

Dr Eunice Lumsden is Head of Early Years at the University of Northampton and has decades of experience of working with children, young people and families in Social Work, Adoption and Early Childhood Education and Care.

### **Lisa**

Tell me a little bit about how you ended up being the Head of Early Years at the University of Northampton.

### **Eunice**

I often question this myself, I did not intentionally choose the journey my career has taken. Before moving into Higher Education, I spent 22 years in social work, primarily focusing on work with children, young people and families. Having spent 11 years working as a local authority social worker, I moved to work for a charity focusing on adoption. I learnt so much from those I worked alongside that made me really question how we intervene in family life, the nature and quality of support provided and its timing. Working in adoption was some of the most privileged work I have ever done. I am still surprised how the valuable insights that those who have been adopted provide is not used to inform practice more.

My professional practice has benefitted immensely by being part of the adoption journey of so many. Most of all I have gained such valuable insights into the importance of our earliest experience, of knowing 'who we are', as well as the importance of high-quality parental support and educational opportunities. Everyone needs someone to 'meet you at them station' – to hold them in mind.

My engagement with further training, including my MA, allowed me to fully appreciate the importance of research informed practice. I loved undertaking research and learnt about the importance of engaging in the serendipity of the learning process. The more I knew the less I knew, but my practice improved because you question and critique everything and see things through different lenses.

Much to my surprise I also developed a love of training others, this alongside my experiences as a social worker and love of research led me towards a career in Higher Education. Initially, I combined practice with an Associate Lecturer role for the Open University. Here I worked with so many students who had difficult first educational experiences but were able to transform themselves through the educational opportunities the Open University provided. This experience, alongside my social work practice, ignited a passion in me to want to impact on policy for children most 'in need'. Idealistically I constantly advocate for systems, training

and multi-professional approaches that mediated against children coming into 'care' and enhance their earliest experiences.

This latter point has become a real focus of the last 18 years of my career. I tried to secure a fulltime job teaching social work students, but I just couldn't break the barrier of a lack of experience in Higher Education. I had no publications nor a track record in academia. By default, because I didn't get the job on the social work team I had applied for, I ended up being suggested to another team that was running the Early Childhood Studies degree, they needed somebody to run the social work modules. Initially, I worked part-time in this role and continued working in practice, I was offered a full-time position and within two years, I was running the degree. I was appointed Head of Early Years in 2014.

### **Lisa**

That's a lot of wisdom, a lot of knowledge, and a lot of practice. And there's two things that came out of that for me. One of them was around that whole relationship between research and practise. And also thinking about what those key learnings are that you took away from adoption that created a space for you to want to work in the Early Years sector. And I'm wondering if they're actually the same kind of question.

### **Eunice**

Two things, I never intended to work in the Early Years sector, I feel I work outside my comfort zone all of the time and admire my early years and teaching colleagues hugely, I could not do their jobs. Actually, understanding the roles of others working in the same space has been really empowering. However, I am a social worker through and through, I'm still registered, this is vitally important to me. It ensures I hold myself to account and keep my practice and knowledge updated. It also means that I adhere to the values of the profession. Anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice permeates my work. As a woman of 'difference' I have and continue to walk the journey of what it means to tick a box other than 'White British', in fact for much of my life there was not a box to tick. However, while this personal journey has been disabling at times it has also empowered me to constantly address social inequality.

Reflecting on my journey since entering Higher Education, I think was meant to end up in early years, which might sound really silly, but I think I've had more impact on the knowledge and practice of those working in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC), that directly impacts on their work with children and families. I think I've managed to bring in a different dimension to that area, that draws on all my social work value base, experience and understanding of how a child's development can be

impacted upon by abusive experiences and structural inequalities in early childhood.

What did working in adoption tell me? What it told me was that the earliest experiences are the most important, regardless of whether you were relinquished for adoption or were placed for adoption because of a Care Order. I learnt how important your name was, where the colour of your eyes came from, in short where your DNA came from. If those, who had had very challenging experiences in their birth family had greater opportunities in the early childhood to address some of the imbalances in their holistic development, then maybe they would have been able to manage later challenges. You can't take away what's happened in childhood, but in ECEC you can provide opportunities that promote cognitive, physical, personal, social and emotional development. As children develop you can enable them to understand what has happened and develop new ways of being. Importantly, I learnt it wasn't a one-off intervention, the timing has to be right and interventions may be required at different points during the life course.

