From marginalised student to marginalised professional - Identity and the Early Childhood Student

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Abstract

The Early Childhood sector is one beset with tensions for its workforce. We raise the question of how this will affect the identity of Early Childhood undergraduate students as they work towards careers in the sector. Two cohorts of Early Childhood students were asked about their understanding of the 'ideal' student and what is special about Early Childhood students. Responses were thematically analysed with *a priori* and inductive coding and with particular mind to how author positionality, as both tutors and researchers, might affect the postulated meaning of data. Whilst we conclude that there is a shift in emphasis between student understandings of the 'ideal' and the early childhood student from a stronger academic vision to a more vocationally motivated persona, we also find it important to acknowledge our own part in constructing this understanding of our students. The findings have implications for strengthening student identity but also for considering the impact of academic staff perceptions and the positioning of early childhood studies within academia and beyond.

Introduction

This project began as a teaching and learning exercise aimed at furthering understanding to inform practice with Early Childhood undergraduate students. As staff, we often discussed the status of Early Childhood degrees, both within and outside the university environment. Another subject of frequent conversation is the orientation, feelings and identity of our students and their development over time at university. A key concern bridging these two areas, is the desire to meet students' needs within the university but also to equip them for life beyond graduation in a sector beset with demands and difficulties.

The early childhood education and care sector is globally marked out by its low professional status, low wages and low political influence (Li, 2014; Schaack et al., 2021). In England, Statham et al. (2022) describe the modern-day child-care system as 'highly dysfunctional' (p.15), unable to satisfy the needs of parents, children or those working within the sector. From the workforce perspective, they cite a lack of career opportunities and wages so low that retention is a key problem - staff have been known to leave for better paid supermarket work. Bonetti (2019) highlights the limited training and progression opportunities alongside the financial insecurity linked to low pay. The workforce is 98% female (DofE, 2023); a bias attributed to a mix of low economic opportunity and low public esteem accorded to the profession (Jones & Aubrey, 2019). Latest figures also show that only 8.6% of the workforce

are accredited graduates (Orso et al., 2024). Thus, the usual rewards of graduate careers (financial reward, professional autonomy, progression and status) are compromised for aspiring early childhood professionals.

Intertwined with these difficulties, is the post 1980s increasing political interest in the sector which is often seen as a route to tackling social ills and educational shortcomings. Consequently, policy in the area has proliferated with an increasing top-down structure, (Robert-Holmes & Moss, 2021). Archer (2022) argues that a neo-liberal policy framework has shaped a narrowed professionalism where performativity dominates and autonomy is reduced. Robert-Holmes and Moss (2021) call for push-back and resistance from a critically aware and politically active "early childhood community" (p.176), a movement that must rely, at least in part, on a policy literate, vision sharing, self-aware and reflective work force. Early Childhood degrees would seem to be the logical incubators of these goods.

Unfortunately, however, the academic study of early childhood reflects both the status and gender bias of the sector as a whole. Early Childhood studies is overwhelmingly a post 92[i] offered course, only two Russell group[ii] universities (Sheffield and Leeds) offer an undergraduate degree in a subject under a 'childhood studies' umbrella. Although it can be hard to track the precise student gender breakdown (Davies, 2023) it would be reasonable to assume that it largely reflects the low number of males entering the sector. Anecdotally, Early Childhood is commonly viewed as a 'soft' subject, suitable for students unable to succeed in more rigorous areas of academia. University offers are commonly around 104 UCAS points, as compared to the more usual 112 points needed for degree entry (Foulds, 2023). An uncomfortable question to ask is whether this is a reflection of, or collusion in, the low status of the sector. It is also an opportunity to reflect on the extent to which Early Childhood Studies degrees equip students for the realities of the sector, including empowering them to be politically literate and activism-ready in the heavily politicised environment they are entering. In considering this, how Early Childhood students perceive themselves and the formation of identity from student to graduate to professional in a structurally marginalised sector is a key contributing point to discussion.

