

EARLY CHILDHOOD MANIFESTO 2025

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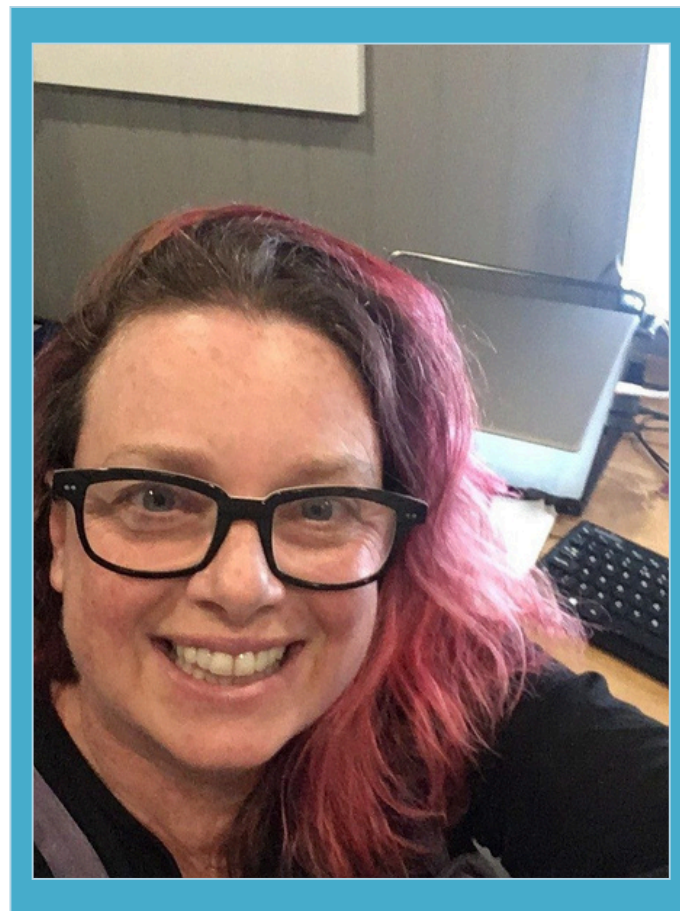


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Foreword



Philippa Thompson
Vice Chair ECSDN

With the announcement of an early general election in 2024, the ECSDN agreed that it was time to create a manifesto for change in early childhood. As the co-chair of the network at the time, I felt it was important to gather as many voices as possible to produce a document to share with policy makers of the future. It was an exciting time to bring our members together face to face and discuss what early childhood should look like if a new government came to power. Leading on this day was an empowering experience as the passion, knowledge and enthusiasm felt exciting to be a part of and the resulting document is testament to this.

I would like to thank all members that attended and represented Higher Education Institutions from across the four nations. This manifesto is the result of your commitment and contributions on that day. Thanks also go to the ECSDN executive for their thoughts, feedback and ideas. The design is down to the patience and hard work of Dr Aaron Bradbury and thanks go to Dr Jackie Musgrave and Dr Helen Perkins for the proof read and edits. The ECSDN continues to advocate on behalf of children, families and the early childhood workforce. Most importantly we advocate for our graduates who constantly challenge us and encourage us to strive for an early childhood profession that they are proud to be part of.

Philippa Thompson



Introduction

Who are we?

The Early Childhood Studies Degrees Network (ECSDN) was set up in 1993 to campaign for a high status early childhood graduate profession and provide a critical perspective on, and a forum for, the advancement of appropriate early years/childhood policies, initiatives and legislation. As a network of further and higher education institutions we have a membership of over 70 institutions and more than 350 members. Our members consist of experienced researchers, practitioners, teachers, social workers, psychologists, nurses, play workers and many other professions.

The term early childhood is used to recognise and raise the profile of the academic discipline which leads on research from conception to eight years. It is transdisciplinary, recognising the need for an holistic approach with children and families rather than a solitary focus on educational outcomes and curriculum.

Why a manifesto?

As a network representing a graduate workforce, we have become increasingly concerned about the lack of investment and clear strategy in early childhood particularly in England. The depth of knowledge in the network is vast, with a deep understanding of multi-agency practice both nationally and internationally. We are all deeply concerned about the current funding strategy, the positioning of quality practice as 'childcare', the narrowing of curriculum to the detriment of quality and the lack of a graduate workforce.

This document also reflects the need for policy makers to think more holistically than simply educational outcomes. Embracing the role of the social pedagogue to respond to the qualities and needs of children and their families, whilst engaging in meaningful relationships, can support long term outcomes for society as a whole.



