

Developing the Early Years Workforce: Student Perceptions of the Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree

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Introduction

The policy agenda of improving the skills, knowledge and understanding of those employed in Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) needs to be understood within widening participation and lifelong learning initiatives. O'Hara and Bingham (2004) argue that foundation degrees have a key role in enhancing educational opportunities for those who did not pursue further education when leaving school. However, as they state, *"...the competing demands of employment and family makes study for mature students doubly difficult."* (O'Hara and Bingham, 2004: 208)

This paper offers a contribution to the literature relating to developments in the early years workforce and the impact of widening participation and lifelong learning on Early Years Sector-Endorsed Foundation Degree (EYSEFD) students at an English university. Literature on the development of foundation degrees and the unique role of the EYSEFD is also focused on. It reports on ongoing research into the impact of the course on the personal and professional lives of the first two cohorts of students.

This research aims to make visible the lives and experiences of a group of students as they become part of wider policy initiatives. The early years' workforce is characterised as having low pay and status and is predominantly female (Hargreaves and Hopper, 2006; Karstadt *et al.*, 2003; Osgood, 2006). Additionally, it demands more than just the desire to teach. As Moyles (2001: 187) argues, practitioners *"often express a 'passion' for their role and for children which is perhaps difficult for those in other phases of education to understand."* ECEC demands that the ability to support learning is *"characterised by an ethic of care,"* (Osgood, 2006: 190) and is an area of provision where quality and 'passion' are uniquely combined. However, the division between public and private provision is complex. Osgood further argues that the government intention to develop the private sector and the increasing pressure for cost effective and profit making provision *"...is unbecoming in the overwhelming female-dominated context of early childhood education and care..."* and therefore provides fertile ground for the feminist researcher (Osgood 2006: 190).

Foundation Degrees, the Context

2000 saw the British Government introduce Foundation Degrees to meet the changing needs of the workforce and in 2003 the Labour Government reiterated the commitment

to foundation degrees as the main focus for work-based higher education qualifications (Department for Education and Skills [DfES], 2003). By 2004 there were over 24,000 students enrolled on over 800 foundation degrees being provided at over one hundred Higher and Further Education establishments (DfES, 2004b). The growth in this area also brought the expectation that students completing foundation degrees could progress to full honours degree programmes.

Alongside this exponential growth in work-based learning is the British Government's commitment to developing provision for children and young people through the Every Child Matters Agenda (DfES, 2004b) and the focus on developing the early years workforce (Children's Workforce Development Council [CWDC], 2006). There is also a wider international focus, as our increasing understanding of the emotional and physical development of children is impacting on the provision of early years across the world.

In England the Effective Provision of Pre-school Education Project (Sylva *et al.*, 2004) has raised issues of quality provision and influenced policy development. Additionally, the vision of the government in developing the workforce (DfES, 2006a) is having a major impact on the qualification requirements for the early years' workforce. There has been the unprecedented development of a new professional with Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) (CWDC, 2006). The status is at graduate level and the first cohort undertaking the pilot programme qualified in January 2007 (Hevey and Lumsden, 2007). Alongside this development is the commitment that by 2015 those working in settings providing full time day care will be qualified to a minimum of Level 3 (CWDC, 2006).

The timing of the EYSEFD has been opportune in relation to the rapid changes in ECEC, though there was no indication that it would have such a pivotal role in providing an academic pathway for early years' practitioners to pursue EYPS. The first EYSEFD began in 2002; a year later, over 3,500 students enrolled on the first year of EYSEFD in England and, according to Sure Start (2003), this made it the most popular foundation degree in the country. For the first time this predominantly female, low paid workforce had the opportunity to access higher academic study with financial support.

The importance of the development of the EYSEFD has led to the British Government commissioning a research programme from the perspectives of the students, the mentors and workplace (DfES, 2006b; c; d). National findings evidence a picture of a predominately white female student cohort, in their late thirties, who indicated that their levels of confidence had improved and they had struggled balancing the demands of study and home.

Research Design

The research is part of a longitudinal study following EYSEFD students who began their studies in 2004 and 2005 and has used Feminist methodology (Ramazanoglu and Holland, 2002) to make visible the experiences of this particular group of women whose work lives reflect issues such as the relationship between motherhood, childcare and the subsequent financial value ascribed to this role. The researcher has also been mindful of the underpinning ethics (British Education Research Association, 2004) especially as the research cohort would not necessarily locate themselves within the feminist debate, seeing themselves as women who had made the choice to work in the early years to meet their own needs and those of their families.

The design was also sensitive to maximising participation without putting an additional burden on an already overstretched student cohort, therefore questionnaires were used to gather data in the first two stages of the research. These were completed at the end of Year One (thirty-six participants) and at the end of Year Two (twenty-eight participants). This method also meant that the data could provide more than just a dialogue with the participants about their experiences, as data was harvested that allowed comparison with national research and therefore moved away from what Kitzinger (2004: 138) describes as '*...an over reliance on self-report methods...*' that have been evident in feminist research methods.

The initial questionnaire aimed to gather data about why the students decided to undertake the course, their hopes and aspirations. The second questionnaire aimed to elicit how their knowledge and understanding had developed, the impact on their workplace, home life and progression to the honours degree.