Graduate and professional identity

Adjusting to the environment of higher education is often a challenging time for new students, impacting significantly on their identity as they navigate the reality of university life and learning (Ang, et al., 2019; Yale, 2019). Part of this is the transition in educational trajectories to undergraduate student and membership of the wider academic community. Dunham (2016) defines student academic identity as being the extent to which academic values and practices are absorbed into the student sense of self, in turn reflecting the commitment and willingness of the student to align herself with academia. In this sense, academic identity is an individual matter, reflecting the degree to which students integrate into the existing culture and structure of the academy. Similarly, Sims et al. (1993) consider

professionalism to be marked by the acquisition of a given body of knowledge and understanding, again, matters sited within the individual. However, they temper this by balancing the emergence of the professional self with the external recognition of, and respect for, the exclusivity of professional knowledge and expertise. In sum, for the student, taking up the professional/academic persona rests on personal adaptation, flexibility, orientation towards, and self-identification in, the graduate/professional role. The challenging circumstances of this were acknowledged by Schaack et al. (2021).

However, whilst taking on a body of knowledge and expertise is clearly important, so is the development of self-efficacy and a belief in personal competence and validity (Dinther et al., 2011). Whilst self-efficacy comes from mastery that affirms belief in capabilities it is also established through validation by outside sources, including such things as comparison with other students and feedback from staff (Dinther et al., 2011). Huang et al. (2022) cite the influence of idealised notions of the profession, including as communicated by academic staff, alongside professional experience and personal understandings, as part of a multi-layered building of professional identity. Thus, both the individual, and a complex contextual environment, combine in the shaping of the emergent professional.

However, following research with early years student teachers, Dunham (2016) inverts the idea of professionalisation through personal growth and self-identification with the academic community. For her participants, she contends, the academic learning experience is a to-be-tolerated part of achieving their sought-after career goal. Engagement with the academic community is a necessary gateway to gaining teacher qualification, rather than academic experience, knowledge, values and practices providing an ongoing source of identity and a resource of expertise for professional practice. Membership of the academic community is seen as a means to an end rather than a long-term affiliation, with further professional development associated with non-academic modes of learning (Dunham, 2016).

Early Childhood studies would seem a field similarly vulnerable to this recasting of the goods of academia. An early childhood career has long been portrayed as a vocational choice, being driven, and rewarded, by uniquely female, natural, nurturing, maternal instincts (Mitchell, Vandenbroek and Lehrer, 2023). Such worth is often expressed, not through knowledge or expert practice, but through socio-emotional qualities, epitomised by the 'caring' professions (Noddings, 1984). Cultural values and social expectations of females as carers disguise the political location of the early years workforce in its structural lowly position, reinforcing marginalisation and necessitating active interrogation beyond the structures of normalisation to examine the costs of such arrangements (Nicholson et al., 2014). The ideal carer is concerned primarily with the 'cared for' to the marginalisation of her own needs and identity, whether that be self-care (Nicholson et al, 2014) or the repression of political identity. Addressing the latter, Moyles (2001) examines the relationship between the early years workforce and its political sphere of operation. One of many paradoxes besetting the sector, she argues, is that of maintaining the culture of vocational care in the face of pressing political

demands, often targeted at societal reform as much as outcomes for individual children. Early years practitioners are undermined as professionals both by the trope of women- as- carers and as non-autonomous deliverers (not deciders) of agendas from elsewhere (Mitchell et al., 2023).

Langford et al. (2017) argue for the re-evaluation of the early years sector within the economic and social landscape, calling for an appreciation of care as human enrichment. Realising their far reaching vision however, first needs the spadework of bringing politics into the nursery through considerable political engagement both within and outside the sector (Moss, 2007). In the meantime, a blend of care and activism must work alongside each other; a combination of both affect and effect where affect refers to personal and relational caring and understanding and effect refers to professional behavioural competencies that can promote the early childhood sector as a political force. Moyles (2001) refers to this juxtaposition as one of many paradoxes inherent in the early childhood sector; a paradox not just of structure but one which also demands the personal and professional embodiment of contradictory forces, as Moyles' participants make clear.

