some schools have set up 'special days' during which learners develop employability skills through team tasks and competing among teams. However, learners noted that these activity groups were arranged within friendship groups. Consequently, the fact that learners were not randomly mixing with different peers across the year group may present a missed opportunity in relation to maximising the development of employability skills such as teamwork and communication skills, as learners here were working with peers already familiar to them.

Some learners discussed extra-curricular activities and part-time work outside of school more generally as aiding the development of self-management skills because of the need to time-manage and balance school priorities such as revision and homework with their out of school commitments. Work-related experiences are widely recognised as an extra-curricular activity which can support the development of self-management skills, drive, ambition, motivation, being informed about careers, and confidence (NFER, 2013). Messer (2018) argues opportunities for learners aged 14-15 on an academic track to engage in work related experiences is beneficial for their skills development, as has often been the case for learners on vocational programmes. However, since 2012 it is no longer compulsory for learners at Key Stage 4 to undertake any work experience. Although discussed in relation to graduates, Tomlinson (2007) argues that students need early exposure to work based learning experiences in order to develop a pre-professional identity that can allow them to make choices about their future careers.

To add to this, learners noted the time to engage in extra-curricular activity during school was often limited or constrained by the focus towards examinations, particularly for learners in Year 12:

I think what we found is that as we began our college kind of routine, we started with loads of extracurricular but as workload started to build up we focused on our studies rather than extracurricular activities – I think that's what happened'. (Year 12, Learner 1)

One Year 12 learner also described how participation in more creative extra-curricular activities was impacted by the priorities of the sixth form towards examinations:

We used to have a lot of clubs, like singing club then I was part of like a band...we did drama but then it called off in Year 11 when we were all doing exams and it got a bit too much on the school side so they had to call it off. (Year 12, Learner 3)

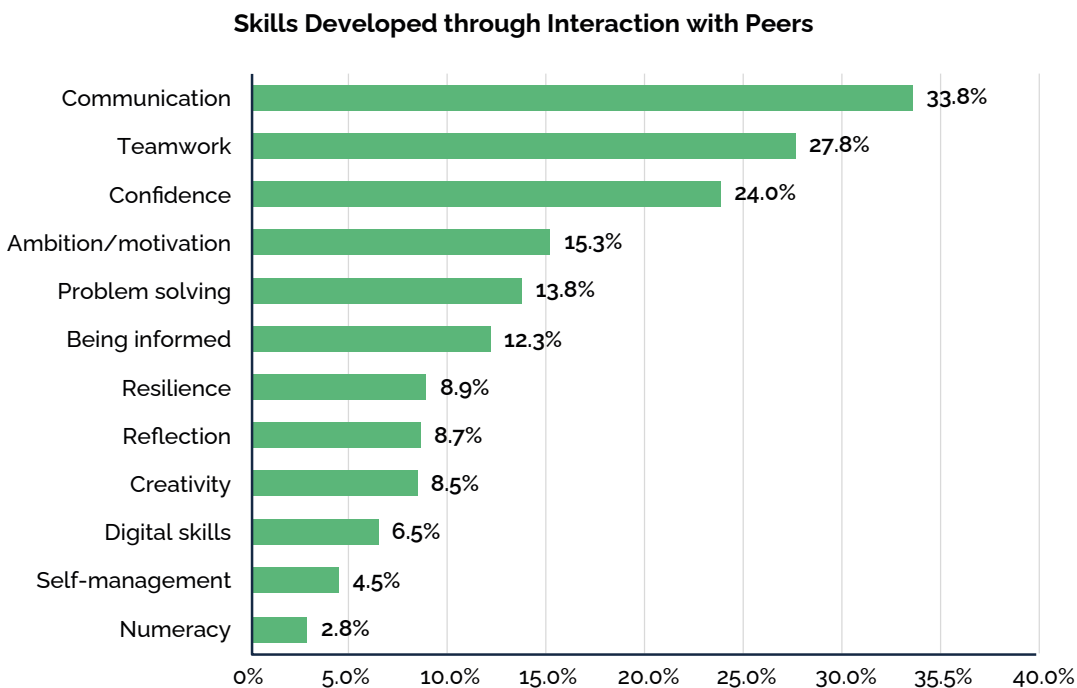
Teachers surveyed in Phase 1 of the research equally commented on the nature of examinations limiting opportunities for learners to participate in extra-curricular activities at school, and on examinations also limiting learners' time to develop employability skills more generally. The narrow, performative demands of what it means for learners to be academically successful and teachers to be professionally successful, is constraining the space for learners to develop wider skills (Ball, 2003).

