



Building Professional Relationships and Student Confidence through Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies

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Abstract

This paper reports on how Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs) impact on professional relationships and develop bidirectional confidence in the practical abilities of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) students in England. The study adopted an interpretive approach, seeking views through questionnaires (n=38) which were administered, through purposeful sampling, to students, mentors and academics from three universities in England offering Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees with ECGPCs. Findings suggest that the ECGPCs enabled focused placement students, with stakeholders recognising the potential for confidence and increased professionalism through the direction that the ECGPCs provide. In contexts of rapid change in Early Childhood policy this article argues the importance of the ECGPCs and of placement to support the graduate professional identity of the early childhood workforce. Interlinking and evidencing knowledge from research and practice enable graduates to articulate and have competencies in; 'what they do', 'how they do 'it'' and essentially 'why they do 'it'''. This is essential in promoting graduate relational/collegial professionals and advocating for stronger societal recognition and valuing of young children and the professionals working with them. With the ECGPCs being a new initiative within the United Kingdom, this study is unique in that it begins the research conversation around the success and challenges that this new initiative brings to the suite of Early Childhood (EC) qualifications.

Keywords

Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies, professionalism, confidence, early years, early childhood workforce development

Introduction

The Early Childhood Studies (ECS) and Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) were established in 1992, arising out of Early Childhood (EC) researchers', training organisations' and practitioners' increasing concerns over the quality of the early childhood workforce in England (Silberfeld & Mitchell, 2021). Employability has been a central point in national education policy development in England, and the ECS degree and Subject Benchmark Statement (Quality Assurance Agency (QAA), 2022) have included practice and employability opportunities developed alongside or

within the degrees with the aim to mobilise a graduate professionalisation within the fields of education, health and social care.

In 2018, the ECSDN developed the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs), with the aim of strengthening early childhood graduate professionalism and ensuring 'the skilful application of knowledge to practice and practice to knowledge' (Lumsden, 2019, title page). The ECSDN took the position to lead and involve stakeholders and students in developing an acknowledged and coherent graduate levelled professional set of Early Childhood competencies (Lumsden, 2022). The Early Childhood Graduate Competencies are:

1. Advocating for young children's rights and participation
2. Promote holistic child development
3. Work directly with young children, families, and colleagues to promote health, well-being, safety, and nurturing care
4. Observe, listen, and plan for young children to support their well-being, early learning, progression, and transitions
5. Safeguarding and child protection
6. Inclusive practice
7. Partnership with parents and caregivers
8. Collaborating with others
9. Professional development (Lumsden, 2019)

The ECGPCs listed above indicate the holistic nature of Early Childhood and each of the competencies, along with their subcategories, are designed to be applicable not just to roles within the field of education, but also to the field of health and social care. The nature of ECS students is that they know that they want to work with children, however not always sure in which guise this work will take (Richardson & Lumsden, 2022), and the ECGPCs are constructed with this in mind. As has been seen in other countries, such as Denmark, a professional graduate workforce identity needs consistency and developments with key stakeholders from practice and education (Brogaard-Clausen & Ringsmose, 2017), where key stakeholders are being 'change agents' recognising 'new possibilities rather than being enforced from above' (McDowell Clark, 2012, p.398).

A significant aspect of the ECGPCs is the democratic underpinning with value placed on voice, participation and advocacy in the development of practice, skills and knowledge across the holistic nature of Early Childhood. A fundamental aspect of ECS degrees is to develop students understanding of the relationship between theory, research and practice (QAA, 2022). The values and knowledge informing the degree are the understandings of the holistic nature of children's development, wellbeing, participation and learning within a social justice framework. In order for a student to foster this for children though, it is argued that they first need to possess it themselves as a professional and within the professional relationships they forge. It is recognised that building professional relationships is a crucial element of a student's development, as Perkins (2023, p.144) points out, relationships 'produce positive emotions which increase self-efficacy and task performance'. It is asserted that it is these positive emotions and self-efficacy that are essential when developing competence as a professional. This was therefore an area that warranted further exploration through the lens of the ECGPCs. The ECGPCs aim to provide students with level 6 depth of knowledge required as well as 'the skilful application of knowledge to practice and practice to knowledge' (Lumsden, 2019) and this study explored how these aspects manifested themselves within placements. A previous report on this study identified how undergraduate ECS students, placement mentors and academics positively experienced and perceived the ECGPCs, and how they enhanced self-efficacy, as well as reporting on challenges and barriers involved with the implementation of the ECGPCs (Richardson et

al., 2022). This paper reports an element of that study; being the way that the ECGPCs build relationships and confidence within the context of placement.