The Early Childhood student is at the start of this demanding journey in which the ironies encountered by the sector workforce – the tension between submission to caring and active political energy - are mirrored in the tension between academic identity and vocational calling. Moyles (2001) describes how easy it is for practitioners to feel "disempowered and inadequate" (p.87), to lack confidence and fall into the passivity of delivering policy. Students arriving at university to fulfil a vocational calling may experience the same feelings of inadequacy, disempowerment and paucity of confidence as they face a challenging academic curriculum. Where the social/political climate in which the sector works or the university environment in which the academic hierarchy is built, is not sufficiently encouraging, supportive and visionary, then students may be inclined to eschew the difficulties of the activism/academic challenge and immerse themselves in the vocational calling. Where the contact cannot be avoided, as Dunham (2016) found, students may consider the academic encounter as something to get through, rather than something that prepares and arms them for the politics of the sector. There is also a logical antecedent to the practitioner whose professionalism is marked by self-sacrifice in the student who puts aside her own political development, as it is expected she will put aside status, earnings and progression, in favour of demonstrating the selfless, caring identity valued in the public image of the early years sector.

In addressing this tangle of competing and conflicting needs and interests, how early childhood students view themselves and how their identity develops over the course of undergraduate study is a crucial point, both to understand and influence identity development.

Methodology

Epistemology and Design

This case study exploration of Early Childhood undergraduate students aims to advance instrumental understanding of identity formation, as categorised by Cousins (2005). In investigating identity in this group of students we hope to further understand Early Childhood students in other institutions as well. No claim of representativeness is made, instead the question of identity for the Early Childhood student is a load bearing one in the spirit of Stake (1995, quoted by Cousin, 2005); which aims to go beyond description to a positioning of the Early Childhood undergraduate student within the sector and the academy.

We adopt the critical realist ontological stance towards identity formation postulated by Marks and O'Mahoney (2014). Their account questions the positions of realism and social-constructivism regarding identity as inherently limited, the former by reliance on group, rather than personal, factors; the latter by failure to account for the possibility of emancipatory change. Their critical realist model instead considers the interplay between contextual structures (societal, organisational, cultural) and the personal factors through which individuals negotiate their social identity. The model is a dynamic one, recognising the stratification of influences on identity but also accounting for subject reflexivity and agency as agents of change. We add further to this hermeneutic as both interpreters and conferrers of identity in the dual roles of researchers and academic tutors. With this model we are able to acknowledge context, both academia and the wider sector, whilst also allowing for emancipatory possibility in terms of emerging political self and conferred identity. This is, therefore, not a deterministic account but one which may help to see the way to emancipatory identities.

Research Participants

Table 1 details our research participants. These were students, from all three undergraduate years, studying combined or single honours Early Childhood degrees. Twenty-nine students were under 25 years of age and studying on the university campus, 40 were aged over 25 and studying at an outreach college. The gender split reflects that found in the sector and commented on earlier. Further demographic questions were not asked in deference to student privacy and given the teaching and learning premise of the data gathering project. We did not explicitly ask the participants about their work experience since the focus of this project was related to learning and teaching.

University	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
No of students	4	8	17
Gender	f	7f, 1 m	15f, 2 m
Age	Under 25	Under 25	Under 25
Outreach college	Year 1	Year 2	Year 3
No of students	10	12	18
Gender	f	1f, 1 m	f
Age	25 or over	25 or over	25 or over

Table 1: Sample demographic

Participating students were given paper sheets (Figure 1) with six questions centred around the theme of the 'ideal' student. The layout indicated brief responses and most consisted of single words or short phrases rather than complete sentences. Participants filled out their responses together in an informal classroom atmosphere and received snacks and vouchers as a thank you.

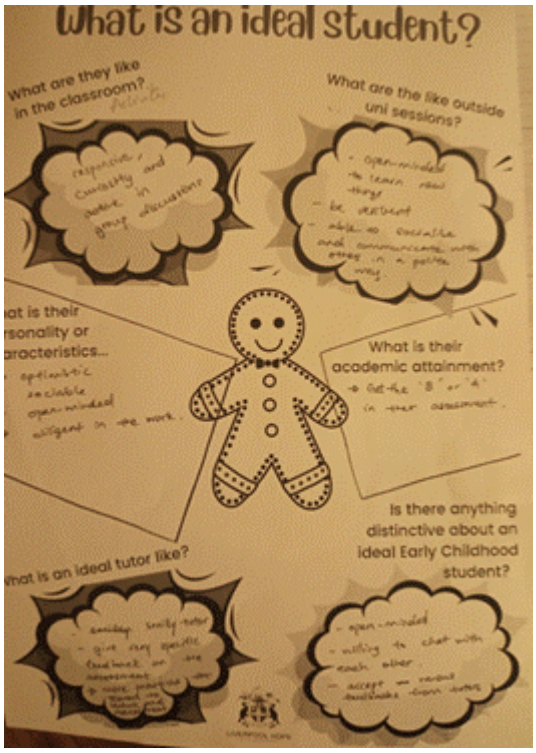

Figure 1: Briefing sheet – What is an ideal student?

