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To cite this article: Eunice Lumsden & Jackie Musgrave (2023): 'Early childhood studies is more than a degree; it is an experience': undergraduate students' motivations, professional aspirations and attributes, International Journal of Early Years Education, DOI: [10.1080/09669760.2023.2240836](https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2023.2240836)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09669760.2023.2240836>



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Published online: 28 Aug 2023.



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'Early childhood studies is more than a degree; it is an experience': undergraduate students' motivations, professional aspirations and attributes

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ABSTRACT

This mixed methods study sought the views of early childhood studies students from three universities in England. The research explored motivations, professional aspirations and the attributes they believed were required to work in early childhood. Findings highlighted that the holistic study of early childhood is valued by students and placements offered a *space* where they grew and flourished, as they made sense of where their *personal* intersected with wider theoretical, practice and political systems embedded in early childhood. Students follow a range of career trajectories, either by choice or because there is no specific practitioner role underpinned by the holistic study of early childhood. This study also revealed factors that led to their choice and place of study, as well as the ways that students' personal circumstances affected their studies, reinforcing the importance of academic and pastoral support. Very significantly, this research led to discussions about the core purpose of the early childhood studies degree and helped to inform the development of the Graduate Competencies as an addition to ECS degrees that included placements.

ARTICLE HISTORY

Received 4 June 2020
Accepted 19 July 2023


KEYWORDS

Early Childhood Studies
Degrees; Student; Graduate
Competencies; Placements;
Attributes

Background to study

This paper reports on a research study into student motivations for undertaking a 3-year early childhood studies (ECS) degree focusing on children aged 0–7 years. The research idea started in 2016 during a meeting between the course leader for a BA (Hons) Early Childhood degree (a co-author) and three academic colleagues, one of whom is the other co-author, who were external examiners for the course. The role of the external examiner is to 'provide each degree-awarding body with impartial and independent advice, as well as informative comment on the degree awarding body's standards and on student achievement in relation to those standards' (QAA 2018, 7).

Having met with students and perused their work, the external examiners, who were all completing their four-year contract, reflected on the high quality of academic work

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and the progress that the students had made both personally and professionally during the 3 years of their degree. Their progress was even more remarkable because of the personal difficulties many had experienced during their undergraduate studies. The conversation developed as we considered that this was a situation reflected in the three higher education institutions where the external examiners were employed as tutors on ECS degrees. We wondered what motivated students to study for an ECS degree that does not provide them with an assurance that they will be able to enter a profession as a graduate with the attendant pay and status, and what sustained them to continue when faced with personal and professional challenges.

We were aware that there was a dearth of research about ECS students in England (Silberfeld and Mitchell 2018). However, research about 16-year-old students who were studying childcare highlighted that their experiences of adversity in childhood were motivational factors for wanting to work with children (Manning-Morton 2006; Vincent and Braun 2010). Vincent and Braun (2010, 207) suggest 'as an occupation, childcare itself appears in many ways to be an excellent site for a redemptive project of the self'. We wondered if there was a similar need for 'redemption' in undergraduate ECS students who were typically aged 18 years and over and what this meant for the pastoral support given by the academic team as well as the services within the university (Thorley 2017).

The conversation made us realise that we needed to know more about our ECS students and find out how their personal and professional experiences contributed to their decision to study for an ECS degree. We wanted to gain insights into the factors that motivated their choice and place of study, and to find out more about their thoughts about professional aspirations and attributes and the professional attributes they believed are important for working in early childhood. We were curious to find out answers to these questions so that we could understand how we could support them during their undergraduate studies.

The students' progress and perseverance were even more striking because, unlike some other countries, England does not have a strong tradition of a graduate led early years workforce, nor a role akin to the European Social Pedagogue that takes a holistic approach to children's development and learning (Hevey 2014; Moss and Petrie 2019). Furthermore, the lack of graduate status in England means that practitioners working with young children in education and care settings experience low pay and status; consequently, there are limited opportunities to gain employment that requires graduates. In turn, this means that ECS students who decide to pursue careers in the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) sector are unlikely to gain employment that attracts a salary that reflects the students' investment in their studies.

It was anticipated that the findings from this research would have implications at two levels. First, for the programme's curriculum, pedagogical approaches and the personal tutor role in providing academic and pastoral support to students, as well as the wider well-being services offered by the institution. Second, a contribution to wider debates of the importance of studying early childhood in developing future practitioners. However, there was an unintended and important implication from this study with the development of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Graduate Practitioner Competencies, which will be discussed below. The ECS Graduate Practitioner Competencies (QAA 2018) were developed by working in partnership with the Quality Assurance

Agency (QAA) which is the body responsible for standards and quality in UK Higher Education.