At the time of writing, no previous research has been published within this area, due to the innovative nature of the ECGPCs, and this paper will therefore add sought after knowledge and empirical evidence to an unexplored area. Although this study is situated in an English context it is argued that the nature of competencies, and the way that these are applied and experienced, is an area that warrants international interest. The focus on placement and employability in degrees is also of significant relevance to other ECS degrees, internationally.

The article will therefore discuss how these ECGPCs have been viewed by students, placement mentors and academics and the perceived benefits of the implementation of this national initiative, through an interpretive lens (Gray, 2018).

Literature review

Professional relationships in Early Childhood placement experiences

As referred to in the introduction, to increase self-efficacy, positive professional relationships are essential when developing competence as a professional (Perkins, 2023). Lumsden (2018) reports that, traditionally, different professions within the UK have developed as individual entities. However, regardless of the profession into which ECS students go, the needs of children and their families supersede such professional individual entities and boundaries. Therefore, this paper argues how EC professional relationships and professionalism should be regarded holistically. The nature of ECS is that it is a holistic field of study and multidisciplinary and the EC professionals of the future should be regarded in this way also.

The democratic development of the ECGPCs aimed to bring together the different spheres of knowledge and create professional learning relationships between placement mentors and students as different but equal. Whilst acknowledging and addressing the domination of construction and dissemination of knowledge, through placement the aim can be that a third space is created; ‘a non-hierarchical interplay between academic, practitioner (student) and community expertise (placement mentor)’ (Jónsdóttir, 2015, p.186). This includes a respectful but challenging dialogic process that extends reflection into transformative action in the development of a graduate workforce with the participation, empowerment and mutuality of all stakeholders (Hammond et al., 2015; Brogaard-Clausen and Cottle, 2022). It is therefore asserted that to develop professional relationships between students and placement mentors, there needs to be a recognition of, and a discussion around, the hierarchy and expectations surrounding the placement experience.

Dalli (2008) suggests that we need to examine our pedagogical strategies and style with a focus on building warm, respectful, caring collaborative relationships with children, families, colleagues and agencies outside of the EC setting. This highlights the importance of, or even the necessity for, EC placement experiences to be an integral part of ECS degrees and reinforces the need for the ECGPCs to further embed the practical skills required for the development of effective professional relationships within the fields of education, health and social care.

Bidirectional confidence in practical abilities within Early Childhood placement experiences

Dalli (2008) draws attention to the need for professional knowledge and practice: including being knowledgeable about children and the ‘theory of early childhood’; where qualifications and professional development need to consist of content knowledge and reflective practice. Sensitivity and openness to the multiple ways and cultures of living and learning are necessary to work inclusively and relationally. Understanding the emergent nature of relationships that include, at times challenging, negotiation of diverse values is part of recognising the more relational and affective ways of understanding oneself and others (Richardson et al., 2022). Promoting these early childhood values,

relationships and learning are both necessary within the profession as well as with the wider community and society, where the EC professionals advocate and act for change (Brogaard-Clausen & Cottle, 2022).