For analysis, two dimensions of affect and effect were taken as first order, deductive organising principles. Effect refers to the behavioural competencies that contribute to student outcomes, affect we take as students' thoughts and beliefs about themselves and their study (Dinther et al., 2011). Five inductive emergent themes were noted and allocated within these dimensions following initial coding.

These categories were noted by the lead author and subsequently used independently by the two other authors.

First order deductive categories	Inductive emergent themes
Affective	Socio-emotional qualities Vocational aspirations
Effective	Academic qualities Knowledge Careers/goals

Table 2: Deductive and Inductive coding scheme

Sample, reliability, validity and research epistemology

The student samples used here are not numerically consistent across the years of study or between the two locations. Instead, the sample is opportunistic, reflective only of the participating students. Nonetheless, and whilst making no claims of generalisability, the data does offer an insight into the perspectives of Early Childhood students within the wider academic and political context outlined above. Originally intended to inform teaching within a particular institution, there are indications here of issues relevant to other Early Childhood departments. This research aims to be part of "a creative and exploratory enterprise" (Seale, 2002, p.108) which, whilst cognisant of its limitations, may nonetheless be able to offer some plausible account of student identity within the context of Early Childhood studies.

Reliability and Positionality

Independent categorisation was undertaken by each researcher, using the agreed codes. This revealed a core of shared interpretation rather than complete ontological agreement. Divergence was apparent in 38 instances out of 178 (or 21.4%). Three-way divergence occurred in three cases across the data set. This divergence is an opportunity to deepen perspectives (Zade et al., 2018) and to recognise the layers of interpretation, reflecting our perspectives as Early Childhood tutors, as well as researcher categorisation. This analysis is a co-construction of meaning in which tutor/researchers frame and interpret student perspectives, an exercise contextualised itself by the academic location and economic, social and political realities of Early Childhood as an academic subject and a functioning sector. These layers of constructed meaning are further influenced by our own professional and personal positionality and we therefore offer brief statements of this below (Holmes, 2020).

The usefulness of such statements has been questioned by Savolainen et al. (2023) who argue that researcher positionality does not, in practice, explain how, when or even why, bias may affect the research process. Instead, they argue, it is rigour, not candidacy, which produces robust, reliable research. However, our intention here is rather to highlight the part played by academic staff in our conceptions of what and who our students are, our own visions of

the ideal and how our understanding of the Early Childhood sector is brought to bear on student identity. So, these statements are not designed to mitigate the effects of our positionality but instead to locate ourselves as part of the understanding and knowledge about early childhood students within the academy, and, by implication, within the sector. The understanding of academic staff, about the nature of our subject and our students, is itself a factor in the identity formation of students and future professionals, so in a way, this research has become as much about ourselves as our students, and the concomitant contention is that the academy is as much part of the problem as the solution, with our own selves implicated in this.

Author 1 - I work predominantly with third year undergraduates. In this year, they study politics and policy, many of them coming to the subject and its issues for the first time in their lives. I am aware of how they will be thrown into the deep end of the Early Childhood sector, with its high political needs, and how many do not consider themselves to be people, either naturally inclined to the political or equipped to take on such a challenge.

Author 2 - Has taught Early Childhood for nine years, working primarily with first- and second-year undergraduates plus some doctoral students. My observations of students arriving into the first year is often a misconception of what completion of an Early Childhood degree will involve. Many believe that they already know all about the subject. Teaching them effectively is hence about broadening their minds and horizons to see contexts and underpinning theoretical ideas which they've never considered before.

Author 3 - Has taught Early Childhood for seven years, working equally across all year groups of the undergraduate degree primarily at the outreach centre in the North-West of England. My observations of students have been that they have a lack of clarity regarding the nature and extent of the global complexities of Early Childhood. Additionally, many students have a lack of self-belief around their capability towards academic study, therefore teaching has a supportive role to play in fostering belief and building advocacy.