Some of my most challenging learning was when I moved to work at the university. I realised for 20 plus years, my understanding of the training of others in child development, child abuse, trauma, attachment and the impact of structural inequality was not what I had assumed it was. I am not saying that I would have done things differently, but I would have asked different questions and advocated even louder for those I was working with. That sounds rather dramatic but when I started to visit some early years settings, I cried, but if I ever stop crying at the experiences of others it will be time to retire.

I was very challenged at some of the things I saw because I thought if I was a social worker visiting a family, would I be focusing on neglect? I was really problematised and had so many questions buzzing in my head about the impact of separation of children, especially babies. I had had my own children by this time and had accessed amazing early years provision for them, I see the impact in them now as adults. However, I really had not appreciated that the mixed economy of the sector, qualifications, pay scales and working conditions varied so much.

This really challenged me on so many levels. As a social worker, I had facilitated children going to nurseries, or preschool while they were in foster care or as an intervention to support parents. But I didn't realise that those working directly with the children may not have the level of knowledge, understanding and skill levels to meet the sometimes very challenging needs of the very young children I was working with.

This was back in 2002 just at the time when the Government were really focusing on improving the early years. But I had made lots of assumptions. I had also assumed that child development, child abuse and attachment had been part of teachers training. I found there were huge variations. I know I had had variable experiences when working with educational colleagues, as they do with other professionals they work with. However, by stepping outside my comfort zone I learnt so much more about the challenges we had, and continue to, in enabling our children who have experienced the greatest challenges achieve socially and in education.

### **Lisa**

I think we've moved some distance with cross-sector thinking about adversity and trauma, whether that's embedded in training and qualifications or not is really quite hit and miss in my experience. Some departments and universities very much do that, and others don't. So that situation still hasn't really changed when you're working with people from different sectors, in terms of their knowledge base around either attachment or childhood development or impact of adversity. And it's interesting because I had the same experience where I had made the assumption as well that if you worked with children, you would have had somewhere within your training a knowledge base and an understanding about childhood development, particularly. So I think we have moved some way with that. Certainly, this book, for example, is a cross-sector, interdisciplinary book and I work across the sectors and we have that, we see that in different forms. Is that your view? Do you think that, or do you see something else?

### **Eunice**

I think it's difficult and it's complex and it's tricky because there is so much prescribed training different professions have to undertake. In fact, most of my learning has taken place since qualifying and social work training has not always addressed child development, attachment etc. Back in the day, as the saying goes, back in '78 to 1982 when I did my four years applied social studies degree and social work, I didn't have very much child development, nor child abuse. My training was generic, I learnt a little about lots of things. Post qualification requirements are so important, the children and families we work with deserve and need us to be the best practitioners we can be.

If I look back over the last 18 years, the first 10 years saw unprecedented developments in ECEC, it was so exciting. The *Every Child Matters* agenda, however challenging that was for some areas, was talking a common language. And you just need to look at books that were

published around from 2004, 2005 upwards to 2012, that there was a lot then published on Every Child Matters, working together, multi-agency working, they've all dried up. It isn't a topical area to write on at the moment. So that says something about what's happening. Yes, different professions are still working together but in England, we have this historical issue of a siloed approach to education, health and social care. Therefore, our training socialises us into one profession and research by Anning highlighted that when things are tough in multi-professional teams, people gravitate back to their own profession- the area they are most comfortable with. In Europe, you have the pedagogue, a specific profession that is interdisciplinary, that can navigate the boundaries of different professions working with families.

So, what I am trying to say is that we still need our separate professions but for me something is missing-something that is more akin to the European Social Pedagogue. I thought we were getting there slowly with Early Years Professional Status that was introduced in 2006/7 but that's a whole other conversation. What I know is that despite all the research, knowledge and investment we still are unable to shift the number of children entering the care system.

More recently the term Adverse Childhood Experiences has given a new lens to explore the issues that have been prevalent all of my working career. New ways of exploring issues is always good but embedding research in practice depends on so many things, especially a thirst for continuing professional development. It also depends on where you are working and the professional regulation requirements of your chosen career pathway and importantly it needs political will.

If we're looking at the school system, there is no one uniform approach, outcomes are important to all but some choose to be trauma informed school, or a child's rights school if they take the UNICEF approach. So there's a real cross section, it's patchwork. And it depends which school you go to, what the experience will be for you.

### **Lisa**

And that's tied up as well with where there are more placements for children, matching in foster care, all of those experiences that create a whole range of difficulties for children. So on top of the difficulties and challenges where they might get sent out of the area, there's also the additional challenge of which school are they going to end up in? And what approach is that school going to have?