Georgeson and Campbell-Barr (2015) establish how content knowledge, pedagogical skills, dispositions, and attitudes frequently form the basis of professional standards and associated qualifications and debate the limitation of a narrow technical understanding of competencies. Although there are debates about differentiation between skills and competencies, and between attitudes and values (Urban et al., 2012). It is noted that EC professional education, alongside academic degrees in other related disciplines, have mainly been focused on knowledge rather than practical abilities (Maier-Höfer, 2015; Osgood, 2021). It is suggested that these practical experiences are required for students to develop the confidence required when working with young children and families, and for the placement mentors to develop confidence in the students. Some contest the use of the word 'competence' as, due the fluidity of the profession, it is not possible to ever be fully competent (Tedum, 2024) and, in particular reference to the social work context Tedum argues that competence indicates an expert level of knowledge and practice. This indicates the need for a holistic approach to professionalisation and experiences to overcome these conflicting views and it is argued that this is achieved through the development of bidirectional confidence; being mentors having confidence in the students and vice versa. It is recognised that professional identities and confidence are formed through relationships with others, informed by knowledge, education and training, skills/competences, values, ethics, autonomy, status, power and reward (Brock, 2006). Professional identity is negotiated as a narrative of who we are through continued interactions with others and the world around us (Brogaard-Clausen & Ringsmose, 2016).

One obstacle that often exists in placement mentoring is the power relationship between academics, placement mentors and students with perceived hierarchies in status of knowledge (Lohmander, 2015; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Hammond et al., 2015). Equally there can be a perceived reality gap between theoretical knowledge learnt at university and the real work/placement as concrete and immediate knowledge and practice (Lohmander, 2015). It is argued that to bridge this reality gap students need to be exposed to first hand practical experience (Richardson & Holman, 2021) and 'to ensure the skilful application of knowledge to practice and practice to knowledge' (Lumsden, 2019, title page). The bidirectional confidence in practical abilities will therefore be strengthened through the exposure to a variety of placement opportunities.

Recognition of Early Childhood professionalism

The context within England is such that definition of what it means to be a professional within the Early Childhood sector is not clear (Waters & Payler, 2015, p.161). Professionals working in early years have been referred to as 'the children's workforce' in England or 'early years educators' in other cultural contexts (Waters & Payler, 2015, p.161). The recognition therefore that is given to these professionals is equally as ambiguous. The current Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) context in England presents a picture of low levels of graduates in the workforce, no nationally agreed pay or work conditions, lack of professional autonomy and experience of being under pressure (Bonetti, 2019). It is argued that these are all important factors to recognise when introducing a new qualification (Lloyd, 2021) and considering how to enhance professional practice.

It is noted throughout this study that the role of collegial reflection and mentoring is part of negotiating professional identities and developing critical reflective professional practices (Mikser et al., 2019). However, this is not always a straightforward process, due to the confusing and rapidly changing landscape of Early Childhood professional education. Callan (2015, p.43) asserts that to display professionalism within Early Years practice it is necessary for individuals to 'advocate for the sector alongside the children and families within it'. It is recognised that this is not a skill that is necessarily natural to all, and it is therefore something that needs to be developed and nurtured accordingly along with the confidence to do so. The workforce requires the confidence to articulate

their pedagogical beliefs but also, it is argued, need the confidence that they are regarded as professionals within the society in which they are embedded.

Whilst considering this literature, significant themes have merged. The essential professional relationships within Early Childhood placements are critical in securing competence as a professional. However, it must be acknowledged the complexities surrounding hierarchy, expectations and the differences and somewhat challenges that may arise. Early Childhood professionalism should be regarded holistically and through student's practical experiences, competent professionals will be created as a result of bidirectional confidence. With this in mind, confidence in both pedagogical beliefs and practical skills will further develop and enhance the professional identity through advocacy for the sector.

Context and aim

The aim of the overall study was to understand the experiences and perspectives of students, placement providers and academics regarding the potentials and challenges in further developing ECGPCs and graduate practice and building professional identities and relationships. This research project was funded by the ECSDN and involved the BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies programmes at the University of Roehampton, the University of Derby and the University of Northampton, all of which had been pilot institutions for the ECGPCs from the outset. The research team had been involved in the introduction and facilitation of the ECGPCs within their institutions and therefore had an insider perspective (Katz, 1994). The research questions were:

- RQ1: How do students, placement providers and academics experience and value the ECGPC placement?
- RQ2: How can supportive learning relationships be built between all stakeholders?
- RQ3: How can the competencies be developed? Ie what are the challenges and opportunities?
- RQ4: How can the mentor role be best utilised for the benefit of both the student, the mentor and the settings?