Although written independently, all three statements present deficit views of students, lacking in some sense and needing education to address these deficits. All three of us present Early Childhood studies as a complex field that students may not be expecting and may struggle to step up to. Author 1 suggests that student identity (both self and her own assessment) as people ready and able to take on challenge is lacking. The perceived deficit is based on an interpretation of both students and the sector and the (mis)fit between them. Author 2 sees a misalignment between the self-assessment of students and a reality visible to staff. Author 3 cites, in contradiction of Author 2, that it is a lack of self-belief in their capacity to engage with academia that needs to be addressed. All three of us suggest a transformation of self- and conferred identity is needed. The deficit view and the need for transformation are positionings (bias) that we bring to the data; pre-theoretical understandings which influence how we address and interpret the meaning of data (Dean et

al., 2018). We also clearly bring differences, with Author 1 explicitly addressing entry into the sector whilst authors 2 and 3 concentrate on aspects of the university experience, the transfer of knowledge and building of (self)identity.

The exploration of positionality and accompanying internal critique is important to highlight the way in which we, as early childhood tutors and researchers, view the studentship but also to acknowledge our own role in constructing what it is that we see (May, 1999).

Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance for the project was given by Liverpool Hope University ethics system, approval number SEL-22092023-002.

Power relations are immediately implicated in staff – student research. All Early Childhood students were invited to participate but the voluntary nature of this was emphasised in all communications. Participants were encouraged to answer freely, without worry about the reactions or responses of the research team and anonymity and confidentiality were assured. Participants received vouchers, and snacks were provided during the session.

Results and Discussion

The responses to two questions have been analysed for this paper. These are: 'What is the academic attainment of the ideal student?' and 'Is there anything distinctive about an ideal Early Childhood student?'

Question 1 – 'What is the academic attainment of the ideal student?'

This question aimed at exploring students' understandings of the signifiers of academic excellence. Responses were then used as a benchmark against which students' understandings of themselves in relation to 'ideal' could be considered.

Results

The two main themes of effect and affect (as outlined above) were used in ordering this data. Sub themes were not considered to be necessary at this stage with a more general and abstract response being sought as a background to interrogating the specific early childhood data. The tables below show the responses of cohorts at the university campus and at the outreach college. Disagreements on coding between the research team are also noted.

	Theme	Instances	Sample words
Year 1 – cohort 4	Effective	0	
	Affective	0	
Year 2 – cohort 8	Effective	9	Achieve good grades, get a well-paid job, 90%+ attendance
	Affective	2	Try their best
	Disagreed	2	Aim to learn in and out of the classroom
Year 3 – cohort 17	Effective	13	Get A or B in assessments, complete assignments, have academic goals
	Affective	5	Doesn't matter as long as you try, hope to pass
	Disagreement	1	Improve over time

Table 3: University Campus Responses to question 1 - Deductive analysis Effect/ Affect

	Theme	Instances	Sample words
Year 1 – cohort 10	Effective	2	Attends all sessions, organised
	Affective	10	Tries their best, puts in 100% effort
	Disagreement	1	Reflective of the work put in
Year 2 – cohort 12	Effective	11	Takes on board feedback, always improving using notes and guidance from tutors
	Affective	2	Attainment to best of ability, determined to try best
	Disagreement	4	To pass the course, very good
Year 3 – Cohort 18	Effective	13	Engages with online tasks, takes on board feedback, submits on time, perfect
	Affective	12	Tries to improve, works to best of ability, doesn't have to be perfect
	Disagreement	1	To achieve enough to move on

Table 4: Outreach College Responses to question 1 - Deductive analysis Effect/ Affect

Location		Affect	Effect	Disagreed
University Campus	Year 1	0	0	0
	Year 2	2	9	2
	Year 3	5	13	1
Outreach College	Year 1	10	2	1
	Year 2	2	11	4
	Year 3	12	13	1

Table 5: Comparison affect/effect in terms of instances and locations

Discussion

This question garnered student thoughts on the academic practices of the 'ideal' student. The aim was to build an understanding of student perspectives on academic achievement to form a context in which ideas about Early Childhood students could be placed.