The following section explores the origins of ECS degrees and the policy context of early childhood in England.

The policy context of early childhood care and education in England

Bonetti (2019) reports that the ECEC remains a predominantly female workforce with deep roots in notions of motherhood (Noddings 2002). The association with motherhood implies that looking after children is an innate skill rather than a professional skill. This view may have influenced how the workforce is regarded as having low status and low pay. Attempts to professionalise and create a graduate led workforce have not been realised (Cohen et al. 2021; Pascal, Bertram, and Cole-Alback 2020).

The history of care and educational provision in England and developments in ECEC internationally are well documented (Pound 2013; Oberhuemer and Schreyer 2018; Hirst 2019) as are the well-rehearsed arguments about the importance of high-quality early education (Taggart et al. 2015; Melhuish and Gardiner 2020). The Labour Government (1997-2010) was committed to universal provision for children, young people and families aimed at reducing poverty and increasing employment opportunities for working mothers (Her Majesty's Treasury 2004). In contrast, since 2010, government policies have focused on providing funding for childcare costs to meet the employment needs of parents (Payler and Davis 2017) and there has been a persistent lack of investment by a succession of governments as Hevey (2014) clearly articulates, with every new administration comes changes in policy, different views on qualification levels and funding, therefore the problems of low status, pay and qualifications of the workforce persist. Furthermore, unlike some other European countries, a separatist rather than an integrated approach to ECEC continues (Oberheuer and Schreyer 2018), with early education and day care/childcare for children regarded as separate entities. They have different drivers, the latter being associated with services that enable parents and carers to work (Fenech et al. 2022). It is this division, alongside a mixed economy of pre-school education and childcare provision that has inhibited the development of a graduate led profession.

ECS degrees were first started in 1992, at a time when there were ideological, political and social debates advocating that the distinction between 'education' and 'care' systems in England was not appropriate in the early years (Calder 1999; Calder 2018; Miller and Hevey 2012). The assertion that care and education are interrelated and need to be viewed holistically highlighted the need for a degree aimed at offering higher education for 'educarers' (Curtis and Hevey 1992, 210), who would be a discipline separate from social care, health and education. To fill the gap for higher education for educarers, ECS degrees were created with the aim of addressing the lack of coherence in:

... understanding the development, care, education, health, wellbeing and upbringing of babies and young children in a social, pedagogical and policy context. (QAA 2019, 4).

Since the inception of ECS degrees, there have been several initiatives aimed at creating a graduate led workforce in ECEC. The widening participation education agenda provided

new routes to HE for people who were traditionally less likely to study for a degree (Labour Party 1996; O'Hara and Bingham 2004). Foundation degrees offered opportunities for experienced practitioners already in the workforce to study the first 2 years of a degree. A further opportunity to complete undergraduate study to a full bachelors was offered with the creation of a Top-up route.

Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) was another important opportunity for the early year workforce to become graduate leaders of practice. During the Labour Government (1997–2010), the Every Child Matters Agenda (Department for Education and Skills 2004) became a central policy focus. There was substantial financial investment in the early years, notably the Graduate Leaders Fund (Department Children, Schools and Families 2008) which set the aspiration of each setting having a graduate to lead practice (Mathers et al. 2011; Ranns et al. 2011). This aspiration gained traction in England and there was a 76% increase in the number of graduates (Bonetti 2020).

In 2012, Professor Nutbrown's report (Department for Education (DfE) 2012) stressed the importance of a career structure in the early years. She argued that there was a need to mediate the divide that had emerged between Qualified Teacher Status (QTS) and Early Years Professional Status (EYPS). To achieve this, Nutbrown recommended the creation of an Early Years Teacher that could work across the 0–7 age group. The Government response was to replace EYPS with Early Years Teacher Status (EYTS) to work with the 0–5 age group, which would be provided through Early Years Initial Teacher Training (EYITT). Despite EYTS and QTS having the same entry requirements, those with EYTS could not be called teachers in maintained schools nor were they awarded commensurate pay and conditions. This move has served to further divide those working in the 0–5 age range from their teaching colleagues.

Alongside these developments in workforce qualifications, research findings continue to reinforce the importance of international and national early childhood policy (Payler and Davis 2017; United Nations 2020). However, raising the status of early childhood beyond political rhetoric is challenging. In England, there is no single government department or minister who has responsibility for a holistic approach to early childhood.

It is within this context that the ECS degree has evolved being both helped and hindered by its strong connections to early years policy, the lack of graduate qualifications requirements to work in ECEC and its' relationship with health and social care.