The above RQs have previously been reported on (Richardson et al., 2022) and this paper now reports, through the interpretation of questionnaire responses, on RQ2, which in turn also addresses RQ4. The findings and discussion that follow will consider how to develop supportive professional learning relationships, through the bilateral confidence in practical abilities of students.

Methodology

This study was undertaken within an interpretivist vein, with the intention of interpreting the views and opinions of participants (Gray, 2018). Cohen et al. (2018, p.17) assert that this approach is useful to 'explain and demystify social reality through the eyes of different participants' and this was the intention within this study. A qualitative approach was therefore adopted. It is recognised that there were elements of quantitative data within the overall findings in the form of statistical information used to understand the positionality of the participants and to provide context however the main purpose of this data was to aid with positioning participants' experiences. Although not aligning neatly with one typology, with a focus on perceptions, the qualitative interpretative lens was utilised (Hood 2006). A multiple case study was carried out with three of the eight universities who had piloted ECGPCs. The purpose of this study was not to generalise widely (Yin, 2014), but to use the findings to assist programme, placement, mentor and student development. Multiple case studies, according to Thomas (2017, p.156), involves an in-depth study of a set of cases with the aim of being combined to 'tell a finished story'. This was the situation with regards to this study; to explore the situation in detail and tell a story about the implementation of the ECGPCs and how the relationships with placement mentors can be enhanced accordingly.

Method

It was necessary for those taking part to have knowledge of the ECGPCs and to have engaged in placements hence the purposive sampling approach. To meet the aim of the research; to gain the perspectives of students, placement providers and academics, and consider the value they place on the ECGPC experiences; questionnaires were distributed to students, placement providers and academics (appendix one). Online anonymous questionnaires were considered the most appropriate ways to gain perspectives from a broad range of participants, in a timely and cost-effective manner (Robson, 2011). In addressing the need for time-efficient measures, the first section of the questionnaire was designed around a series of closed questions to elicit contextual information. Participants were then asked to provide narrative comments through questions intended to provide insight into the participants' experiences. This range of questioning technique was designed purposively to encourage completion and retain interest, in the hope that detail and engagement was achieved resulting in rich data for analysis. Due to the low number of ECGPC institutions and students, no personal data was collected as identification of individuals would be too easy and it was necessary to maintain anonymity throughout the study.

This study was planned prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and therefore had to be adapted due to the ongoing nature of pandemic and the impact that this had on students and placements. Due to the restrictions of a pandemic (no in class teaching and placements being unavailable in some places), the questionnaires were circulated and re-distributed over a lengthy period of time, as the placements in the three universities fell at different times. Also, it meant that not all students were able to go on placement and the sample size of this study was therefore impacted on significantly. It was originally planned that a total sample size of circa 90 participants would be sought (50 students, 25 mentors and 15 academics) and due to the restrictions of the pandemic the response rate was somewhat lower, with a total of 38 responses being received (comprising 19 students, 12 mentors and 7 academic tutors). Although this could be seen as a limitation in the study, it is also recognised that a corrective measure to this reduced sample is to ensure a 'thick description' is provided in the analysis of the data (Seale, 1999, p.108) and this has been provided in the findings and analysis that follows. Investigator triangulation (Denzin, 1989) also assisted with this and is discussed in the section below. The purposive sampling (Robson, 2011) adopted throughout also ensured that all respondents had some experience with and knowledge of the ECGPCs and could answer the questions posed in an informed manner.

Interviews and focus groups, it is recognised, could have added another dimension to this study however they were discounted due to several reasons. Firstly, there was a requirement throughout this project that the anonymity of participants and institutions was protected, and secondly the pandemic created a situation whereby individuals were constrained by lockdown rules and pressures of work brought about by the situation. It was therefore felt to be more ethical and responsive to the situation that questionnaires alone were used in this instance. The ethics of the study will be discussed further in the section that follows.

