

## Language, self-esteem, and academic achievement: mature students' emotionally incited stories

ISSN 2657-9774; <https://doi.org/10.36534/erlj.2023.01.02>

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### **Abstract**

*Through empirical evidence we have found that female students reflect their emotions through the language they use. This paper examines responses of 24 adult female students in higher education on Early Childhood Studies (ECS) programmes. It draws on qualitative interview data from a recent research project and interactions in meetings. The aim of the research was to determine the views of students on perceived benefits of higher education to their early childhood, education, and care (ECEC) practice in a sector that is notoriously low paid and carries low status. The research was undertaken in a further education (FE) college on the Isle of Wight in England to establish the impact of HE in childhood studies. What started as research into early years policy morphed into a very unexpected and emotional response. The language used also revealed the insecurities and lack of confidence of this student group as they embarked on, and during their time as students in HE. Our experience as professionals working in higher education, is that adult female students can express their levels ambition (or lack of) through their language, especially where they feel they do not really belong in higher education, and where their prospects of success are tempered by their view of themselves and their perceived ability.*

**Key words:** *Isle of Wight, higher education, language, cultural capital, self-esteem, achievement.*

### **Introduction**

This research examines the perspectives of two years' cohorts of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) students studying at Isle of Wight (IOW) in the United Kingdom, and their views on higher education (HE). The participants were all mature students (i.e., over 21 years old) and experienced Early Years (EY) practitioners on a Top up year (Level 6 final year) studying to gain a full bachelor's degree, the BA (Hons) Early Childhood (Oberhuemer, Schreyer, and Neuman, 2010). Four focus groups were held with a total of 24 students, and a narrative method was used as a way of giving the students freedom to respond in their own ways. The students answered the questions about the benefits of HE in terms of professional development, as had been intended, but what was remarkable was what was said about their views of themselves and the personal barriers they perceived whilst undertaking HE. There were three emergent main themes: logistical and financial, professional, and personal.

This paper concentrates on the responses that emerged associated with 'personal' issues. It focusses on how language was used to reveal these personal views. It will consider various theoretical perspectives to explain this phenomenon, Bourdieu's (1993, 1977) ideas around the "linguistic market" and a "linguistic habitus", Foucault's (1998) discourse analysis, and Derrida's (1982) phenomenological approach to language. It will explore themes of self-esteem, drive theory and the concept of 'imposter syndrome'. It will reflect on student's feelings about HE and how they express these feelings.

**Background:** Early Childhood Education and Care in England

To provide a background to this study, a brief historical account of government policy towards the Early Childhood Education and Care (ECEC) workforce should be recounted. The unparalleled attention of ECEC services, nursery places and choices have roots from when mothers' participation in the labour market increased during, and after the Second World War (Osgood 2012). As a result, a rapid expansion of nursery provision was recorded which coupled with relevant policy and curricula developments (DfE 2021). It is important to highlight the highly gendered composition of the ECEC workforce in the UK (Osgood 2012) and the lack of societal recognition EY practitioners have. The workforce suffered a reputation of being low skilled, low status and low paid, while other professions such as social workers or qualified teachers enjoy higher status, and more favourable working conditions (Moyles 2001). Since the Childcare Act 2006, all early year's providers in England have been required to register and be subjected to inspection by Ofsted. EY practitioners have been subject to increased state regulation and accountability, resulting in an increased workload and emphasis on 'technical competence and performativity' (Osgood 2012, 146). Despite all these challenges for the EY practitioners, some of them are still choosing to enrol to HE (Mikuska 2014).

The private day nursery sector remains a competitive, but fragmented market (Bonetti 2019). In England, the overwhelming majority (78%) of nurseries are private (profit-making), voluntary and independent, for which there are no requirements to employ qualified staff (DfE 2021). There has been much debate as to who can work with children, and what kind of skills and qualifications nursery workers need (Fairchild et al. 2022). These debates are based largely on the nature of ECEC policies that seek to 'improve the quality of early years training' (DfE 2021, 2) and which 'set the standards that all early years' providers must meet to ensure that children learn and develop well and are kept healthy and safe' (DfE 2021, 6).