## **Eunice**

And also, I just think, it's really interesting that there continue to be such variations in practice. One of my undergraduates conducted a research project for her dissertation this year on adverse childhood experiences in a range of early years settings and schools. And very few had actually ever heard of the term.

## **Lisa**

That's interesting.

## **Eunice**

I think she was quite taken aback but we have to remember that there is often a disjoint between what we learn in our studies and practice. I also think when we work in a specific area to use the language of that sector and we cannot assume we all use the same terms, nor that a term means the same in different professions. I always use the example of 'transitions', in social work we could be thinking about the transition from home to care, in education from year to year and health transition into different stages of an illness. Then there is a transition from one developmental stage to another. Do you understand what I mean? So, you can't make assumptions, that the same term is understood in the same way or that terms used in one sector are universal, so you cannot assume teachers or early years practitioners know the term Adverse Childhood Experiences, let alone what it is referring to.

You also need to remember that those new to their careers are experience things that are commonplace to you, for the first time. Sometimes, I have to dig deep to remind myself of this, especially when I get frustrated that we continually seem to rehearse the same debates and there is yet another reorganisation, or when people think this is the first time the importance of the early years, child poverty, racism and child abuse is on the agenda.

When I completed my Ph.D I loved engaging with the work of Bronfenbrenner. Quoting Hamlet, he stated 'The play's the thing'. So, ultimately, we never get to the final scene of the play – This really speaks to me. Children and nor born equal and services for those most in need vary depending on where you live. Although, my drive is to change this, I will never stop children experiencing adverse experiences, or caring for those in the margins of society. Here I am talking about those that haven't had the same life chances as others because of their birth, because of the area that they live in and their ethnicity or religion. These are ongoing issues - In fact, 2020 was once a target to have eliminated child poverty but those living in poverty, including working poverty is

rising. I am rambling a bit—but in essence, we have to ensure we do not stop taking part in the 'play', we must be aspirational for those we are working alongside. We must enable new green shoots to move from novice to experts in their chosen area of work. We must bring the next generation on because social inequality isn't going to change. If it was going to change fundamentally. I love the quote by Buckminster Fuller:

"You never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete."

We are a long way off from this...

### **Lisa**

Something potentially when you're talking like that, there are two ways that we can go with that. And I went into both of those spaces and one of them is, "Wow, that's quite depressing." And the other is, "Actually, being in that place of constant aspiration, understanding that part of your work is always, always rooted in seeking to make things better for children and young people." It's actually very empowering if you understand that that is what your work is.

### **Eunice**

And that is the job. So I think I always see it as empowering. Sometimes you have to dig deep but I always bounce back more determined. So Bronfenbrenner is a really important theorist for me, him and Freire. Bronfenbrenner, because he was his greatest critic. In his final work, just before he died, he clearly says that "I got it wrong and that development isn't like that because if development was like that, then why are people still knifing others?" He put out the gauntlet to others to work on the chaos in society – a new system that needed to be theorised.

I strongly advocate, that our job in preparing 'tomorrow's professionals' is to ensure they can work in the Chaoticsystem. You need the skills, the knowledge, the understanding, the thirst to always be working in your chosen area. So that when life throws you curveballs, you can manage them. In any work with children and families you need to have a real work ethos, you have to see it beyond the money and recognise it is not a nine to five job when you work in the human services it is hard, it is full of complexity and challenge. It is indeed *Chaotic*.

You have to know how to look after yourself so that you can enable others. And you also have to know how to work with other professionals and practitioners and recognise that there is a range of motivational factors that have led them to work with children. Therefore if you choose to work with children, it is your responsibility, nobody else's to make sure you're a safe professional and practitioner all the time.

And what I mean by that is that you're somebody that can critically reflect on yourself and change your practice, so reflexivity, constantly searching for new knowledge and realising we are all part jigsaw, none of us is more important than anyone else—we all have a role to play. Because I am sure all social workers would have been in the situation where they have taken on a case and been told: "Oh, you're so much better than that social worker we had before." That's really good for our ego, but....

I also believe that you must be the best possible professional you can be at any time. You are navigating the complexities of people's lives and need to ensure you have the knowledge and skills to hold this space, and you need to be kind.