Data Findings and Analysis

The composition of the student sample reflected the findings of the national research in relation to gender, age and ethnicity. The first two EYSEFD cohorts classified themselves as White British. They were female and thirty were aged thirty-six and over. All participants indicated applying for the course for their personal and professional development and after completion, most had aspirations for their future careers that would require professional training and therefore increases in pay and status. 45% indicated that they wanted to become teachers, 14% wanted to move into family or social work, 11% did not want to change their role and 30% were unsure.

Central to the degree is ensuring that students are able to develop their knowledge and understanding of education, health, social care and multi-professional working. Research participants indicated high levels of satisfaction in relation to these areas (Figure One). One of the interesting characteristics of the group was the determination to develop their

academic writing skills and the grades being awarded. When they were asked what they had enjoyed most about the course 68% indicated everything, 7% being able to put theory into practice and 25% their academic and personal development.

Additionally, all twenty-eight research participants completing the second questionnaire indicated, in line with national evaluations, that they had developed high levels of personal and professional confidence (Table One).

Figure One
Participant satisfaction ratings

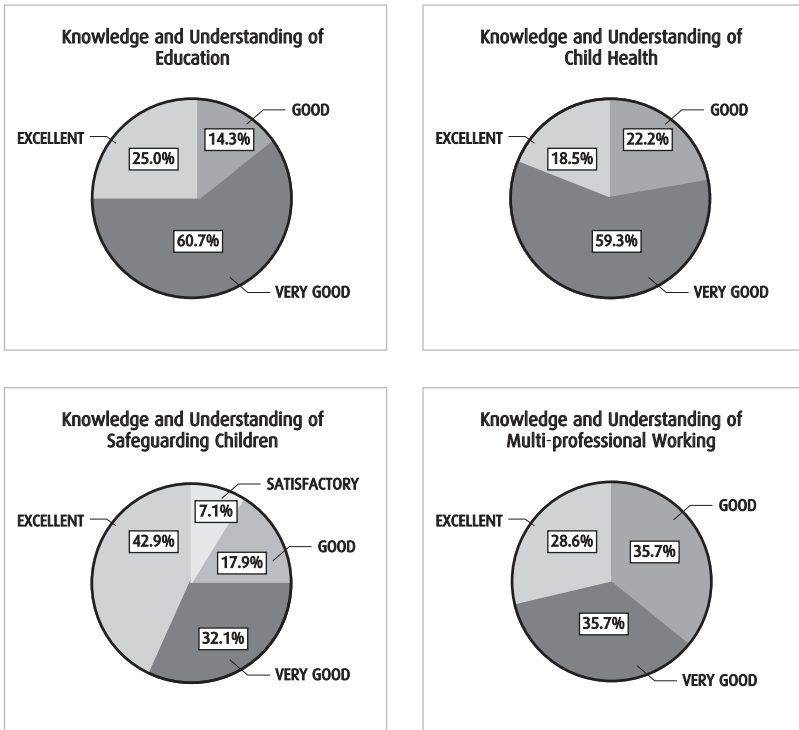


Table One
Personal and professional development

"I look at things differently, deeper; I understand things from a child perception more."

"I have grown as a person. My professional development is respected by management."

"Made me more knowledgeable, confident and professional."

"I now want to continue studying. More confident in my ability and knowledge."

The impact on their home lives also reflects issues in national evaluations. The main concerns centred on juggling competing demands and time. For some, managing work, home and the assessment schedule was stressful. There was also an impact on parent/child learning. One participant wrote:

"I have had to ask the children to help me as I developed my computer/internet skills which they enjoyed doing - they always wanted to know how I got on with my assignments. I think it has been a good thing to see an adult parent learning and doing their homework alongside me."

Two positive measures of the impact on stage two participants are new employment and progression to honours level study (Table Two). This study compared favourably to the national follow-up survey (DfES, 2006d) with a higher percent gaining new employment, participants indicating the degree had given them confidence to apply.

Table Two
Employment and Honours Degree Progression

	National follow-up Survey	University Survey Stage Two
Participants	593	28
New employment	80 (13%)	11 (39%)
Progression to Honours degree	N/A	22 (79%)

While the national follow-up survey did not specifically ask about progression to honours level study, the majority stated they would pursue further courses in the future. In this study a high percentage actually progressed to the honours degree programme. As one participant stated: *"This level of learning was something I did not feel I was ever able to achieve."* This is a view echoed by many of the participants and it fulfils the government aim that foundation degree students would progress to an honours degree programme.

Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore how a feminist perspective can support understanding of how higher education impacts on a unique group of low paid, low status, female early years workers. Data gathered aims to add to our understanding of how the government agendas of widening participation, lifelong learning and improving the standards of early years provision come together to raise aspirations for this gendered workforce.

This specific research group reflects wider research findings; the enrichment of their lives is evident. They also provide data on how their specific engagement has had wider implications both in the home and workplace. It is therefore clear that on several levels, policy is having a positive impact in the early years sector. Whilst over a third of the research participants in this study have had their qualifications recognised through improved status and pay, this is not reflected in national surveys. This area needs government focus if the workforce is not to become disillusioned and disempowered. They deserve to have their raised aspirations met through improved employment contracts that recognise the investment they have made in developing their knowledge, understanding and skills. If the British Government continues with their failure to address the low pay and status issues inherent in this workforce, the newly skilled practitioners will find that the doors they thought would be opened are closed before they even start.

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