In addition to extra-curricular activities learners spend considerable time with their peers. Recognising skills they develop during this time is valuable. This is discussed next.

3.3.3 Interaction with Peers

In relation to how learners were developing employability skills, learners frequently cited or mentioned the role of their peers, in both the survey and interviews. According to the survey results, learners felt the skills they developed the most through interaction with their peers were: communication (33.8%) confidence (24%) and team working (27.8%).

Figure 6: Which skills are most developed through Interaction with Peers? (n=67)



Likewise, learners during interviews often noted the value of peer interaction in relation to developing confidence and communication skills:

I think interaction with peers is very key for building employability skills, because I think interaction with peers or people is everything in society, y'know you have to learn how to have a conversation and communicate with each other, otherwise nothing will get done. (Year 10, Learner 6)

In class we often work with our peers which increases our communication and team working. (Year 12, Learner survey)

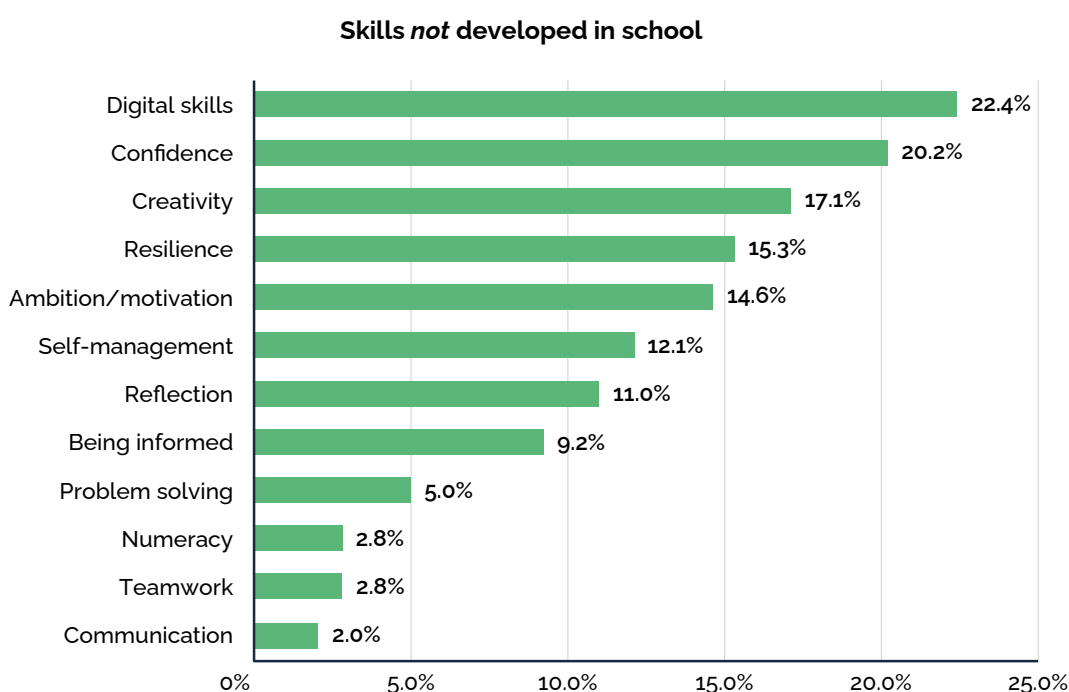
I think a big part of it is through interaction with peers, and especially because we're in an all-boys school, there's the competitive element of it and if you see your friend doing better than you – you're not exactly jealous of them – but you see them and want to do as well as them and then it's learning from each other. It's about everyone pushing each other up together. (Year 10, Learner 7)

3.4 What skills are not developed in school?

It is important to gain an understanding of what skills learners think they develop in schools. However, it is equally important to identify skills that are felt to be distanced from their school days. Learners in focus groups participated in the card sorting activity where they were asked to sort and order which skills and competencies were being developed in school (or not). From this exercise, no learner across the schools felt that either self-management or numeracy skills were not being taught in school. Rather digital skills, drive, creativity and reflection were noted frequently as skills not developed in school.

Similarly, the results of the survey showed that the top three skills least developed in school were digital skills (22.4%), confidence (20.2%), and creativity (17.1%).