More recently, the divide between education and care has become further exacerbated by international debates about school readiness. Rather than care and education receiving equal weighting, care has been relegated to the side lines (Van Laer and Vandebroek 2018). In England, the Early Years Foundation Stage (DfE 2021), the statutory guidance for providers of ECEC, requires employers to ensure that practitioners have appropriate qualifications, training, skills, knowledge (DfE 2021, 26), however, there is no requirement for practitioners to have studied as an undergraduate.

Understanding the early childhood policy landscape and the missed opportunities of successive governments to commit fully to a graduate workforce is important. Rather than introducing policies aimed at achieving a graduate workforce, qualification levels

have fallen or remained static (Bonetti 2020). While graduate leadership remains an aspiration, some students who are studying for degrees in early childhood are motivated to work in ECEC rather than pursue careers in teaching or the wider children's services. The following section explores literature relating to students' motivations for seeking to work with children ECEC settings.

Motivations for studying an ECS degree

An aim of this research was to explore our students' motivations to work in this complex and contested space and to discover more about their higher education experience and career aspirations. Manning-Morton (2006) suggested that some practitioners choose to work with children because of their own negative childhood experiences, and by working with children they see it as a way to fulfil their own unmet needs. Vincent and Braun (2010) interviewed students studying level 2 and 3 childcare courses (pre-university level), predominantly aged 16–18 years, they concluded that students' motivation for choosing to work with children was an opportunity for them to prove their moral worth. Turning to Australia, Fenech et al (2022) analysed childhood workforce studies to identify students' motivations for choosing to embark on an undergraduate course of study with the attendant financial cost, both in terms of tuition fees and with limited opportunities for graduate employment. They drew on Richardson et al.'s (2011) findings indicating intrinsic factors which include a passion for teaching and working with young children. In a similar way to Vincent and Braun's (2010) findings, Fenech et al. (2022) highlighted that 'moral and altruistic motivations – making a difference and supporting children's rights – draw students and teachers to ECEC' (p 5).

Method

The research sample was drawn from three universities, situated in the northwest and middle of England. All share similar characteristics namely they are regarded as new universities because they were awarded university status and research degree awarding powers during the last 30 years. Typically, they admit students who are described as non-traditional, meaning that they may be the first generation of a family to go to university, or from a low-income household, from a minority ethnic group, or be mature or have a disability. Non-traditional students are less likely to gain a first-class degree (Wong 2018).

The study investigated student motivations for undertaking a degree in the early childhood and the implications of these for a quality early years workforce (0–8). It was conducted in two phases and employed sequential mixed methods; questionnaires followed by interviews (Creswell and Clark 2011).

Phase One was a web-based questionnaire, using multiple choice and non-compulsory open questions and gathered data on:

- previous study
- the reasons for studying a degree in early childhood
- how previous experiences have influenced study choice
- choice of university
- professional aspirations

- personal attributes
- views on the professional skills needed for working in the early years
- challenges they experienced that impacted on their studies.

Participants

All students studying the 3-year undergraduate ECS degree at three universities were invited to participate. The degrees were similar in taught content and aligned to the Subject Benchmark (QAA 2019). The web-based questionnaire was completed by 128 students of which 26 indicated a willingness to be interviewed. Only eight of these responded to follow up contact reducing the generalisation of the findings from the interview phase. They were all students who had just graduated. To maintain anonymity, the data from the three universities was merged in both research phases.

Ethical issues

A joint ethical application for approval of the research was submitted to the lead partner institution and ratified by the other two universities. The ethical process was guided and regulated in accordance with the University's committee and the British Education Research Associations Guidelines for Educational Research (2011). The researchers were mindful of the benefits and challenges of conducting 'insider research' (Walker and Solvason 2014, 35) but recognised that '... although a potential minefield, insider research can also be a rich pasture, from which important data can be harvested, with appropriate boundaries to satisfy ethical concerns' (Floyd and Linet 2010, 5). Our 'insider' knowledge meant that we were aware that adverse childhood experiences shaped some students' motivations (Manning-Morton 2006; Vincent and Braun 2010). To mitigate against any ethical breach, a statement was prepared for students ahead of participating to reassure them that their anonymity would be protected. They were invited to provide contact details if they were willing to be involved in the interview phase of the research. The researchers were aware that students may have disclosed sensitive information to the interviewer, therefore, to reduce bias and increase objectivity, a research assistant who was separate from the teaching team and unknown to the student participants conducted the interviews.