The first year campus students chose not to respond to this question. It is interesting to speculate on why this might be; potentially as first term undergraduates they were unsure of the question. In the outreach college, first year students put most of their emphasis on affect, perhaps also indicating uncertainty about what a successful student actually does. By second year however, in both locations, the emphasis was moving towards aspects coded as effective with high achievement, continual improvement, good grades and even the prospect of a well-paid job being cited. Affect centred around trying hard and attaining to the best of ability. By third year, the campus students still placed most emphasis on effect, although in the outreach college affect and effect were considered of equal importance. Both groups continued to cite good grades, progression and improvement but there was also emphasis on trying hard and not having to be 'perfect'. The responses, at least from the second and third years indicate that students have positive ideas of what constitutes the behaviour of the ideal student and that their understandings of academic prowess encompass certain behaviours (attending, submitting work on time, asking for help, applying feedback) and high achievement (getting good grades). In terms of affect, trying hard and trying to improve were most frequently cited in both locations.

Disagreement between the coders centred around two core themes. The first of these was the difficulty of coding single words without a context and the inherent ambiguity and construction of meaning this entailed. To a certain degree this difficulty could be attached to all the data but there were cases where it became particularly challenging. Examples of this difficulty were single words or phrases such as 'generally good' and '100%'. In these cases, we

agreed to let the disagreement stand in recognition of the high levels of interpretation that finding a common agreement would require.

Further coding difficulty occurred around interpreting degree in statements. For example, 'hoping to do well' could be coded as affect, indicating a wish to succeed academically rather than a behaviour likely to impact on academic achievement. However, 'determined to try their best' might be taken as an attitude of resilience and pro-activity that could well be a causal factor in academic success and thus be coded as effect. The responses themselves collectively introduced the idea that affect and effect can be seen as points along a continuum as much as two separate categories which can be evaluated for their bearing on academic achievement.

Much of the discussion around categorisation in this question centred about the way in which particular thinking patterns might materially have a bearing on behaviours ascribed as contributing to academic success (eg 'organised'). 'Organised' can be seen as an indication of affect, a belief about the ideal student's state of mind and orientation towards their subject as much as it might indicate particular behaviours such as organised study practices. In our discussions the separation of the two became more and more opaque, indicating perhaps that the one is embedded in the other or that the behaviour is not possible without first the mindset which enables it.

Discussion around coding also indicated that, as tutors, the link between effective study strategies on the one hand and student aspiration and effort on the other, was close. Both affect and effect were considered necessary for effective studying, therefore linking personal attributes to an understanding of the 'ideal' student. The picture emerging, through student words and researcher interpretation, is of the 'ideal' student as a mixture of effect and affect.

One response which remained in the 'disagreement' coding category is perhaps of particular interest. This was the response from a third-year outreach college student who wrote: 'To achieve enough to move onto what they want next'. This response, more than any other, pointed towards the thesis of Dunham (2016), that even for the 'ideal' student, academic achievement is a gateway to other things, rather than an end or asset in itself.

Question 2 – 'Is there anything distinctive about an ideal Early Childhood student?'

This question aimed to draw out a more specific response to the question of identity regarding early childhood students. The sub-theme analysis moved beyond the two a priori categories to try and capture emergent themes that expressed student views and concerns. Five sub themes emerged. These were: affect (socio-emotional and vocational) and effect (academic qualities, knowledge, careers/goals). After the second analysis, academic qualities and knowledge were collapsed into one category due to the category 'knowledge' having been allocated only five instances across the whole data set.

Results

		Theme	Instances assigned	Sample words
Year 1 - Cohort 4	Affect	Socio emotional	4	Kind, caring, patient
		Vocational	4	Passionate about working with children, energetic
	Effect	Academic	4	Group work, organised, passionate about the subject
		Career	0	
	Disagreement		1	Mature when needed
Year 2 - Cohort 8	Affect	Socio-emotional	4	Friendly, understanding, kind to others
		Vocational	1	Passionate
	Effect	Academic	4	Willing to discuss theories, open-minded
		Career	2	Focus on future career, eager to seek placement
	Disagreement		3	Responsible, sympathetic, engaging
Year 3 - Cohort 17	Affect	Socio-emotional	2	Personal qualities change across the levels – e.g. more confident in third year
		Vocational	3	Passionate about children
	Effect	Academic	10	Understanding current affairs, open-minded, accepting feedback
		Career	1	Work/placement experience
	Disagreement		9	Every early childhood student is perfect in their own way, good with children, outgoing