Figure 7: Which skills are not developed in school? (n=67)



Reflecting on the teachers' survey in Phase 1, digital skills (18%), drive (15.9%), resilience (14.1%), numeracy skills outside maths class (15.6%) and being informed (11.6%) were not perceived to be developed in school. Digital skills set was the highest with 18% of teachers signalling that it is not developed in school (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, p 28). There are clear agreements among the surveyed teachers, and surveyed and interviewed learners, about those skills which are either not developed or only done so to a limited level in school.

Further, some learners commented on employability skills being minimally taught or taught too late in school altogether:

We learn about this [employability skills] very late, not everyone is given an even playing field, some people more than others. (Year 10, Learner survey)

At the moment we are not really doing anything towards this. (Year 10, Learner survey)

I am not developing employability skills in school. (Year 10, Learner survey)

The majority of these respondents were in Year 10 at the time of surveying, which suggests employability skills are less embedded across the KS3 curriculum or teachers are less specific when developing them. This could reflect a disconnection between the activities and intentions of schools with skills development, and what is ultimately received and understood by learners as being of importance. Learners developed and used the language of skills. However, it has been clear that their understanding of various skills varied. They often struggled with articulating examples. Developing skills is only one side of the coin, articulating them and being able to use them in different contexts is vital.

According to learners, one of the skills least developed in school was creativity. Seventeen percent of survey respondents felt creativity was not developed in school. Some of the interview participants explained why they did not think creativity was being developed in school, and that their interest in creative or arts subjects was less nurtured within school:

I did not develop this [creativity] in school, I developed it myself outside of school. I always had a passion for music and drama which interested me. (Year 12, Learner 3)

I don't think creativity goes very well with school because I think the key ingredient to creativity is intuition and self-learning, independent learning, learning not from what people show you but going to find it yourself...and I think you don't get that in the school. (Year 10, Learner 6)

The issues raised by learners on the limited development of creativity in school was attributed to the lack of space in the formal subject-based curriculum because of examinations. Examinations subsequently negatively affect schools' extra-curricular offer to learners. Teachers in Phase 1 felt that changes to the National Curriculum in 2014 and the introduction of the EBacc and Progress 8 accountability measures have restricted the space to focus on learners' creativity. Instead, Chell and Athayde (2011) argue vocational courses such as BTECs offer 'more scope for creativity and innovation' while A-Level learners are increasingly focused towards examinations and examination techniques.

3.5 Reflecting on Socioeconomic Factors

An important issue raised centred on disparities in cultural capital and resources as having an impact on learners' development of employability skills. One learner commented on the role of parents and certain advantages learners may acquire on account of socioeconomic status:

I think they [parents] are maybe too important, if you're from a poorer background and you don't have the support of your family you can't access the experience to develop these skills. (Year 10, Learner 14)

The impact parents can have is supported by the comments offered by one Year 12 learner who described the positive role model effect of their parents in relation to developing their communication and people skills:

I'd say parents, just seeing how they interact with people has helped me gain confidence and understand how to speak to people in a certain way. (Year 12, Learner 2)

This supports the idea that parental capital has some relationship to the development of employability skills, although this was not expressed widely by learners perhaps because the focus of this research was on school-based activities. Nonetheless, it has been shown that informed parents are a key source for young people's development of employability skills (YEUK, 2022). This social capital allows learners the opportunity to pursue extra-curricular activities that can support the development of employability skills - such as learning to play an instrument, the ability to arrange work experience or gather career information and guidance through personal/professional networks. For example, Merrifield (2013) found that parents in the more advantaged independent

school of her three case study schools were very active in organising work experience and insight days for learners. More broadly, Kashefpakdel et al. (2021) found that the learners whose parents were significantly involved in their wider education, reported higher essential skill levels.

Further, research by the Sutton Trust supports the impact parental engagement and capital has in the development of learners' life skills, but also emphasises the importance of school and extra-curricular activities as children grow older (Cullinane and Montacute, 2017, p.8). On the topic of extracurricular activities, one Year 10 learner further reflected on potential disparities among learners who may be less able to access opportunities:

I think there's a risk of employability skills being seen too highly, so for example a lot of boys have the privilege of getting the chance to have employability skills but if you're from a deprived background maybe you don't have the option to spend time doing other things 'cause you need to focus on your education and sometimes they won't have the opportunities, so stuff like music lessons or even joining different gyms and stuff like that will cost them money. (Year 10, Learner 7)