Analysis

Descriptive analysis of the data was undertaken and where appropriate it was interrogated using the chi-square test for independence for any statistical differences, but none were found. Participant comments were coded into themes.

Phase 2 of the research aimed to gather more detailed insights at a micro level with the themes that emerged for the questionnaires informing the interview questions that focused on:

- The personal stories behind the choice of ECS as degree level study
- How the degree supported their personal and professional development
- The impact of the degree on career aspirations.

Thematic analysis was used to interrogate the data to identify key themes.

Findings

Research population

Of the 128 responses to the web-based questionnaire, 126 (98%) were female, aged between 18 and 25 years (78%) and overwhelmingly of white British origin, 94 (74%). Six of those interviewed in phase 2 were white British and two were Chinese British.

Level 3 equivalent qualifications reflected the range of study options available alongside traditional ‘A’ levels in England (Table 1). The largest proportion of students (45%) had studied A levels compared to 30% who had studied a vocational childcare qualification. Of the 57 (45%) respondents who had completed ‘A’ levels, the most popular subjects were Health and Social Care, English, Psychology and Sociology.

Choice of study

Students were asked about their choice of degree, university and the factors that influenced their decision making. There were 188 reasons identified for choice of university, 77(60%) cited programme content and 54 (42%) that the location of the university in relation to their home was a deciding factor. Only 26 (18%) were influenced by their open day experience.

Wanting to work with children was an important motivational factor with 59 (50%) of the 117 responses citing this. Participants were asked what they thought had influenced them (Table 2). Of the 150 responses work experience had influenced just over a third of the respondents. Those interviewed provided deeper insights into the role of work experience:

I've always loved working with children, and when I finished 6th form, when I was 18, I was a special educational needs one to one support in a high school. I did that for a year, and I did really enjoy it, but it also made me realise that I wanted to work with younger children.

I did my 6th form, for study in health and social care. Along ... while I was doing that, I kind of worked in nurseries on work experience. So, kind of ... started from there, as I tried placement in a nursery, and then just found that I really wanted to work with kids.

Table 1. Qualifications on entry.

| | Qualifications | |
|-----------------------------|----------------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % |
| A Levels | 57 | 45% |
| Cache Diploma in Childcare | 23 | 18% |
| Btec Childcare | 15 | 12% |
| Btec Health and Social Care | 10 | 8% |
| Other | 23 | 17% |

Table 2. Factors influencing the choice of study.

| | Work experience | Adverse childhood experiences | Family | School | Friends | Other |
|----------|-----------------|-------------------------------|--------|--------|---------|-------|
| <i>n</i> | 57 | 35 | 30 | 16 | 1 | 11 |
| % | 38% | 23% | 20% | 11% | 1% | 7% |

For others, adverse experiences in childhood including bullying, child abuse, parental separation, divorce and domestic violence in the family had a role to play and, for some, these and other external factors impacted on their studies. Of the 62 who responded, 23 (37%) indicated that family pressures affected them. Other issues included working to support their studies, financial pressures and physical and mental health issues. Furthermore, a male respondent stated that: *'it is more challenging for me because there are a range of barriers for men who choose to work in the Early Years workforce'*.

The interviews provided evidence of how these factors can impact and highlighted the personal tutor role and pastoral care. The importance of these roles was stressed by all interviewed because they all had personal issues that impacted on their studies. These included dyslexia, childhood experiences, family pressures and low confidence levels:

My tutor's been amazing. He has been there for absolutely everything, even if I had a personal issue, I won't be able to meet him, and he rearrange the meeting for me. I have always been supported 110%

I had a really, really, bad experience with one of my placements, it caused my anxieties to get really, really, bad ... , I rang my tutor, and I was crying, and they sorted it all out. You know I just couldn't do it, and they understood that straight away. They were just brilliant.

I have a personal academic tutor, I could always go to ask for support, and if I have an issue, I could always speak to her.

Career aspirations

Career aspirations were also explored (Table 3). 102 responded, of which 49 (48%) wanted to pursue teaching careers either in school (33%) or specifically with children aged 0–5 (15%) and 32 (32%) aspired to specific roles in welfare services.

Further insights were gained from the interviewees. For example, one interviewee stated:

I have known for a long time that I would work in childhood, but quite naively, didn't realise that there are so many options, I've just thought I had to become a teacher.