Ethics and triangulation

Ethical approval was sought at institution level, with each institution requiring slightly different processes, and giving the rigour that this project adopted throughout. In addition to this, ethical guidelines were adhered to throughout (British Educational Research Association, 2018; European Early Childhood Educational Research Association, 2015) with the fundamental principle of 'do no harm' remaining paramount throughout the study.

Although these principles and processes provided a level of rigour, there were certain aspects of the project that required further consideration. The first of these being the way that the questions were phrased within the questionnaire. Much time was given to ensuring that the wording of these questions and wording was clear, open, understandable, unambiguous and not leading in any way and

needed to appeal to the different participant categories. Pilot questionnaires were undertaken with each group (students, mentors and academics) and responses reacted to accordingly with necessary alterations to wording made. The pilot data was not included in the final data analysis so as not to skew the results (Gray, 2018).

One ethical challenge that was recognised was the need to minimise the inherent power relations between academic and student (Grieshaber, 2020) and to allow all participants the opportunity to opt-out as they wished. All placement providers, students and academics were sent the link to the questionnaire electronically at the same time and responses were anonymous as questions were constructed in a way that made it impossible to identify participants.

Working as a research team, with all three parties engaged in this process, allowed us to use investigator triangulation during the process of data collection and analysis as a key tool to increase levels of internal validity and reduce bias (Golafshani, 2003). Although there was only one method of data collection, it is argued that this investigator triangulation, along with the data triangulation (Denzin, 1989); i.e. gathering data from different sample groups, gave a robust set of data for analysis.

Findings and analysis

Demographics of respondents

There were 38 responses received to the questionnaire for this study:

- 19 were students, where 84% had had prior experience working with children before joining the course, ranging from a few weeks (n=3) to more than 3 years (n=7)
- 12 were mentors, where 58% held a degree in Primary Education with only one of those 7 citing an early years specialism. The others 42% were all qualified with an EC graduate level qualification
- and 7 were academics all who had worked with students on placement for between 3 years and 20 years that they had been in role

The section that follows will present the findings that relate to research question 2 and 4, with specific attention to professionalism and relationships building. Other findings were discussed in a previous publication, such as the experienced value of the ECGPCs, employability and different learning styles (Richardson et al., 2022). However, further to undertaking thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2021), three specific themes warranted further depth of discussion; professional relationships in EC placement experiences, bidirectional confidence in practice and the recognition of EC professionalism which will form the focus of this article.

Professional relationships in Early Childhood placement experiences

The findings from this study indicate that both students and mentors valued the construction of professional relationships that occurred during EC placement experiences. As in Perkins' (2023) study, this recognition is important as supportive professional relationships build self-efficacy, and the findings below establish the bidirectional relationship of this.

The data showed that mentors commented on the potential of the ECGPC students' professionalism, with emphasis on being able to evidence their knowledge and practice, giving them focus and ability to communicate/show their competencies. As one mentor stated: 'when collecting evidence, the student can link the competencies specifically and give examples to show they have achieved them' (M8) thus highlighting the students' ability to link theory to practice and developing their professionalism by communicating, 'the what, how and whys'. It is noted that this needs to be a collaborative approach as to develop professional relationships needs ongoing negotiation (Brogaard-Clausen & Cottle, 2022).

The development of professionalism and professional relationships though need sufficient time and resources. As stated by Bonetti (2019), in a sector that experiences high turnover of staff, a lack of nationally agreed and regulated pay and work-conditions and with limited access to CPD, it is not surprising that time is raised both by mentors and students as a key barrier to undertaking the ECGPCs.