Research has shown that there are substantial socio-economic gaps in access to extra-curricular activities, with learners 'from disadvantaged backgrounds less likely to take up activities than their better off peers (46% compared to 66%)' (Cullinane and Montacute, 2017). In addition to unequal access to extra-curricular activities, research has noted that social class can facilitate greater cultural, economic and navigational capital to support learners' eventual transition into a labour market, which continues to be stratified and influenced by the economic conditions of individuals (Atkins, 2013; Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990; Brown et al., 2003). Although discussing graduate employability, Bathmaker et al. (2013) note that this leads some learners to have a different awareness of the 'rules of the game,' which would likely interact with the attitudes of learners towards the relevance and importance of skills development.

For learners from less affluent families, it is increasingly important to develop skills in school and through school-related activities. Therefore, it is crucial that schools develop learner's employability skills to minimise any disadvantage family backgrounds may create and reinforce.

3.6 Special Educational Needs and Disabilities Schools

Four focus groups were conducted with learners in attendance at the Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (SEND) schools, consisting of two groups each across the two age groups (14-16 and 16-18). During these visits we also spoke informally to some of the staff in the schools, including one formal interview with a headteacher. In general, special schools provide education for children with moderate learning difficulties to multiple and/or more complex special educational needs and disabilities. Special schools can provide the national curriculum but may also offer adapted and different education to support young people through their education to ensure that they achieve the specific outcomes they have identified, with the aim of working towards independence.

The learners with SEND in the focus groups conveyed a well-rounded understanding of the meaning and importance of skills development. The two schools visited had a well-developed skills framework supporting their learners developing both life skills and employability skills. For instance, one of the SEND schools clearly articulated a set of skills and attitudes which run alongside their curriculum and 'underpin everything [learners] do at the school' (Headteacher). These include skills such as self-management, effective participator, and team worker, along with attitudes such as resilience and independence. These were developed from the skills that employers have highlighted that they want from their employees but are not adequately being displayed by recruits when they reach the world of work.

Learners demonstrated a good understanding of some skills that would be useful to develop for the workplace and gave explanations of why they were important:

3. Findings and Discussion

Listening skills are important for a job because if you're not listening you won't be able to learn what you're doing. (Year 11)

Leadership skill is the most important skill for working, to lead a team to come up with different ideas. I've been developing that through leading a group of people to create something through a project—we made a leaflet in a group. (Year 11)

In contrast to some of the conversations with learners in mainstream schools, learners here provided more holistic examples to support their understanding of skills and their application to daily life:

Getting ready for the future, getting your own job, getting a job, house, car, insurance, bank credit cards. (Year 11)

Getting your own house and all that, getting your own car and sorting that all out as well. (Year 10)

Numeracy because you have to be able to count money to buy things and you need numeracy and accuracy in cookery. (Year 10)

While there was some reference to employability, most learners' understanding of skills was applied in the context of developing a greater sense of independence and could therefore be described more as 'life skills' as opposed to employability skills – although the terms can be interrelated. As part of this, maths and English were described as essential subjects within which to develop their skills. Unlike the learners in mainstream school, maths here was understood in the sense of functional skills (i.e. managing bills, budgeting, shopping), which may reflect the content of these learners' lessons in school.

Part of this understanding of life skills is likely attributable to the stronger focus and whole-school approach towards developing independence and confidence amongst young people. The SEND schools in this research placed high importance on learners developing resilience in particular:

The number one employability skill it is important for our students to develop is resilience, it is really really important, and something that our students find really difficult. So we talk to them a lot about that and try to make the curriculum very opened ended ... I'll can honestly say that resilience is the most important thing we can give them. (SLT)

As such, some learners were able to explain the concept of resilience well with supportive examples, which also demonstrated their ability to reflect on their strengths and weaknesses:

Resilience is like when you are struggling for something, sometimes in your mind you feel like you want to give up. It's like for me when I do sports, I do coaching and I was struggling since the beginning of the year but then as I was developing better and better at coaching. (Year 10)

Some learners also mentioned 'determination' as being similar to resilience and expressed that these skills were developed via activities that required teamwork such as sports. Despite resilience being noted by three groups of learners participating in the card sorting activity as a skill least developed in school, teachers and senior leaders in the SEND schools emphasised both the importance and necessity of encouraging resilience amongst their learners, and explained ways in which they helped their learners to develop this skill:

We try to emphasise trying to our learners, providing them with open-ended questions and tasks. (SLT)

The purpose of doing so was described as the need:

...to take them out of their comfort zone for when they get older, to develop their confidence and expose them to vocational work and new people. (SLT)

More broadly, leadership in one of the SEND schools was acutely aware of the disparities and lack of opportunities available to learners with SEND, often despite their capabilities and passion. In response to this, a purposeful commitment to developing the employability skills of learners was the cornerstone of their educational provision and embedded throughout the curriculum:

We're hugely driven here to do something about the fact that only 3.8% of our children will go to get a job in our area...but we have a large number of employers in our city...so when we are developing the curriculum, we really keep in our mind "right, how are we going to prepare our learners for a pathway into employment?" because most of our learners, if they have the right support surrounding them, could go into work....they are able young people. (SLT)

3.6.1 Where and how are employability skills developed?

Learners mentioned various activities in addition to their study of maths and English as mentioned earlier. In relation to communication skills, Year 11 learners from SEND schools noted this skill was developed while playing team sports, showing visitors around the school and attending various events in school which would necessitate speaking to new people.

The ability to socialise and interact with new people was noted as one way communication skills were being developed in school, which reflects the inter-personal aspect of good communication skills. In addition, some Year 10 learners noted their communication skills were being developed in tandem with their growing emotional literacy:

If people are not in a good mood we sometimes do communication on how we are feeling. (Year 10)

By learning how to articulate and express their feelings to others, learners saw this as an active example of them developing communication skills.

Similarly to the learners in mainstream schools, reflection was linked to assessment and feedback as well as drive. Drive was also mentioned by one learner who felt their parents were an important influence in developing this skill:

Because of my parents. They try and get me into situations where I would not be and help me to adapt and overcome. (Year 12)

Confidence was developed through work experience opportunities and attending residential trips, but also participating in programmes linked to the Duke of Edinburgh award and the Prince's Trust, which was also helping some learners develop their leadership skills:

After lunch we do skills lessons like leadership sessions – we speak about different types of leaders from different parts of the world and see which ones we like. We then have lots of social and leadership activities, for example we have walkie talkies and we go out into groups into town and give instructions to each other about where to go. (Year 11)

As part of this, the importance of working with others and interacting with their peers was widely acknowledged as helping learners develop their employability or life skills:

I develop creativity skills through interacting with peers throughout the school day and we can bounce creative ideas off each other. (Year 10)

There was also some understanding that employability skills may be developed in collaboration with other people outside of school such as, work experience opportunities, friends and family:

3. Findings and Discussion

Some people have these skills as qualities, they have them naturally or they might learn them from work placements where they do these things. Or we get advice from family and friends and people around us. (Year 11)

Being informed was a particular concern for some learners and a skill some learners felt the least comfortable with. The quotes here suggest learners were unsure and lacked confidence about their future plans:

I'm trying to find a job that I can get when I'm older. (Year 10)

It's really hard to decide. (Year 10)

I always get confused about decisions I make, I'm not good at it. (Year 10)

Even a member of staff at the school expressed their surprise regarding the availability of supported apprenticeships for learners with additional needs:

We did not realise how well supported apprenticeships can be. We thought unpaid apprenticeships were the only option. We did not realise it is not. Apprenticeships are a realistic future for our learners. (Teacher)

A member of SLT in one school described the variety of events and opportunities organised in the school to support learners' awareness and confidence in navigating a future working life. Such activities included career days, holding mock interviews with learners, engaging with local employers who set tasks for learners to complete, and CV writing. The challenge still facing the school was in how such activities could be translated into 'tangible work experience opportunities' for their learners.

Some learners discussed their future and interests in a manner which demonstrates reflection. They demonstrate a sense of self-awareness in relation to their skills development and interests:

I don't feel like I'm ready to just jump straight into a job or a mainstream college. I don't know what I want to do, I like to always keep my options open because you don't know what's going to pop up. (Year 11)

I'm quite good at my creative arts, I like dancing and singing. I'm not saying I'm good at it but I like it. (Year 11)

Learners spoke in a pragmatic, self-reflective manner. They demonstrate a sense of self-awareness in relation to their skills development and interests. Cease-Cook et al. (2015, p.352) reflect on their experiences in creating work-based learning experiences for learners with SEND and note that a 'career-ready person knows his or her interests, strengths, and weaknesses.'