Another interviewee highlighted how the degree provides new opportunities. They indicated that they planned to undertake a postgraduate teaching certificate, but the placement experience changed her career trajectory:

I wanted PGCE, and I wanted to be a primary teacher and from the placement, I went to special educational needs school, and one day one, I come home, I said that's it, I've

Table 3. Career aspirations.

| | N | % |
|-------------------------|----------|----------|
| Teacher in School | 34 | 33% |
| Teacher of children 0–5 | 15 | 15% |
| Play Therapy/Work | 16 | 16% |
| Social Work | 12 | 12% |
| Family Work | 4 | 4% |
| Management | 6 | 5% |
| Unsure | 8 | 8% |
| Other | 7 | 7% |

changed my mind, I wanted to work with children with learning difficulties. So that really changed my views.

The importance of the placement experience was reinforced by those interviewed as playing a significant role in their future career trajectories:

Well, the school placement module really helped me, because when I went to apply to do the PGCE, I had already got all the experience, I worked with children, compare that with the people who do the history degree or geography degree.

I think the key element is the placement because that is the experience and practical experience, so it is the most important experience and my professional development.

I did a placement in a children centre, I wasn't with the children all the time, I worked with a family support worker. That just really showed that how vulnerable the children are, you know, it's this littler person that been brought into the world, and they need all the help and support that they can get. I think that really showed me that actually like I wanted to be one of those people that you know that help them.

Personal and professional attributes

Students were asked about their attributes and the professional attributes needed to work in the Early Years (Table 4). There was a synergy between the two but their views on their importance varied (Table 5), reflecting their perception that in the workplace attention to task and interpersonal skills were important, but how they responded to others was the most important personal trait.

Interviewees comments brought life to what these attributes meant in practice:

I would say, I am always fully to share my knowledge ... and willing to share, and help out as well ... So yes, I just willing to share, when they have any questions ... I like sharing my knowledge.

I am very empathetic, but I am also quite anxious. I would say ... I can say I am quite friendly ... I can be quite loud; I think I cover my anxieties quite well ... I would like to say I am creative.

Impact of studying early childhood

Year 3 students were asked if their initial reasons for studying ECS had changed during the degree. Of the 56 responses, 44 (79%) indicated no, a further 12 (21%) said they had, with many citing that they had either found new skills and/or areas of interest. One respondent stated: *'That is the beauty of the course though, you can change your mind'*. A further respondent indicated that: *'I did want to work as a teaching assistant in mainstream education but since completing placements and work outside of uni, I have discovered that my passion lies with children who have special needs'*.

Those interviewed contributed further understanding indicating that their holistic experience had enabled them to flourish, professionally and personally. They particularly valued the range of placement experiences that enabled them to apply their learning into practice.

Table 4. Personal and professional attributes.

| Category | Personal attributes | Traits | Professional attributes |
|----------------------|--|--------|--|
| Approach to Others | Approachable Caring Compassionate Empathetic Friendly Helpful Kind Loving Respectful Selfless Sensitive Understanding | | Approachable Caring Empathy Friendly Kind Respectful Selfless Supportive Sympathy Understanding Warm |
| Approach to Tasks | Creative Fast Learner Hard Working Knowledgeable Leader Logical Organised Professional Punctual | | Confident Creative Hard working Knowledgeable Leadership Organised Practical Professionalism Reflective Time management |
| Temperament | Down to Earth Flexible Fun Humble Independent Laidback Outgoing Positive Reflective Reliable Thoughtful Vibrant | | Adaptable Flexible Fun Happy Patience Resilient Reliable |
| Values | Genuine Honest Open-Minded Social Justice | | Open minded Trustworthy |
| Interpersonal Skills | Communicator Listener Team player | | Communicator Listener Team player |
| Motivation | Driven Enthusiasm Motivated Passion | | Dedicated Motivated Passion |

Table 5. Dominant traits.

| Dominant traits | |
|----------------------|----------------------|
| <i>Personal</i> | <i>Professional</i> |
| Approach to Others | Approach to Tasks |
| Approach to Tasks | Approach to Others |
| Temperament | Interpersonal Skills |
| Interpersonal Skills | Temperament |
| Motivation | Motivation |
| Values | Values |

All indicated that the areas covered, including safeguarding, the term used in the UK and Ireland which describes the measures that contribute to keeping children safe from harm (HM Government 2018), diversity and special educational needs not only developed them professionally but also impacted upon their personal development. One interviewee stated:

... the safeguarding module was a challenge for me, I have a lot of difficulties with this, but it has helped me a lot, as a person, as a practitioner, everything about me ... I can now understand from the child's perspective ... and that helped me emotionally as well, to deal with my past.

Another commented that

I am used to responding straight away, and reflection into practice actually taught me, 'no, step back outside the situation, and look at the whole picture.