Currently, the ECEC sector is experiencing big challenges in the UK. Post Covid-19 lockdowns and global factors e.g., environmental sustainability, and the Ukrainian war, a number of key difficulties have surfaced such as financial sustainability for education and beyond, young children's (and their families) emotional and communication skills, but also how to support the sector, and the EY practitioners. What has become clear is the lack of support from the current government resulting in nurseries across the UK being forced to close or reduce their services at an alarming rate (NDNA 2023). Nurseries also reported that they are struggling to recruit and retain staff, which is what our research findings also highlighted.

It is in this hostile political and national environment that this research has taken place. Another significance of the research was that it took place on the IOW, which is a small island located off the south of England. This gave another dimension of the findings. The main aim was to find out how the HE degree helps the professional work and what the students were planning to do once they have completed their studies. Therefore, the aim of the of project was 'To explore the ECEC sectors perspectives of ECS degrees FD and BA (Hons) Top Up and ECS graduates on Isle of Wight'. It hoped to map the terrain on the IOW, to get a better understanding what a graduate 'looks like' and what the degrees offer the ECEC sector on the IOW. The outcome of the research aimed to examine and improve the delivery of both, Foundation Degree (FdA), and BA (Hons) Top Up, at IOW Further Education college.

**The research**

The research was conducted in a further education (FE) college on the IOW. The study took place between 2021 and 2023 and the aims were to:

- To examine how the ECEC sector see the 'graduate skills'.
- To explore the value of Early Childhood Studies (ECS) degrees to the sector.

The expectation was that by conducting this research universities can offer a better tailored programme to students.

## Participants

Ethics was a key component for this project and was considered on the following levels. The research adhered to institutional and educational research guidance and codes of ethics and conduct at an institutional and disciplinary level (BERA 2018). Prior to any data collection, favourable ethical approval was obtained. Consent and information sheets were provided prior to the focus group interview, and it was designed to be easy and quick to complete to minimise impact on the time on participants. In total, 24 participants were recruited, who were also mature students and were employed in a range of EY settings across the IOW. There were 23 female and 1 male participant which reflects the national gender picture (Bonetti, 2019). The sample varied in age with the youngest in the 18-24 and the oldest in the 45-54 age groups. They were all White British.

## Research method

It has been claimed by many authors that focus group interviews are relatively common form of data collection in qualitative research (Barbour and Kitzinger 1999), but they are not without their challenges. Due to participants personal and professional responsibilities, we were economical on time, therefore forty minutes was allotted for each of four groups of six students, as recommended by Barbour and Kitzinger (1999) for educational research. Although the data generated was less than would be expected from individual interviews, the benefits of the collective view (Morgan 1988) and the meeting of the psychological and social needs of the students (Gibbs 2007) compensated for this.

The idea that the data represents the ‘truth’ about the world also can be challenged, as it is historically and culturally specific and open to change (Cohen et al. 2018). This subjectivity is embedded within the interpretative paradigm, allowing interweaving with the process of exploration, rather than the following of a method. The questions asked were open to allow the participants to tell their experiences and stories (Bruner 2004). The questions asked were generally about the reason for studying, their roles in the educational settings, which meant that the semi-structured nature of the focus group interviews provided opportunities for the interviewees to dwell on certain topics. For example, we gained rich data about the reason for staying on the IOW to study. We were also aware of the intensity when researching human experiences, and that one of the fundamental aspects is that the researcher needs to be responsive to potential sensitivity of the interviewee and its possible impact on their emotions. It is important to mention that participants knew each other in the focus group therefore their response reflects that they were familiar with each other. It is also important to recognise the unintended consequences to this research. The aims were to find out how the sample valued HE and how ECEC degrees were received by the sector. However, the responses used as the basis for this article were surprising and the level of emotive language used was intriguing. As a result, the research approach has taken the form of a grounded theory approach. It has been the discovery of theory from the data (Glaser and Strauss 2008). The process was abductive i.e., observation into theory, literature became significant as the data emerged (Magnini 2001). The theory used to discuss the findings was used to account for the surprising or puzzling findings (Charmaz 2014, Reichertz 2007). As a result, conclusions were able to be drawn from the data about the emotional use of language from unanticipated findings.