As one student phrased it: 'Time and space, early years is a busy environment!' (S7). This issue is exacerbated when students did not manage time and did not communicate sufficiently with settings. It could be that it is due to the immaturity of the professional identity and/or relationship that results in issues with students 'doing things last minute - one student was very organised and gave it us so we could complete it over a period of time' (S15). The time pressure was similarly experienced by students, who identified the struggle in developing competencies in a busy environment:

As students you need to remain very focused on the competencies during the practice, as the placement are not actively focusing on them and reminding them. On my placement there was a lot of practical things and I would have to reflect myself. (S1)

The examples of the student (S1) above indicate the need for independent self-direction and highlights the difference a proactive student can make to the professional relationship, indicating a more non-hierarchical professional relationship (Jónsdóttir, 2015) Another participating mentor acknowledges this potential bidirectional confidence development, by stating:

I had a good relationship with the student and she was open and honest and we had lots of conversations related to whatever was relevant at the time. She was conscientious and came in good time before the children so she could be part of the planning and preparation meetings for the day- I think this made a huge difference to enabling her to fully embrace the placement. (M2)

As Mikser et al. (2019) identify, there are here signs of the collegial and critical reflective professional practice and professionalism. The ECGPCs provide opportunity to reflect on and develop strengths in practice. Though it was for others a less straight forward negotiation.

One mentor commented:

I did not know what was fully expected of my student. Even down to the changing practice task she said this wasn't compulsory and they didn't have to carry it out. I ensured she did this anyway to develop practice but I think we need to see their tasks so we can ensure they are completing everything. My student also explained that she had only ever had positive feedback from observations not sure how true this is but I believe there needs to be next steps of development passed onto mentors so we see what they need to be working towards. (M1)

What the above diverse voices highlight is that the ECGPCs can give a point of focus for the development of professional relationships between mentors and students, however it cannot be assumed that this will happen automatically or will be a seamless process. Democratic pedagogies and the process of negotiating professional relations are not straight forward (Brogaard-Clausen & Cottle, 2022). Managing potential barriers can, through dialogue and reflection, be turned into how we together can learn, empower and support each other as an early childhood community (Andrew, 2015; Richardson et al., 2022). It is interesting how the findings point to the significant difference when the student takes a proactive approach in their own professionalism and learning. Two-way trust, awareness of process and procedure and the ability to question and reflect on progress and practice is of essence. Especially when time is limited, empowerment of the students is required and that mentor and students navigation of the holistic ECGPCs and EC placement practice together.

Within the data, the collegial reflection address a requirement to attend to students' individual and diverse starting points and where there might be experienced reality gabs between the knowledge acquired at university and in settings (Lohmander, 2015; Jónsdóttir, 2015; Hammond et al., 2015). The

expected/perceived hierarchy of knowledge and practice is relevant to make explicit in any professional relationship (Jónsdóttir, 2015). A 'lack of previous experience' was mentioned as a barrier to professional relationships, however, whether students position themselves as mainly learners by observing they should be empowered to see their specific journey and knowledge as worth sharing and reflecting on. This means articulating interests, questions, and thoughts in a reflective and collegial way, but this also needs certain levels of trust and confidence (Mikser et al., 2019; Richardson & Holman, 2021). This will be discussed in the section that follows.

Bidirectional confidence in practical abilities within Early Childhood placement experiences

This study highlighted that the integration of ECGPCs into placement experience, as highlighted by Maier-Hofer (2015) and Osgood (2021), developed bidirectional confidence in practical abilities within practice. In an English ECEC context of quality inspection, the ability to evidence and explain your understanding of how and why you 'teach' in the way you do, and evidence of what the children gain from this is a crucial professional expectation of the ECEC professional (Ofsted, 2021). Students therefore not only require confidence in order to be effective professionals, but also to be able to articulate the hows and whys of their individual practice. The same can be said for health and social care contexts.

When questioned, students interlinked the need for the ECGPCs closely with the aim to better themselves, gaining confidence and valuable varied experiences, (Brogaard-Clausen & Ringsmose, 2016), one student explained that she chose to embark on the professional journey of the ECGPCs 'to gain valuable experience with children to ensure I can become the best possible practitioner.' Another student commented 'as I already had my level 3, I wanted to do something that would help me better myself and gain the confidence in working with all age ranges' (S6).