Table 6: University Campus Responses to question 2

		Theme	Instances assigned	Sample words
Year 1 Cohort 10	Affect	Socio emotional	0	
		Vocational	6	Interested in children, passionate about children
	Effect	Academic	0	
		Career	0	
	Disagreement		1	Willing to learn
Year 2 Cohort 12	Affect	Socio-emotional	5	Patient, confident
		Vocational	3	Passionate to understand children, interested in children
	Effect	Academic	3	Considers opinion of others, likes reading, willing to take part in discussion
		Career	0	
	Disagreement		7	Willing to learn, child friendly, imaginative, wants to work with children
Year 3 Cohort 18	Affect	Socio-emotional	5	Caring, kind, great personality
		Vocational	6	Love and interest in early years, wanting to help children, support and promote children in a positive way
	Effect	Academic	3	Organised, interest in policy, passion for subject
		Career	1	Career with children
	Disagreement		7	Funny, stressed, already working with children, interest in work with children

Table 7: Outreach college

Location		Affect	Effect
University Campus	Year 1	8	4
	Year 2	4	6
	Year 3	5	11
Outreach college	Year 1	6	0
	Year 2	8	3
	Year 3	11	4

Table 8: Comparison affect / effect in terms of instances

Discussion

For students at all stages and from both locations, the distinctive features of the early childhood student were mixed between the affective and effective dimensions. In the university-based cohort, effect gradually overtook affect across the course of the three years of study. For the outreach students, affect outweighed effect consistently through the three years. In the socio-emotional category attributes such as being kind and caring appeared consistently, as did the vocationally coded 'passion for working with children'. Overall, the Early Childhood student was depicted as someone for whom personal nurturing and sympathetic qualities are, at least, as important as the attributes more widely associated with academic prowess and professionalism.

Within the university cohort effect concentrated on academic qualities. However, the range of attributes associated with the 'ideal' student tended not to appear. Instead, there was more concentration on the need to be open minded, to talk to others and to join in discussions. Accepting feedback, which featured in the ideal student description, however did feature here too. In the outreach college, there was less mention of academic qualities and even in the third year these did not appear to be the thoughts that sprang to student minds. Where they did crop up, reference to course content, such as social policy, appeared once, likewise considering other opinions and taking part in discussion. The academic qualities mentioned in conjunction with the Early Childhood student tended to be expressed as person centred skills such as understanding others and considering different perspectives. The 'harder' academic qualities which distinguished the ideal student (attending, reflecting, achieving) were not mentioned here, although being organised and taking on feedback were. As discussed above, specific reference to knowledge was dropped from the coding. Reference to specific areas of knowledge (one of the hallmarks of professional status (Sims et al., 1993) did not feature apart from one reference to social policy and another to child development.

Careers and goals were mentioned three times by the university students, twice by second year and once by third year students. However, specific future careers were not named and, whilst placement and work opportunity were mentioned, it was not specified of what type. In the outreach college only one student mentioned a career with children, although already working with children and an interest in working with children fell into the disagreement category of analysis. Although there was considerable coding disagreement (discussed below) several things were noticeable by their absence here – for example professional aspirations, status, financial gain, advocacy, political literacy, activism.

Categorised as 'vocational' were responses on love and interest for children, being passionate about children and interest in children. Where future work was mentioned, this was to do with working with (in a school or setting), rather than for children (in advocacy or politics). This in turn may reflect students' low awareness, or embracing of themselves as political actors in the sector. Or, it may be a reflection of an acceptance of themselves as 'deliverers' rather than 'architects' of childhood experiences, precisely as discussed by Mitchell et al. (2023).

Question 1 responses indicate that students hold a particular understanding of the ideal student. Whilst there is some cross over into their depiction of the Early Childhood student, and whilst both idealised students are a mixture of effect and affect, the 'ideal' student does not seem to have been directly transposed to the Early Childhood student. The high academic achievement, top grades and continual state of learning of the ideal student do not feature in the image of the distinctive Early Childhood student. Instead, portrayed is a caring individual who is passionate about working with children but does not have particular career ambitions or hold an important body of knowledge. The university cohort placed more emphasis on the Early Childhood student as embodying academic qualities however these concentrated on attributes like being open minded, accepting feedback and being willing to discuss; themselves person centric ideas rather than the more strategic skills which are connected with academic success. For the outreach college cohort, affective dimensions were more emphasised. Certain attributes associated with graduate status and professionalism (as espoused by Sims et al., 1993) were not raised at all or only marginally.