Largely the learners who participated in the research from the SEND school displayed a good level of understanding of skills. In many cases they were able to articulate examples of how they have or would develop their employability skills. They were also able to give some explanations of why some skills are important to develop, not just for future employment, but also to live an independent life. These learners' ability to articulate their employability skills in a clear and often self-reflective way, may be attributed to the strong focus the SEND schools and teachers place on employability skills. In the visited schools, the teachers communicate the importance of skills development clearly across lessons and in other aspects of school life. The emphasis on life and employability skills are clearly visible across the schools.

4. Conclusion

This research sought to understand young people's perceptions of employability skills and how they believe their school helps them develop these, or which skills they believe they are not developing during school activities. It focuses on young people in Years 10 to 13 who are following a general (academic) route in their education. The findings presented in this research suggest that learners understand employability skills to be important, they knowledgeably use the jargon of skills development and have clear views on which skills they believe important for their further study, training or employment. However, they were less able to provide specific examples of how they were developing specific employability skills. This is a crucial point when young people are being interviewed for education/training courses and employment. Offering real examples of employability skills practice suggests that the young person consciously engaged with skills development and can consequently articulate that experience.

A key finding of the research was that, in fact, there does not seem to be a shared general definition or understanding amongst the young people about what employability and 'employability skills' are. However, they did identify some skills and qualities employees should possess to be successful in the workplace. Also, learners did acknowledge the need for employability skills to succeed in a competitive labour market. However, some acknowledged the limitation of this term as being applicable to a 'commercial' environment. Many of the skills that were discussed, such as teamwork and communication skills, participants claimed should be recognised as being important as wider 'life' skills, rather than simply for employment. Likewise for the learners at SEND schools, employability skills were described by many as primarily delivering the means to lead a more independent adult life. However, the importance of securing employment or work experience and the necessary skills needed for that were also clearly articulated.



4. Conclusion

Communication skills, in its broadest sense, was seen as the most important skill to develop by the learners from the focus groups and survey. This is supported also by research with employers who emphasise the importance of their employees having good communication skills (e.g. Arregui Pabollet et al., 2019, Kashefpakdel et al., 2018).

Similarly in this research, digital skills were seen as one of the least important to develop. Potentially this could be due to young people believing that their digital skills are already well-developed, and therefore not important to develop further at school. However, as has been found in other research (e.g. Dabbous et al., 2022), students' perceptions of their digital literacy is not necessarily in line with what is required of them in the workplace. This research suggests that students believe themselves to be 'digital natives' and therefore already possessing the ability to skilfully use computers. However, the level of this skill is debatable, and worryingly almost a quarter of the students (22.4%) in the survey said digital skills were not being developed in school.

It is difficult to separate the interaction between learners' sense of confidence in their digital skills as the 'net generation' or because schools are also sending a message about its relative lack of importance as part of the school curriculum, compared to other skills and examination results. The results of the Youth Voice Census 2021 found that 52.7% of young people aged 14-18 were either 'confident' or 'very confident' regarding digital skills, but it is not clear whether this confidence reflects the knowledge and skills employers seek in practice. Moreover, digital skills were considered as the least important skill for work amongst 14-18-year-olds. Only 20.8% considered digital skills as important to develop, compared to teamwork which scored 76.9%. Yet, 95% of employers expect their digital skills needs to grow, but less than one third of employers felt confident they would be able access such skills in the next 3-5 years (CBI, 2019, p.24).

Overall, digital skills, confidence, creativity and being informed were skills highlighted by survey respondents and interviewees as not being developed in school, suggesting that schools could place more emphasis on developing these as they have all been deemed important employability skills (see Edge's [Skills Shortages Bulletins](#)).

In general, participating young people struggled to offer clear examples of how they have developed employability skills or give examples of how they use them day-to-day. Some skills were easier to discuss with them, such as communications and team working. In these cases, learners were able to offer examples of how they developed them and how they used them in different contexts. However, some of the skills young people found harder to articulate, for example determination. This finding from mainstream schools contrasted somewhat with the students at SEND schools. Learners with SEND appeared to be able to give clear examples of activities where they are developing certain skills. There was evidence at the SEND schools that skills were often referred to in lessons by teachers, and skills development was directly linked to activities and learning outcomes which were articulated to learners. For instance, students are told at the beginning of their lesson that it will focus on their leadership skills.