## Findings

The overall findings of the research were divided into three themes; these were:

- Logistical and financial
- Professional
- Personal

The first illuminated participants’ views on issues they faced regarding practicalities of undertaking an HE programme, such as costs and travelling. The second concerned the impact on professional development in ECEC settings. These were the expected responses as the aims of the research were to

assess the benefits or otherwise of the programme. However, the third exposed the students' self-perception and anxieties in relation to being in an HE programme, and it is this theme that will form the basis of this analysis.

From the theme of 'personal' three sub-topics emerged; these were:

- (i) self-esteem
- (ii) professional development
- (iii) personal development

The focus group data from these sub-topics are presented below.

### **Self-esteem**

Many saw their personal and family situations as a disadvantage to studying, and as a result, did not see themselves as ever embarking on HE. One summed up the feeling of the group by saying they were:

*...disadvantaged because they have children and other commitments.*

Some expressed the view that single parenthood was perceived to be another major hurdle to achieving in HE:

*I'm massively struggling to find anything that will fit in with solo parenting, I don't have another person there either...*

Of the perceived barriers, some were logistical. For example, there is no university as such on the IOW and the prospect of travelling to the UK mainland to go to university was not relished:

*I haven't got the mental capability to leave (the Isle of Wight).*

One of the participants had interviewed at a mainland university but was told in no uncertain terms that placements were difficult, and that attendance was crucial, and that living on the IOW was a disadvantage.

Some saw HE as for other people and not themselves, and even when they had the opportunity to study at an FE college on the IOW, they expressed a deficit of agency and power. Their view of their abilities to fit in and survive in higher HE was blunt:

*I personally wasn't ready at nineteen/twenty to go to university.*

*I never thought, I'd ever be the typical university student.*

One found the prospect of going to a university intimidating:

*I don't think I would have fitted in to the normal university life because it's just so many more people and you are in a big lecture hall.*

When one started, they felt:

*For the first like week or so, I was like I can't. I can't do this. This is gonna be a nightmare, because I was there like I don't know any of these things that they're expecting you to do.*

However, anxieties were relaxed for one:

*When I first started, I was never really a university student I didn't really know how to do that, but I feel like throughout time it's just kind of sunk into my head a little bit.*

Despite the lack of status of the ECEC sector, there was a feeling in the group that after the initial nervousness reduced, that their life experience had been useful preparation for university:

*Most of us, like had children in our twenties and stuff, I always wanted to do a degree, and I'm glad now I've waited because actually, doing it later on, has given it more context.*

### **Professional development**

One theme that recurred throughout the data was that of confidence' in their roles. Many of the group spoke about their lack of faith in themselves had held them back. Their feelings about their family situations and a sense that the professional world has left the ECEC sector behind came through in this respect. One felt that the programme had enabled her to:

*...learn about children/ gain confidence in working with children/ to do job better.*

Others stated:

*It's just changed my whole perspective in my role.*

*It just made me a bit more of a confident person in knowing what I know... it's kind of helped me more being me as well as just professionally.*

Some felt they had become more reflective and critical in their roles:

*I didn't used to know how to sort out a situation but now...I can actually think back and criticise and challenge.*

*I think it's given me the opportunity to question... instead of just accepting that that's why it was done.*

...and more confident dealing with stakeholders in their roles:

*I just feel more professional... doing this course has helped me talk to parents with more confidence.*

*I look at things a little bit more open, I'm opinionated with my thoughts, I step back and think...more confident...*

One was specific about the confidence HE brought:

*I basically just wanted to do it to get more confident in my role.*

Because of the low status of the ECEC sector, some felt that the programme had helped to open opportunities in their careers that they never thought they would encounter:

*Yes! The way I see it is that it's going to open a lot more avenues up for me.*

*It helped me progress because I was just a bank support worker and I'm now home coordinator.*

An FdA offers the opportunity for students already working in a sector, to maintain their employment and study at the same time (Mikuska 2023; 2014), and this model was welcomed by the participants. The students would typically move on to other roles in ECEC such as school teaching, and social work, as well as specialist roles such as occupational therapy and psychology. Although the options available were appreciated, the limitations of the IOW were acknowledged. Achieving a degree was viewed as a way to develop their careers in the childcare sector and move away from nurseries and reception classes.

*To go into a different route from early years, but still work with children.*

Others were more specific:

*The Top up has opened doors- for example to study for the Certificate of Education*

One participant claimed that the professional benefits of HE had already paid off:

*Well, I think just that it's well worth it when it's the right time for you.*

The managers and supervisors in the sample had come to appreciate the skills and abilities that early childhood HE offers; these include depth of understanding, communication skills, and team working. However, most of the sample looked beyond practising in nurseries and reception classes, when they achieve a degree:

*I originally wanted to go into mental health ... but now I am happy to see where it takes me.*

However, familiar doubts still expressed themselves; there was still a feeling that the ECEC workforce was still exploitative. Some felt that early years' graduates could be recruited to positions which required only lower-level qualifications, and therefore felt a level of exploitation, saying:

*On the IW, schools advertise a lower level and take graduates for lower-level work.*

*Schools recruit staff that need level 3 for their job, from graduates, to do higher level work (ie teachers) for the same terms and conditions.*

## Personal

Apart from a sense of (unexpected) achievement, the respondents gave other 'personal' benefits to studying in HE. These varied from the 'love of studying' to 'validation to self and others'. All felt it was 'worth doing'. They spoke of the value of learning but also of benefits outside of a professional context;

these personal benefits included improved self-confidence and resilience, and a sense of doing it for 'myself'.

*Yeah, like I've really achieved something.*

*If I wasn't here, if I hadn't done it, I wouldn't be who I am now.*

Due to a feeling that they did were not really worthy, there was a clear sense that the big university experience was not a welcome option, and that they would not have coped in a larger institution. Some stated that the experience of HE had given them a greater sense of patience and understanding, and the feeling of personal achievement was pronounced:

*It's made me more resilient... so it's helped me personally develop. So now I approach other things in my life using the same mindset that I use in the degree. And it does work.*

...and a renewed sense of confidence:

*I am a different person- more confident.*

*I'd say it definitely brings confidence.*

This spilled over into confidence about the workplace; there was a realisation that what they their practice in ECEC was of high value. From job applications to faith in ability to take on new roles. Two commented:

*I've got confidence, when you fill out application form... your mindset in answering the questions and what they're looking for.*

*I know what they're looking for because it's changed your way of thinking... you can understand what they're looking for rather than, before, trying to fake it.*

Options and the confidence to apply for them have both increased:

*As I've gone further and further through, its opened so many different doors...actually, I can do this, and I can do that...there are so many options now than what I originally thought.*

One significant finding was the impact on their self-concept. Although it was acknowledged that the degree was useful for career development, they all felt that it had its own value beyond professional development. One state that her perspective had changed:

*The degree expanded my world (and brought) personal development.*

*It has changed the way that I think about everything.*

*Realising that I am quite capable (academically) look, I've done it.*

Although there was a sense of personal achievement...