It is recognised that ECGPC students have varied starting points, both in academic pre-university education and practice experience, some with National Vocational Qualification-entry routes with included placement, others more academic entry routes (A-level). This indicated that students are likely to have varying levels of confidence, competence and requirements to develop within this profession (Lohmander, 2015), with the need for flexible and adaptive approaches.

It is suggested that confidence (Dalli, 2008) is not necessarily an immediate product of a placement experience and is something that needs to be nurtured, bidirectionally. One mentor noted that their student 'Rarely instigated independently. Their focus tends to be more about learning from the staff. With encouragement or prompt, suggestions sometimes occur' (M6). Mentors need clarity around the differing levels of experience and capabilities of students, with the realisation that they are not one homogenous group.

Although some mentors found students needed guidance, other mentors generally experienced the students as being proactive learners, most making suggestions daily, some regarding tasks, others 'it could be if they've noticed behaviour issues, or children are upset etc' (M12). Mentors explained how they offered an open environment, with 'students encouraged to share ideas. Students freely offered suggestions on several occasions' (M11). Mentors in this way evidenced the different starting points of students, where they, student and academic tutors at times recognised the different students' levels of confidence also influencing them in 'taking on further responsibilities' (M7). This confidence that mentors show in the students' ability is to be celebrated and encouraged. There are signs of bidirectional confidence and professionalism developing in these placements. However, with students often feeling uncertain and lacking confidence, such proactive attitudes need to be fostered (Dalli, 2008). There is a need to ensure that this reflective culture is role modelled in the HE interactions between tutor and students, engaging peer to peer reflection, and in visits to the settings.

Recognition of Early Childhood professionalism

As previously reported (Richardson et al., 2022) the students displayed awareness around the need for professionalism and to maximise employability opportunities. It is crucial that the ECGPC students acquire a clear rationale and understanding of their professionalism and the study findings suggest that both professionalism and bidirectional confidence has great potential within the placements.

This study indicated that mentors perceived it to be a strength of the ECGPCs in how students had an increased awareness of their professionalism, and stated: 'students think about their professionalism more' (M4). They also commented that students were commencing placement 'with a clear purpose of supporting the needs of the child' (M3). It is recognised that this professionalism applies across the breadth of placement opportunities, not solely restricted to educational establishments. Students relished the diversity of opportunities, highlighting an advantage of this approach as 'gaining more experience and exploring the different fields' (S14) and 'accessing a wide range of placements and experiences' (S13). As well as showing the varied context for work with young children that the ECS caters for, these reflections can indicate a growing understanding of democratic professional identity and early childhood democratic professionalism as continually narrated with others, flexible and creatively based in the understanding of the situational and emotional encounters in varied local contexts/environments (Lumsden 2022; Brogaard-Clausen & Cottle, 2022).

Though this development journey is challenging it has been recognised throughout this study that the challenge is worthy of attention and this student summarises succinctly. When giving her reasons for embarking on the ECGPCs she mooted the following rationale: 'to gain valuable experience with children to ensure I can become the best possible practitioner' (S2).

Limitations of the study

The findings of this study were influenced by the time of the pandemic in which data was gathered. As well as lower numbers of participants than hoped, the pandemic was mentioned in a number of the open-ended questions as a barrier.

The anonymity of the questionnaires aimed to provide for safe and open reflection from the participants. Thereby, the study data feed into a continuation of the development of democratic professional relationships and a graduate workforce in Early Childhood. The participants voiced barriers and opportunities as lived experiences, leading to a range of recommendations. Such dialogue can be part of quality assurance of the placements in Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) as a dialogical and democratic approach, recognising the professionalism and the voice of the workforce and sector.

The diversity of responses points to very diverse experiences ranging from both students and mentors being commended as excellent, to both students and mentors being perceived to invest little interest in the ECGPCs or in building professional relationships. As the questionnaires do not identify university nor setting, there is no aim or attempt at comparing participant voices, as only further research can reveal whether these experiences are more general.