In terms of where students felt they developed certain skills, there were particular contexts that were highlighted more than others. For instance, homework and assessment were mentioned as beneficial for developing skills such as resilience. Problem-solving skills were highlighted as being developed particularly in the classroom, however this tended to be only in certain subjects, such as maths, science and geography. Teachers in Phase 1 perhaps overemphasised the role of classwork in students' employability skills and competency development. According to the teachers' survey, 'classroom' was the number one place where employability skills and competencies were developed, except when developing self-management, where 'classroom' came second after 'through homework' (Kashefpakdel et al., 2018, Chapters 5.1 and 5.2). Instead, learners in Phase 2 emphasised the value of interacting with their peers, and assessments, where employability skills were developed.

Extra-curricular activities were widely acknowledged amongst learners as being important in the development of employability skills. This was most confidently discussed by learners with clearer examples given. However, constraints of the curriculum such as homework and examinations, particularly for sixth-form students, were discussed as limiting the amount of time available for extra-curriculum activities once they move to the final stage of their schooling. Teachers surveyed in Phase 1 likewise commented on the limited time available in school to engage in extra-curricular activities and creative subjects. The emphasis on the narrow curriculum and accountability measures risks narrowing the broad range of skills young people will be increasingly expected to demonstrate when applying for future jobs. Furthermore, in Phase 1 of the research it was found that a consistently higher proportion of independent school teachers highlighted that young people developed employability skills through extracurricular activities. Opportunities through extra-curricular activities are critical for the development of employability skills and therefore it should be a key aim to make such opportunities more widely available to all learners, otherwise there are implications for further perpetuating inequality and disadvantage.

The focus group interviews for this research took place before the Covid pandemic, with the survey taking place during the pandemic. It would be worth exploring and discussing with young people their understanding of employability skills in light of changes due to the pandemic, and whether there has been a shift in understanding, in particular what skills they deem important now in the workplace. For instance, it is likely that digital skills, independence and adaptability are regarded as more important skills to develop. As discussed above, digital skills do not seem to be prioritised as being taught in school. In addition, there would be value in unpacking learners' understanding of digital skills and how that relates to schoolwork and later to employment. This emphasises the need for the curriculum to adapt to the latest realities of the world and workplace.

This research has highlighted some of the gaps in young people's employability skills development and where this is missing within the school day. There also seems to be a disconnect between the 'skills development' language learners use and the extent to which they can articulate their experiences with it. It is hoped that this research will shed light on how young people could be supported within school to develop their skills further in order to better prepare them for their future and for the workplace.



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Appendix

Appendix A: Focus Group Questions

1. What comes to your mind first when you hear the phrase 'employability skills'?
2. How important is it for you?
3. Where do you develop these skills? Give me examples. How do you use these skills elsewhere? Give examples. Do you think your school helps you to develop employability skills? (How?)
4. How do you know you are developing employability skills? Give me one memorable example.
5. How (if) do these skills/competencies will help you in the future university/college /work/an apprenticeship?

Appendix B: Employability Skills Survey to Learners

Which year group are you in?

- Year 10
- Year 11
- Year 12
- Year 13

What school / sixth form do you attend?

What type of school do you attend?

- State (e.g. Academy, local authority school)
- Independent (i.e. private/fee-paying)
- Don't know

Are you:

- Female
- Male
- Other (please state):

Below are some employability skills and competencies. Please select where you believe you are developing each skill/competency.

If you don't think you are developing this skill during school, please select '*not developed in school*'.

Please answer for each of the skills below. You can choose more than one area where you are developing the skills.

	Through classwork	Through homework	Through assessment	In other lessons e.g. tutor time	Through extra-curricular activities	In other activities throughout the day e.g. assembly	Through interaction with peers	Not developed in school	Don't know
Problem solving									
Communication									
Self-management / organisation									
Teamwork									
Creativity									
Numeracy									
Digital skills									
Confidence									
Ambition / motivation									
Resilience									
Reflection									
Being informed about possible careers									

Please select which you believe are the three most important skills/competencies for you to develop.

- Problem solving
- Communication
- Self-management / organisation
- Teamwork
- Creativity
- Numeracy
- Digital skills
- Confidence

- Ambition / motivation
- Resilience
- Reflection
- Being informed about possible careers

On a scale of 1-5 (1 = not at all, 5 = completely supported), do you think your school/teachers are supporting you to develop these skills that are important to you?

(Each skill/competency displayed if chosen as important in above question)

Please use this space to explain or give one example about how you are developing your employability skills in school.



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