

The Early Childhood Education and Care sector's perspective on the Early Childhood Studies graduate and the Graduate Practitioner Competencies

In England, Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) provision is predominantly part of a neoliberal market model (Lloyd & Penn, 2014) and diversity in the sector is replicated in the different types of non-statutory/statutory provision including private, voluntary and independent nurseries, children's centres, childminders, and reception classes. Contemporary policy details the required qualifications to work in ECEC are vocational accreditations, which is equivalent to exit-level high school certificates, despite the availability of several graduate qualifications (DfE, 2017). The split between vocational and academic qualification requirements have been driven by different levels of funding between compulsory/non-compulsory provision which splits the need for 'care' and 'education' (Moss, 2017).

This presentation provides details of progress and interim findings from part of a funded research project into the ECEC sector's perception of the impact Early Childhood Studies graduates make in the workforce. Previous research has already highlighted the benefits of a graduate workforce to provide quality education and care which achieves the best outcomes for young children (see Sylva et al., 2010). However, despite the research evidence, there has been limited appetite for policy makers to reflect the wider need for graduates in non-compulsory provision (DfE, 2017). The lack of research evidence informed policy-making (Archer, 2020) has been replicated in perceptions held by the society and the sector where there is still a binary between skills/experience vs. theoretical knowledge discourses in ECEC. Set against this backdrop, there have been challenges faced by graduates entering the sector as there is a perception that graduates may have the academic knowledge but not the practical skills to successfully become part of the workforce (Payler & Locke, 2013).

Early Childhood Studies degrees in the UK have now been established for more than 20 years, however, gaining recognition for their value to the early childhood sector has proved challenging (Nutbrown, 2012). The development of full and relevant Early Childhood Studies degrees has provided opportunities for graduates to enter the ECEC workforce. Some of these degrees have included an equivalent of the NVQ3 Early Years Educator 'licence to practice' (DfE, 2019). Higher Education Institutions (HEI's) offering Early Childhood Studies degrees have been keen to develop a graduate (level 6) practice accreditation to keep pace with research findings (see Bury et al., 2020). With the release, recognition from the DfE, and implementation of the Early Childhood Degrees Network (ECSDN) Graduate Practitioner Competencies in 2019 (ECSDN, 2019) revisiting the ECEC sector perspective on graduate qualifications and expectations of graduates is essential.

We designed our research to explore the ECEC sector's perspectives of Early Childhood Studies degrees and students/graduates. This is an important time to consider workforce development as there are wider conversations on the form and structure of ECEC which has been linked to the implementation of a revised Early Years Foundation Stage framework which will be released in September 2021. The outcomes of this research will include mapping the terrain and background context; considering what a graduate 'looks like' and what Early Childhood Studies degrees offer the sector; considering perceptions of the roll out of Graduate Practitioner Competencies. We hope this research will allow us to identify implications for the delivery of Early Childhood Studies degrees and to open up an ongoing

dialogue between ECEC sector and Higher Education Institutions offering this vocational component of Early Childhood Studies degree.

The aims outlined above will be addressed through a mixed methodological approach that will attempt to capture breadth as well as depth of ECEC practitioners' perceptions of 1) both Early Childhood Studies degrees, students, and graduates and 2) the Graduate Practitioner Competencies. It will include a literature review to include research studies, grey literature, policy texts and media coverage; an online questionnaire for sector stakeholders issued via a range of platforms/organisations; semi-structured interviews with a range of sector stakeholders (target number 20 interviews), this could include telephone/Skype/google meet/zoom interviews (especially if social distancing is still in force). Data analysis will be reviewed with the participants to ensure their comments have been contextualised accurately.

In this presentation we consider the interim findings of the phases of data collection. The outcomes of this research will contribute to wider practice and policy discussions on workforce strategy and staff development. At this important time for ECEC with a range of policy discussions underway, including frameworks, funding, staffing and sustainability, we hope the outcomes of this research will be of significance to practitioners, policy makers and academics alike.

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