*You've done it for you and nothing else.*

...some felt that the impact on family was important. One wanted to provide a role model for her son:

*Show the family I am studying, he can see me studying, and I can see him doing it.*

*...also, to show my son that if I can do it, he can do it too.*

This newfound confidence through HE could be positive for their self-concept beyond the role of parenting:

*For so long all I was a mum...there was nothing that was just for me if that makes sense...this was a chance to prove to myself that I am still capable of doing things like this, and to role-model to my children that you can do things at any stage of your life.*

Also, the sense of esteem within the family was evident. Whereas before they had been servants to the family, they now saw a way of gaining appreciation from family members:

*I think personally, it's a massive achievement...as a parent...you're always praising your children and you're bigging up everything that they do. When do you ever, really, big up things that you've done? You've done this and finished it, and you've done it for you and nothing else?*

However, even though HE could provide a welcome distraction from the rigours of life...

*It helped, it helped just to be busy all the time.*

*It's got me through my divorce, ha-ha, it's very expensive therapy.*

*I haven't had time to think about what good is this for me because it's just go... go.*

...some of the benefits of HE were outweighed by the effort needed in HE:

*Apart from being pregnant this is the most stressful thing ever it's been horrendous.*

### **Findings summary**

The language used by the respondents reveals the students' experiences on early childhood HE programmes on the IOW are practical and developmental, and they saw significantly wider benefits to HE beyond purely professional development. They revealed low levels of self-esteem before starting, but levels of self-worth were raised by a sense of achievement. Although reluctant at first, the group learned to embrace the more implicit benefits of HE such as gains in confidence and authority. HE for this group gave an unexpected uplift to their sense of selves through achievement at something they initially had little confidence about. However, this sense of achievement does not manifest itself until students reach a level of confidence where they can see the potential benefits and possibilities. Having said this, it was also acknowledged that the ECEC sector does not fully appreciate those in the workforce that achieve degrees. It was felt that they are often offered positions where a degree is not necessary (DfE 2021). There is a recognition that professional progression is possible, i.e., away from nurseries and reception classes, but holding a degree is a significant boost to the self-concept and self-efficacy of students and this should not be underestimated.

### **Theoretical discussion**

To conceptualise the responses on the theme of 'personal', several theoretical viewpoints were consulted. As a base from which to work on, the concept of 'imposter syndrome' was used to show how the participants felt they did not really belong in HE. To develop this, theory on the nature and use of language was used to explain the responses. This included general ideas about language and the self, cultural capital, and discourse analysis. Finally, because there seemed to be some hidden meaning in the language used, phenomenological theory on language was used to uncover what the respondents did not say, but what was implied through what they did say. This process of analysis was used to draw conclusions about the emotional responses of the students, and these will be presented after the theoretical discussion. The sample will be related to interchangeably as 'respondents' and 'students' throughout the discussion.

### **Imposter syndrome**

From many of the statements made by the respondents, there seemed to be a sense that, although they had successfully and legitimately passed the necessary qualifications to study at Level 6 (i.e., the final year of a degree), some doubts persisted that they felt they did not fully belong. This raises the issue of 'imposter syndrome'. Young (2011) breaks the concept of imposter syndrome into five different categories, and two of these are relevant to their feelings about themselves. Young writes about the 'perfectionist', where the incumbent does not think they are as able as others think they are, and then 'soloist' where the need to ask for help leads to a questioning of their own abilities. In response to these elements of Young's theory, there was no evidence that the respondents thought that others perceived them as having authority in their subjects.