Regarding identity, the results suggest low aspirations in terms of academic status and professional progression. Whilst passion clearly exists, it appears to be more directed towards individual children (with whom students hope to work) rather than towards themselves as political actors working for children in roles that address the wider political issues affecting the state of childhood.

In these responses were found the three cases in which the authors were completely at odds with each other in categorisation. The disagreement concerned the responses: engaging, non-judgemental, motivated. Coding here was scattered across vocational, socio-emotional, academic and careers – suggesting an ambiguity in wording but also in our own

understandings of what these attributes are and how they should be positioned in the early childhood persona. Our own ambiguity surfaced again in the main area of coding disagreement which was between the vocational and the socio-emotional. That, in our coding activities we often misaligned responses in these categories (for example: fun, imaginative, kind, caring and outgoing were all distributed through these two categories in the initial independent coding), suggests that in our own minds the socio-emotional attributes of students are closely aligned with their attraction to the sector. In turn, and in terms of the positionality discussion above, part of our own construction of students being in deficit may be our own understanding of affect as a responsive, 'natural' and nurturing instinct which will inhibit or even obscure the effect we are trying to establish in our students. Here we have apparently fallen into the mindset, so socially and politically prevalent and rigorously critiqued by Langford et al. (2017), that care is a lesser adjunct to the knowledge about, and the politics of, early childhood. Instead, Langford et al. (2017) argue for care to be a central element of the democratic process, integral to the political critique of current arrangements, and which should be embedded in all political deliberations around the sector. Seeing signs of affect this way in our students would be a step towards our construction of them, not as people in deficit for the task ahead, but as ones well-armed to face its challenges.

Limitations

This project began as a modest enquiry hoping to bring some further understanding to teaching and learning and has morphed into a much more searching exploration than that initially envisaged. We acknowledge that these lines of enquiry are a hard ask for students who are developing their professional identity, and the political aspects of this. Equally, we are aware that our interpretation of the political positioning of participants has been extracted implicitly from questions arising from learning and teaching explorations, rather than from explicit investigation. The restrictions of a single case study notwithstanding, our data collection might have aimed to be fuller, ironing out some of the ambiguities in our mainly short phrase / single word responses. We could also have considered collecting more demographic data. It would have been particularly interesting to have been able to differentiate between students already working in the sector and those not. We would see this study as a starting, rather than finishing point and it would be interesting to extend the research in future explorations of other settings, begging some collective case study work in other institutions (Cousins, 2005).

Conclusion

Day Ashley suggests that a key question in case studies is, "what is this case *a case of?*" (p.1215, italics original). We suggest that the facets of academic and professional identity revealed here are more than attributes of individual students which happen to align in a single school of study within a particular university. Instead, we postulate that these facets of identity are linked to the wider contextualisation of Early Childhood studies as a degree

subject of low academic standing and to the weak political positioning of early childhood as a profession. In answer to Day Ashley's question therefore we suggest that this is a case of particular identity formation influenced through the political positioning of early childhood in both academia and wider society. Given the parameters and limitations of a single case study (Cousin, 2005), this research advances a "fuzzy" proposition (Bassey, 1999 quoted by Cousin) that the identity of Early Childhood students as academics and professionals may be constrained by the political positioning of their subject and sector both within the academy and beyond.

The first act of political recognition is the recognition of self as a political being, already involved in the structures of politics and already identifiable as a politically positioned figure. Identity is a political act and a politicised concept. As their academic guides it is important that we help students recognise not only the structure and power surrounding them which positions them in particular ways but also the power that is inherent in this positioning and the potential that goes along with it. At the same time, we must turn to critique how our own positionality, positions students and be mindful of the power held in our roles.

This case study aims to further debate on the subject of identity for Early Childhood students, not least with the student body itself, to bring an awareness of positionality to the situation and to "sophisticate the beholding" (Stake, 1995 quoted by Cousin 2005, p.426) of the Early Childhood student as a politically positioned actor.

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[i] Former colleges of higher education awarded university status after 1992 and generally considered less prestigious than older establishments.

[ii] A membership group of 24 elite British universities see https://russellgroup.ac.uk/about/our-universities/