### **Lisa**

Do we prepare people for complexity and change? And I ask that because I've often felt when I was myself working in local authorities, was there such a resistance to complexity and change that somehow there was a misunderstanding that working in local authority and working with people experiencing distress that we're working alongside, that there was a real inability, if you like, from several people really to manage and cope with complexity and change. And I wonder, is that something that people are prepared for in their training?

### **Eunice**

In my work with students, it's really important to me that they recognise the importance of understanding where their personal experiences intersect with their work. But I think it's very tricky for people to actually answer "So why have you come into this work?" because for some it is because of difficulties they have experienced in their lives. Some recent research I've done into the motivations for students choosing to study social work, early childhood, or childhood and youth has highlighted three broad areas. One, because of adversity experienced -parents on drugs or families that have been on drugs and alcohol, being a child in the care system, which is a great motivator. You're going to save the world yourself. It sounds like you, Lisa, remember?

### **Lisa**

Yeah.

## **Eunice**

There are others that go for this because they've had really positive family experiences. Their families have been foster carers, they've had really positive experiences. And then there's those probably that maybe have come a bit later on in life and they've had a refresh about who they are, where their direction of life is going. And through having children and things like that, it's changed them.

So you have to remember that in the pathways, like "childcare", health and social care, often have young people directed to them because they are seen as 'less academic'.

There is a common adage used: "If you're no good at hair and beauty, then go and try care. If you're no good at care, go and try hair and beauty" So you're already working sometimes with a group of young people who have already had a negative experience of education but not always, you can never make assumptions.

## **Lisa**

Yeah

## **Eunice**

There was some really good research by Vincent and Braun back in 2010 where they were looking at students' reasons for studying childcare at FE, further education colleges. They found three main motivators, including those that came from a large family, those that are told "you're really good with children, go and work with children". Some were directed by school because "you're actually not academically able to do these subjects so what about childcare?" They suggested, "As an occupation, childcare itself appears in many ways to be an excellent site for a redemptive project of the self." I just love it. And I think any services that are people focused attract people with certain attributes and certain motivations. And I think it's really important that you actually look at those yourself and you understand yourself and what motivates you. It doesn't mean to say that if you've had a really challenging time yourself, that you shouldn't be working with children and families, absolutely not. We choose to work with children and families, they do not choose us, therefore you have a duty to make sure you are a 'safe practitioner -If you're going to work with other people, they have enough baggage of their own. They don't need yours.

## **Lisa**

I often say that, but I'm interested in that because that's something you've identified in Early Years practitioners, it's something that you've

identified in social work practitioners. What about education and the police? Both areas that work with people and yet one might argue that they lack a certain diversity.

### **Eunice**

It is very difficult with some professions to break down some of the barriers to get into them. Now, if you've been disaffected at school, and you haven't got your qualifications, then those occupations are blocked to you. Aren't they? They're absolutely not available. So that's where the Open University and universities like Northampton provide opportunities. In my area, it's people sometimes later in life that enter our foundation degree in Early Years. I watch predominantly women's lives transformed through entering into education later in their lives because they had never felt that they were good enough to do it. Does that make sense? I've not researched the police. I have a view on education, but there are entry qualifications, aren't there, into any profession? So, gateways about who's being recruited in...

### **Lisa**

And this highlights, then if we're thinking about education and how that diverse response to understanding children's behaviour, where that is not reflecting the classroom necessarily, then we can start to see some of the challenges for those children going into that setting, where there isn't that understanding and knowledge because the gateway by definition into that profession has prevented people with more diverse childhood experiences that would be more reflective of the children in the classroom.

### **Eunice**

Yes. But equally, there are amazing teachers out there. So actually, it's really, really important that we are constantly working on a strengths approach and that we identify areas that are good and work on those that need improving. But you can't always make people shift. I mean, one of the things that I love about the Early Childhood Studies degrees across the country is they offer a space for predominantly girls, a few men, to study holistic early childhood before moving into a specific professional pathway. It provides a space, a safe space to learn about themselves as well as children and provides a real grounding in advocating for children, for children's rights. We are not constrained by professional training requirements. Whereas education, social work, health professions, any profession that comes with professional status, you have to be socialised into that profession. What Early Childhood Studies offers is an environment for young people and those with work experience, to explore and find out what are their strengths and skills are. They can also explore different career opportunities available for them.