Recommendation 1

The ECSDN calls for the consistent use of the term ‘Early Childhood’ across research and practice.

1 Early Childhood

Why?

The term Early Childhood emphasises a broader perspective that encompasses not only the early years of a child's life from conception to eight years but also considers the wider position of the child in society during this critical period. The term early years is a policy construct with a strong focus on the education of children aged 2- 5years. This often fails to acknowledge the role of the practitioner and academic as social pedagogue. The advocacy and social justice agenda within the academic and practice construct of the discipline of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) often emphasises the importance of viewing children within the context of their families, communities, and society. By using the term Early Childhood, the discipline underscores the interconnectedness of various factors that influence a child's development and the need for a comprehensive approach to supporting children and families.

Positioning ECS as an academic discipline under the umbrella of Early Childhood, highlights the scholarly and research-based aspects of the field, emphasizing its importance in shaping policies, practices, and interventions that promote the well-being and development of young children. As a network committed to supporting graduate professionals who are vital for children, families, and our wider society, we are critical of any measure to lower qualifications and ratios within the sector. Instead we call for true recognition, in terms of pay and professional status, of a profession that is essential for early childhood development. Network responses and position statements (ECSDN, 2023), have raised concerns about changes which seem only to have regard to the quantity of provision rather than the quality of early childhood education and care. The network calls for at the very least, all managers to be supported to hold a level 6 qualification in the academic discipline of Early Childhood, without which it is unlikely for there to be any progression in recognition, recompense, and quality for our young children.

Proposed Actions

Policy makers need to have a clear understanding of the differences between early childhood and early years and understand the detrimental impact of a sole focus on educational outcomes.

We challenge external perceptions of ‘care’ and education in early childhood. The word ‘care’ needs reclaiming to raise the value of love and nurture alongside the removal of derisive assumptions of mothering and female roles.

We suggest a brave curriculum review to encompass children from birth to 8 years (early childhood not early years) in line with other European nations.



Recommendation 2

2

Sustainability

The ECSDN calls for assurance of and promotion for the sustainability of a graduate workforce.

Why?

The contribution to children's life chances when services and education and care settings for babies and young children that are managed and led by graduates, and specifically Early Childhood Studies graduates is well understood (Lumsden and Musgrave 2023). There have been previous initiatives to create a graduate led workforce, and despite the evidence that graduate led settings provide better quality of care, and consequently better outcomes, the aspiration for a graduate led and professionalised workforce has not been realised.

At a time when all HEIs are under pressure due to the funding mechanism and the legacy of Covid, the ECSDN invites HEIs and the government to maintain their commitment to Early Childhood Studies as an academic discipline. These degrees are under threat following the Office for Students (OfS) emphasis on Graduate Outcome data (Fryer, 2024) alongside the Government reluctance to pay salaries that reflect graduate roles. The sector is in danger of losing large numbers of well qualified graduates who are now considering alternative roles in the civil service, business and graduate internships.

We have lost ground over the last two decades years since graduate aspirations have been curtailed. Pascal, Betram and Cole-Aback (2020:22) make the important statement that 'the withdrawal of the Graduate Teacher Fund in 2011 removed the incentive for graduates to be employed in the Private Voluntary and Independent (PVI) sector'.

Proposed Actions

Policy makers need to have a clear understanding of the benefits of an early childhood graduate workforce and the long-term cost benefits to society.

We advocate for pay and conditions to reflect the important role of a graduate in supporting quality practice alongside recruitment and retention.

We ask the Department for Education to provide guidance to Local Authorities on the formation of local partnerships that include HEIs focused on early childhood education and care sustainability and quality.



Recommendation 3

The ECSDN calls for quality research from academics and government bodies to support evidence-based practice.

3

Quality Research

Why?

Research dissemination is a key role of the ECSDN's civic responsibility and knowledge exchange. We ask that the next government considers Early Childhood research from the ECSDN (and members) in relevant policy developments that they make. Recent emphasis on selective research that is heavily centred around development psychology rather than transdisciplinary sources is a cause for concern. Recent reports e.g. Best Start for life (HM Government, 2021) have claimed a breadth of research but on closer inspection there is bias and a lack of criticality which does not contribute to the evidence base for improving practice. There is a need to generate high quality research to further knowledge and understanding to support children and families, but it must be critical, through a variety of disciplinary lens (without favour to one) and of high quality (peer reviewed).