All were unanimous in their praise for ECS and the overarching theme that emerged from all those interviewed was that 'Early Childhood Studies is more than a degree; it is an experience'.

Discussion

To frame the discussion, we have adopted a similar approach to that used by Fenech et al. (2022) which investigated the recruitment and retention of early years teachers in Australia. Their approach drew on Bronfenbrenner's bioecological model (1979) because of the 'holistic frame that gives consideration to the interplay of individual, relational, organisational, sociocultural and political influences' (Fenech et al. 2022, 4).

Adopting this approach enabled examination of the student's motivations, professional aspirations and attributes in the context of external influences, as summarised in Figure 1. At the meso level, the interplay between the intrinsic motivational factors of the student and other drivers and challenges was identified. These influenced the factors located in the macrosystem of being a student studying early childhood within a higher education institution. In turn, these were influenced by factors located within the exosystem, which included placement and employment opportunities and the wider policy and early education and childcare systems (macrosystem) and how these all evolve over time (chronosystem).

Motivational factors

Findings highlighted the close relationship between systems that influenced choice of study (Figure 1) with two main motivational factors emerging. First, experience at school, especially work experience which was mentioned by 57 (38%) of respondents and, second, positive and challenging experiences within the family. Almost a quarter of respondents, 35 (23%) indicated adverse childhood experiences (Table 2) and five specifically citing their experience of being abused as a child. Here there was a similarity to the research by Manning-Morton (2006) and Vincent and Braun (2010) in their studies of young pre-university level childcare students. Individual interviews provided further detail, highlighting that their personal and academic support needs were high (Thorley 2017). They valued extra support at a programme and institution level, with

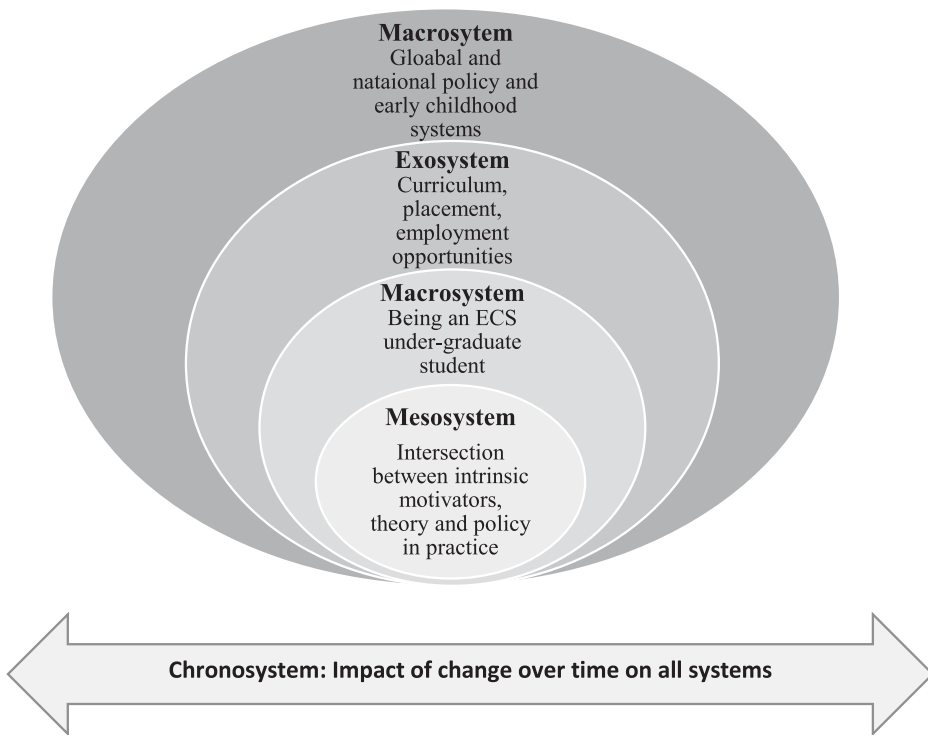


Figure 1. An ecological framing of ECS students' motivations, professional aspirations and attributes in the wider policy and practice landscape.

the personal tutor having a crucial role in mediating the student experience on the programme and signposting them to wider institutional services.

This finding is also congruent with research evidence about the potential impact of adversity in childhood across the life course (Felitte et al. 1998); the adversity in people's lives is often a driver towards careers in human services (Thompson 2019). However, data is not available on how ECS student background motivators compare to those on other educational or social welfare degree programmes. Equally, there is no data concerning any differences between those on the standard ECS degree and work-based students.