For example, some of our students have never experienced special education needs before, they suddenly go into on placement in a special school and they find skills in themselves they never knew. So they might have wanted to come on being a teacher, but end up actually working in a school with children that have got additional needs or they shift into social work. So that's why I love it, it opens different doors for our students. Also, they may be studying early childhood but if you know how children develop conception to one and one to two, and two to three and so on, you understand young people and you understand why some of the adults have the issues they do. You can also ensure their studies include what you and the team believe is important for tomorrow's professionals to survive in the world of work. Anyway, I could go on and on about this...

### **Lisa**

What would be your call to action? Because we started off this conversation thinking about how poverty hasn't been eradicated in 2020 for children and in fact, how outcomes have got worse for children.

### **Eunice**

My call for action, well there is not one thing, there are so many interrelated systems that need to change to *Change the Script* for children. Children need to be centre stage and early childhood services strengthened with a much more holistic approach. Actually, I am always advocating that we must start with a strengths approach and a holistic approach to children and their families. We need very strong policy direction starting from what children need rather than being wed to political ideology. We need to ensure the best start for each generation. And we need someone at a policy level in government somebody that is around the cabinet table that has the responsibility that children's and young peoples voices are also present in decision making—they have to live with the consequences of the decisions made. We do have the Children's Commissioner to advocate but they are independent and sit outside party politics.

From a training point of view, at an undergraduate level, I would really like to see a foundation year for all of those that want to work children, young people, and families. I'll never get it, but a real foundation, solid year where people are able to explore different things, different subject areas, because the career support is variable. I just love it when our students join us wanting to be teachers and then become social workers and the fact that those that move into teaching have a much deeper understanding of, for example, child development, difference, diversity, child abuse and adversity

We do talk to our students right from the start that working with children isn't a job to earn lots of money in. There's got to be something else that's driving you to be here and to keep you going – for me this is always my personal experience of being 'different' and knowing what it is like when you don't fit with society's norms. I know what I will and will not compromise on—namely children.

We always stress to our students getting the degree is just the start - there is going to be ongoing, further training- children and families deserve this and practitioners that will advocate for them when necessary.

### **Lisa**

And that would stop us from having endless conversations where children and young people are missing when we saw... I think we saw this, we've seen this in all the political campaigns. I think we certainly saw this in the press conferences around COVID, a real absence of children's voice, of young people's voice, and their needs at this time.

### **Eunice**

Right. But I also think it's more complex than that because it's also about how people view early childhood, infants and children and how they view women. And while early childhood and babies is wrapped up with this notion of childcare and mothering---women's work—then change will continue to be challenging. It is and will always continue to be a very complex, difficult terrain because we have the research evidence, we have the knowledge, we have practice wisdom of the vital importance of early childhood, but we still fail to have a holistic approach, even though UNICEF advocate its importance and early childhood is included in the sustainable development goals.

However, it is important that we do not forget the journey ECEC has had in England and the massive improvements, but it is still so complex. That is because in England ECEC is a mixed economy of the private, independent and voluntary sector. It is marked by low pay, low status, it is seen as women's work. Our children's voice isn't heard even when it is asked for. We have the evidence, it's just that people hear but they can't or do not act to translate it into practice. And because we work in professional silos, with insufficient resource, children even when visible can be invisible. Reports into children who die reinforce that there are multi professional failings time after time.

There are lots of amazing people out there doing incredible work, but every local authority, early years setting, maintained nursery school,

school, every third sector organisation is different. Actually, we rely heavily now on the third sector and I'm not sure quite what will happen next because a lot of the third sector and early years settings are going to struggle or fold because they will not be financially viable. This will impact on those most in need.

Discussions are often about childcare for women to be in the workplace or support for families to enable them to work. I believe the focus should be about providing high quality, early childhood education and care for children where they grow and develop, rather than being a babysitting service to allow parents to work. If settings are closing, there are some real issues here for family life. And there are some real issues for those living in areas that are deemed as the most disadvantaged areas because families are working in the lowest paid jobs or are unemployed. Our benefit system at the moment is structured so that you only get your 30 hours free childcare in the first place if you're working, not if you're still claiming benefits. And that's a real issue, real issue because there aren't going to be the jobs out there for people as a result of COVID-19.

That sounds such a negative point to finish...the pandemic has highlighted so much and reinforced the structural inequalities that exist in our society—yes things are going to be so hard for the most in need but they have always been hard.

In short my 'call for action' is that 'childhood lasts a lifetime' and we should seize every opportunity to do bigger and better things that *Change the Script*, disrupt intergenerational DNA and shape a new reality. We need to do what is right for children but remember 'The play's the thing' and we will never reach the final scene.

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