On the contrary, they felt they had to prove themselves to others, for example to family members. This was also discussed in the study by Mikuska (2014; 2023) and Giancola et al. (2008) where mature students' motive to enrol HE programme and reported that one of the reasons was to be the 'role model' for their children. There was also no feeling that asking for help was a sign of fallibility; many of the students felt they had to rely on the advice of the university staff for support and confirmation of their abilities. Therefore, there was little evidence that they fitted the 'soloist' element of Young's (2011) theory. However, the other three elements of Young's theory were more fitting to the respondents. In terms of the 'natural genius', there was a sense that they felt others were more justified as being in HE

than them; they seemed to feel that they did not naturally 'belong' whereas others had more of a right or ability than they had, to be in HE. Following from this there was no feeling that they were 'experts' in the words of Young. Although they had legitimately achieved relevant qualifications to get where they were, there was little feeling that they had become experts in their field. Likewise, there was a sense that they had to put in very high levels of effort to achieve, to avoid feelings of being a 'fraud'; in the words of Young, they felt they had to be super persons to justify achievement in HE. From this analysis, it can be concluded that they feel they do not truly belong in education, and they must punish themselves to justify their position on the programme.

### **The linguistic market**

In terms of cultural capital, the respondents use of language revealed feelings of low levels of ambition and an acceptance of a low market position. Bourdieu (1977) wrote of language as a symbolic market where linguistic exchanges happen. This refers to language as cultural capital where a person's linguistic skills determine their position in society through social power relations (Park 2011). The language uncovered a sense of limited cultural capital and a perceived low position in social power relations. Bourdieu (1993) wrote of language as an internalised disposition of social background, and that this language habitus can lead to success or failure in the linguistic market. In language exchanges, actors experience a system of positive and negative reinforcements, and this affects their strategies of expression. The participants certainly expressed an idea of their social backgrounds and cultural capital through their language and there was also a sense of them testing their ideas and beliefs to gain confirmation or rejection, with a view to alter and adjust how they communicated in subsequent exchanges. This was expressed through statements about the struggle to survive in HE due to e.g., family circumstances, and expectations of life after achieving a degree, which was also the finding elsewhere (Mikuska 2014, 2023). Some expressed a lack of confidence at being a student, or feeling of 'fitness' to go to university, but other statements about the eventual benefits of HE, suggest that the students are testing their feelings to determine if they are shared by others, as a way of confirming their view of themselves. From this, it can be deduced that coming from a low position in the linguistic market, they use language exchanges as a way of validating themselves based on the reactions of others.

### **Discourse analysis**

In terms of the expression of power through language, the respondents expressed both negative and positive feelings. Foucault's (1998) ideas about language are associated with power relations through the meaning of language beyond the speaking itself. According to Foucault, discourse is an expression of the interrelationship of language and society. 'Discourse transmits and produces power; it reinforces it, but also undermines and exposes it, renders it fragile and makes it possible to thwart.' (Foucault 1998, 100-101). The respondents related to power in two ways, on one hand they expressed a sense of powerlessness; on the hand they related to a renewed sense of power because of HE. In terms of the former, this ranges from expressing doubts about achieving because of family circumstances, and reservations about embarking on HE in the first place; from being intimidated by others on the programme to feeling that others know more than them. In terms of the second, respondents who came to embrace an ability to think critically about the opening of career opportunities have also become more confident personally with changes to how they think more generally. From this, it is clear that the respondents have views about their own agency, from a sense of powerlessness to new-found confidence.

### **Différance**

What was interesting about the responses was the implicit meanings the students conveyed, that were not said explicitly. According to Derrida (1982), words do not fully say what they mean, they can



only be defined through other words, from which they differ. Literal meaning is impossible, and is a form of fiction (Derrida 1976). Meaning cannot be present in itself, because it refers to other words and meanings. ‘The literal [proper] meaning does not exist, its “appearance” is a necessary function – and must be analysed as such – in the system of differences and metaphors’ (Derrida 1976, 89).

Derrida writes about ‘différance’ as to ‘defer’ and to ‘differ’ i.e., how what is said defers to other meaning and how it differs from the other reciprocal words. By analysing the responses and applying this principle, what was not said can be important. So, in terms of the sub-topics, the implicit meaning of what the respondents were saying can be speculated on.