Professional aspirations

Most respondents had professional aspirations, with about a third wanting to work as a teacher in school and a third wanting to pursue careers in social welfare. Others were either unsure or had ambitions to work in health, law or higher education or wanted to work in ECEC as an Early Years Teacher. These findings reinforce what some of the initial pioneers had hoped the development of graduate study would provide (Calder 1999); a degree that bridged the divide between 'education' and 'care' providing opportunities for students who aspire to a range of careers with children and families.

For some students, the degree was a serendipitous developmental experience where the learning environment enabled them '... to confront own beliefs, attitudes and

actions and to challenge the status quo' (Hirst 2019, 390), which in turn led to new interests and skills emerging. This resulted in students either changing their mind about their future career or feeling secure that their chosen pathway was the right one.

Interestingly, very few participants saw their future working in the ECEC sector, however, as Silberfeld and Mitchell (2018) found, ECS graduates on completion of their degree continue to work in settings. This may indicate there is a lack of graduate career opportunities for ECS graduates that do not want to progress into traditional professions that occupy the early childhood space. In England, unless these graduates already hold a Level 3 Early Educator qualification or equivalent or have completed an ECS degree with assessed and observed placements, they face further challenges. The *Statutory Framework for the Early Years Foundation Stage (EYFS)* (DfE 2021) outlines the requirements for staff/child ratios and what is seen as 'full and relevant' (p 30) qualifications at Level 2/ 3. Therefore, it is possible for an ECS degree student to be a graduate in early childhood but not have the relevant qualification and experience to work in ECEC as a practitioner. This point became the driver behind discussions with QAA and the eventual creation of the Early Childhood Graduate Competencies (QAA 2018).

The syllabus, placements and attributes

All students participating in the research had opportunities to undertake placements. They valued the diverse opportunities they had in a range of provision across ECEC, education and social welfare, mirroring the findings of Silberfeld and Mitchell (2018). Placements appeared to provide a *space* to explore their intrinsic motivations in relation to the wider bioecological systems that operate in early childhood. Moreover, they supported the development of their professional aspirations and choice of career trajectory (Hordern 2019).

Whether ECS degrees should all have placements embedded within them raises issues about the core purpose of the degree as the academic study of Early Childhood or/and a place for developing tomorrow's professionals to work with children and their families (Hordern 2019; Silberfeld and Mitchell 2018). These issues take on further relevance as the ECS degree is located in a shifting landscape (*chronosystem*) where research continually reinforces the importance of a holistic approach to early childhood, yet policy is not developed holistically and a specific career trajectory as an early childhood professional does not exist. Furthermore, the degree must navigate the challenges faced in English HEIs concerning student recruitment, retention, progression, outcomes and employability, as well as an increasing technical approach to professional training, such as fully funded apprenticeships to support non graduate employment routes in ECEC in England.

While the findings suggest that students did flourish personally and professionally, there was difficulty in defining how academic study and placements shaped a specific early childhood student identity. Rather, the findings reinforced the generic and professional traits of those choosing to work in the 'people's professions' (Thompson 2019, 1) and strengthens the current positioning of the ECS degree in developing tomorrow's professionals for a range of roles in children's services.

It is important to note here that reflection is a vital element of professional development in working in education, health and social care. Indeed, developing skills to be a reflective practitioner are embedded in Early Childhood degree syllabi, yet, very few

respondents listed reflection as a professional attribute. This might be that the respondents in this study reinforce the findings of a study by Dyer and Taylor (2012) that suggested ECS students may be stifled using models of reflection, seeing it as a process to give solutions rather than an opportunity to think creatively.

Similarly, this is applicable to the professional attribute of leadership, identified by only four respondents. Again, this was another surprising finding given that leadership was thought to be a concept that was emphasised in the syllabi. Leadership in the early years is important to influence practice and develop professional learning. In this research, students identified the need to be able to communicate and work well with others as professional attributes, but they may be overlooking their role as leaders.

Implications for HEIs

The findings highlighted several areas that have relevance to programme teams as well as wider university services. ECS students are most likely to be around the age of 18 with limited knowledge of early childhood or experience of working with children. They had studied a variety of qualifications at level 3, including 'A' levels, Health and Social Care and Early Educator. While many knew the professional pathways they eventually want to follow, they choose the degree because of its holistic curriculum. This suggests that the development of vocational routes to work in ECEC will not adversely affect recruitment to HEIs and reinforces the importance of the breadth and depth of the interdisciplinary syllabus (QAA 2019). In fact, 77 (42%) cited programme content influenced their university of study.