The English policy, funding and education landscape hinder continued emphasis on graduate in Early Childhood professionalism as otherwise promoted in national and international policy and research context (Oberhuemer, 2017; Osgood et al., 2017). In the mentors' and students' shared experiences, we can detect both development, and recognition of the value of a graduate ECS workforce, potentially strengthening professionalism and advocacy in early childhood (Osgood, 2021). The advocacy for a graduate workforce is present in the student voice when they self-assess the aim and necessity of gaining 'a higher level of qualification'. The student can potentially gain the strength and confidence of a graduate, that is essential in a continued fight for a highly qualified workforce in early childhood (Osgood et al., 2017). The findings indicate that this professional identity formation, individually and collectively, is interlinked with the development of the ECGPCs framework for

placement nationally and within the HEIs, however with a limited data sample, we recognise the need to extend on the study to gather wider understanding. The process and aim of the ECGPCs are democratic, with empowerment and focus on the ongoing negotiation and development of professionalism, and professional relationship building, with all stakeholders.

Conclusion and Recommendations for practice and further research

The article contributes to the international discussion of the interlink between placement, values and research in HE. In developing new HE placement frameworks and practices, it is recognised that flexible and open mindsets, and collegial professionalism and democratic relational pedagogies are needed. Therefore, the recommendations that came from this study are twofold: both in relation to placement practice in HE and in context of ECEC:

- Ensure that the students, workforce, placement settings and mentors have both a general and a detailed understanding of new professional criteria
- Ensure placement mentors have an understanding of students varied starting points and therefore varied levels of confidence at outset. The study highlighted that levels of confidence, levelness in practice and theory can be complex in a rapidly changing further and higher education landscape and it is therefore important that bidirectional confidence is fostered
- When students feel empowered and have overview, they can empower the sector. As the findings indicate, explicit knowledge gained from studying an ECS degree course, brought together with practice knowledge, provide graduates who can assert what they do, how they do it and crucially why they do what they do
- Balancing the need for clarity of direction, while recognising the holistic nature of EC, the continued emergence, and uncertainty requiring situational, relational and emotional labour and supportive professional relationships

This study has highlighted the strengths and challenges of the ECGPCs since inception in 2018, offering experiences to other HE programmes with placement components. The ECGPCs continue to be enhanced and developed and research such as this adds to the field of knowledge to aid this development, and hence enhance the professionalism of those working with young children and their families.

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Appendix: Survey questions related to this paper

Student	Placement Mentor	Academic Tutor
Were there any barriers to gaining support from your mentor on placement? Yes/No If no please avoid next question	Were there any barriers to providing support to your student whilst they were on placement? Yes/No If no please avoid next question	Were there any barriers to providing support to your students whilst they were on placement? Yes/No If no please avoid next question
What were the barriers for gaining support in placement Leave open	What were the barriers for providing support in placement Leave open	What were the barriers for providing support in placement Leave open
What could you suggest to improve this?	What could you suggest to improve this?	What could you suggest to improve this?
What do you perceive to be the main barriers to evidencing GPCs in practice? Leave open	What do you perceive to be the main barriers to evidencing GPCs in practice? Leave open	What do you perceive to be the main barriers to evidencing GPCs in practice? Leave open
What could you suggest to improve this?	What could you suggest to improve this?	What could you suggest to improve this?

What do you perceive to be the main benefits of the GPCs? Leave open	What do you perceive to be the main benefits of the GPCs? Leave open	What do you perceive to be the main benefits of the GPCs? Leave open
Is there anything relating to the GPCs that you find difficult to evidence (please specify) and what suggestions do you have to aid with this?	Since the introduction of the GPCs have you noticed any difference in the way that students approach their placement experience? If yes please explain	Since the introduction of the GPCs have you noticed any difference in the way that students approach their placement experience? If yes please explain
What would you recommend in order to improve the way that the GPCs are embedded and implemented into the degree and into placements?	What would you recommend in order to improve the way that the GPCs are embedded and implemented into the degree and into placements?	What would you recommend in order to improve the way that the GPCs are embedded and implemented into the degree and into placements?

All data underpinning this publication are openly available from the University of Northampton. Please contact the corresponding author for access.