The Quality Assurance Agency Benchmark Statement for Early Childhood Studies Degrees (QAA 2022:4) includes the following guidance about the importance of graduates engaging in research for providers of Early Childhood Studies Degrees:

'Active engagement in research and enquiry are significant parts of ECS. This entails students developing critical awareness and the ability to reflect upon self and others. Students gain a critical understanding of the processes and methodological and ethical debates required to conduct and complete research. They are encouraged to develop the reflexivity necessary to explore the political, cultural, social and economic factors embedded in research and practice.'

Proposed Actions

We urge policy makers to recognise the value of supporting outcomes for children and their families through high quality transdisciplinary research.

We advocate for the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies to become a recognised graduate qualification at Level 6.

We advocate for government funding to be available for high quality research in early childhood that is transdisciplinary with a focus on social pedagogy.



Recommendation 4

The ECSDN calls for a streamlining of the training and workforce available in Early Childhood so that all stakeholders and parents have a clear and deep understanding of progression and provision.

4 Training and Workforce

Why?

The ECSDN are requesting that more rigorous thought to qualifications to be a key change to benefit the early childhood profession more widely.

In recent years, it has become increasingly evident that skilled and well-qualified early childhood and education practitioners contribute significantly to the quality of early childhood education and care. They make a significant difference to the development of children from low-income and at-risk families (Sylva et al., 2014). Over the past decade, qualifications in the early childhood sector have been continually scrutinised and evaluated but little has changed in the scope and recognition for our early childhood professionals.

The Early Childhood Studies Graduate Practitioner Competencies (ECGPCs) aim to support the confusion in the sector about how ECS degrees are aligned to practice requirements in the four nations of the UK. The competencies also address the inherent challenges of different types of Early Childhood degrees and study pathways, enabling the wider workforce to be clear about individual early career graduates' expected level of knowledge, skills and actual experience in practice. The GPCs also acknowledge that there are different pathways that lead a learner to undertake a degree and enhance their practice which support graduate employability skills. They ensure that Higher Education academic routes are responsive to the changing needs and training routes in early years practice, education and the wider children's services workforce.

The ECSDN calls upon policy makers to support a timely workforce strategy to identify what is needed and how we can improve the rigour and future needs of our qualifications. It has been argued by researchers that high-quality early childhood settings can positively impact children's outcomes, which has wider economic benefits in both the short and long term.

Proposed Actions

We propose a deeper understanding from policy makers surrounding the complexities of the early childhood sector and what is truly required.

We ask that the Early Childhood workforce strategic development needs to have a well thought out process map which is supported by a demonstration of progress from a Level 3 qualifications and move towards a graduate role across the sector, which is not necessarily a teacher.

We seek to make the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies a mandatory requirement for all early childhood degrees that include placement and given the same credibility as as Early Years Teacher.



Recommendation 5

The ECSDN calls for Early Childhood graduates to form part of a trans disciplinary Family Hubs leadership team.

5 Leadership

Why?

The concept of a pedagogical lead in early childhood has been widely explored in both research and practice but it is still a title that policy makers have not adopted. The ECSDN believe that this is an essential role in any setting but particularly in light of the recent development of the Family Hubs agenda. Douglass (2019) in a paper for the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) explores the function of leadership and the role of leadership in supporting children's development, well-being and learning. The ECSDN supports the recommendation that pedagogical leaders will make a difference to quality and outcomes for children and their families. This will create a transdisciplinary workforce that works together to create a stimulating and creative learning environment for all.

Graduates who have studied Early Childhood Studies and completed the Early Childhood Graduate Practitioner Competencies alongside their studies, have a depth of pedagogical knowledge and understanding that is ready to contribute to practice. Sakr and O'Sullivan (2022) explores how the role of the pedagogical lead can fit with an organisations practice and they provide examples to illustrate this. This of course, is dependent on the quality of the degrees that graduates have completed to ensure that they are ready to take on the role of a pedagogical lead. The ECSDN is an organisation that continues to develop relationships with degree providers and offers opportunities to support practice. This has been seen most recently in 2024, by the introduction of auditing the quality of ECGPCs across HEIs.

Proposed Actions

We propose the role of a pedagogical lead to be a recognised role across all settings and as part of any leadership team in a Family Hub.

We advocate for pay and conditions to reflect the important role of a pedagogical lead in supporting quality practice.

We call for policy makers to have an understanding of the research that explores pedagogical leadership and the impact it has on children and families whilst creating a dynamic learning environment for practitioners.



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