The need for academic and pastoral support at programme and university level was highlighted. As well as students who needed additional support because of adverse experiences in their childhood, some faced challenges during their studies, including financial difficulties as well as physical and mental health issues. The role of the personal tutor was crucial to the student. However, given the multiple demands on academic time being able to signpost to timely support from student services is vital, especially at a time of increased concern about the mental well-being of undergraduate students (Thorley 2017).

As well as services to support students with their wellbeing, other characteristics that emerged from the background data of the students have implications for all those involved in the ECS degree, especially about future employability. It was evident from the findings from this research and that by Silberfeld and Mitchell (2018) that employability support was an important area for the students.

Findings also highlighted the role of programme teams in showcasing the role of the degree in developing the wider children's workforce, as well as contributing to wider policy debates. Here they have a role in highlighting the continual challenges of qualification levels in ECEC and how the low pay and status of the workforce acts as a barrier to ECS students pursuing long term careers in the sector.

Implications for government

Research findings highlighted that ECS graduates have a holistic view of the child and are well placed to meet the education and care needs of babies, young children and to

support families. However, as predicted by Curtis and Hevey in 1992, attempts to develop create a new profession of ‘educarers’ at the intersection of health, social care and education has not been realised, partly because of a lack of recognition of educarers as a separate profession. Paradoxically, practitioners in ECEC settings are identified in reports and guidance as being well-positioned to improve outcomes for children (DHSC 2018; Soar and Malone 2019). Moreover, the findings from this research suggests that ECS graduates have many personal and professional attributes, as well as knowledge and understanding that equip them to ‘provide the base for professional education and training for new professional roles, for an expanded provision of integrated care and education for children from birth’ (QAA 2019, 4). However, they remain a valuable and under-used resource of graduates who appear invisible to policy makers.

Impact of this research

The data highlighted the importance of placement experience for students; in turn, this made us reflect on the responsibility that we have within our institutions to support students to develop their academic and employability skills.

It is this important finding that has contributed to wider discussions in the Early Childhood Studies Degree Network (ECSDN). The ECSDN is a UK wide organisation that represents over 70 HEIs that teach ECS, (ECSDN 2020). We realised that there was a need to develop an opportunity for graduate practitioners to demonstrate their competency both academically and practically. The process of engaging with students to explore their experiences highlighted that students could graduate with a degree in ECS, but they may never have had a practical experience of working with babies and young children. The lack of practical experience for ECS graduates presented difficulties for their future employment, as well as challenges for employers. The insights gained initiated discussions with the Quality Assurance Agency (QAA) A key function of the QAA is to provide Benchmark Statements which ‘provide a framework for specifying intended learning outcomes in an academic or vocational discipline’ (QAA 2022, 1) and defines what can be expected of a graduate in the subject. The discussions with the QAA led to policy change and the development of the Early Childhood Studies Degrees Graduate Practitioner Competencies (Quality Assurance Agency 2018). The Graduate Competencies have been added to the QAA benchmark statement (QAA 2019; QAA 2022) and are available to HEIs who wish to strengthen the application of the degree to practice in early childhood. This development has afforded opportunities to co-construct the identity of the new genre of ECS degree student, where values of participation, democracy and advocacy are applied directly in practice. The realisation that young children need to be educated as well as cared for by a workforce that is equipped and educated to do so is reflected in David’s (2004, 27) assertion that the workforce needs to be ‘brilliant, capable, strong and clever’ to fulfil their role.

Conclusion

The findings have led to greater appreciation and understanding of ECS students, the strengths they bring to ECEC and the wider children’s workforce and the vital role of placements. These provide an important *space* where students explored and critiqued

their intrinsic motivations, theory and policy and how these bioecological systems interact with each other in real life situations. The questions raised during this research have foregrounded the need to enable policymakers and employers to appreciate the strengths that ECS degree students bring to the workforce. Despite the research into the importance of a holistic approach in early childhood and the knowledge, practice skills and attributes of the ECS graduate appear to remain invisible to other professional groups and policy makers and there is no career trajectory for them as holistic early childhood practitioners. In fact, finding graduate paid employment in ECEC for those not wanting to pursue specific professional training is a challenge.

It is the voice of the students in this research that shone a light onto the value of the degree and specifically the placements as a location where the personal, academic and professional played out. This distinguished early childhood degree students from those studying at Level 3, as rather than a place of ‘redemption’, it was a space where over time they grew and flourished, as they made sense of where their *personal* intersected with wider theoretical, practice and political systems nested in early childhood.

Acknowledgement

We would like to warmly acknowledge Dr Naomi McLeod from Liverpool John Moores University who contributed to the original concept and early drafting of this article. We would also like to thank all the ECS students who participated.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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