**Table 1.** Différance and responses

Response	Reciprocal meaning
<b>(i) Self-esteem</b>	
You’ve done it for you and nothing else.	Prioritisation of others in the past e.g., family and children in a professional sense. Now they are prioritising themselves
I’ve got confidence, when you fill out application form	A previous lack of perceived ability in completing official documentation.
Yeah, like I’ve really achieved something.	Lack of accomplishment in the past, or expectation to accomplish anything significant.
<b>(ii) Professional development</b>	
I just feel more professional	A feeling that in the past they were not professionals in practice.
Because you have more belief in what you’re saying is right... you’ve got more confidence in what you’re saying.	In the past, a lack of confidence over communicating in a professional environment.
Yes! The way I see it is that it’s going to open a lot more avenues up for me.	Career options were perceived to be more limited in the past.
<b>(i) Personal development</b>	
I am a different person- more confident.	In the past, a perception of insecurity.
It just made me a bit more of a confident person in knowing what I know	Despite having knowledge in the past, this was not recognised.
Realising that I am quite capable (academically) look, I’ve done it.	A perception of inability to achieve academically in the past.

### **Culture in the person**

To explain the transformation of the sample, concepts from the Trajectory Equifinality Model (Sato and Tanimura 2016) will be used. Valsiner (2011) outlines several axioms for cultural psychology, the first being that perceived stability of experiences is actually dynamic. In terms of the sample's responses, they felt a sense of stability (or entrapment) in their family and ECEC situations before embarking in HE, their activities seemed to be isolated and closed. But this stability is dynamic and can move. Subjects tend to slow down time for experiences which are felt as 'happy' and speed up time for experiences felt as 'sad' (Valsiner 2011). The sample have come to a realisation that their situation in ECEC is not positive, it is a semiotic pitfall, and are ready to move time on to new experiences. Second, Valsiner (2011) argues that a person does not belong to a culture, but that culture belongs to the person; this culture that belongs, is utilised for everyday living. The sample have lived with one form of culture i.e., the experiences in their families and in the ECEC sector, and that has defined their expectations and ambitions. The experience of HE has changed the culture within them, and they have adopted a new culture, which reflects new expectations and ambitions.

This theoretical discussion reveals the perceptions of the students' professional and personal situations. Operating in a female dominated sector noted for its low pay and status, and perceived lack of professional status (Moyles 2001), as well as the apparent hazards of ongoing regulation and accountability (Osgood 2012), they feel that they are not justified in entering a professional world. Because of their personal and family situations they feel that they do not belong in HE. They express this through emotive languages that illuminates their perceived power position, and it is only after they pass a certain tipping point that they realise that the experience and expertise they have accumulated in the ECEC sector might be worth something after all. From this it can be concluded that, before entering HE, some of the respondents had experienced lack of confidence and anxieties in professional life influenced by the ECEC sector and had surprised themselves with their new-found abilities. From this, they feel agency to extricate themselves from their current situations and adopt a different culture to facilitate their new way of individual living.

### **Conclusions**

This research has unexpectedly shed light on the thoughts and feelings, through language, of professional and personal development of a group of students. It has shown perceived lack of confidence and self-esteem; low expectations and acceptance of low-level roles in the ECEC sector. However, despite an uphill struggle, benefits have been derived from studying in HE; these range from increased self-esteem and professional and personal development. The reason these findings are unexpected is because the responses analysed here are highly emotive and personal. This is more important because this is not what was originally intended or asked for and a paradigm shift (Kuhn, 1962). This student group's habitus (Bourdieu 1977) is of outsiders entering HE under false pretences. Not only do they feel they do not truly belong in education, but they also turn this anxiety on themselves to justify their imposition in HE and prepare themselves for possible failure (Mikuska 2014). Coming from a perceived low position in the cultural market, they use language exchanges based on the reactions of others, as a way of judging the legitimacy of them being in HE. In some cases, views about their own agency emerge, and these vary from a sense of powerlessness to new-found confidence. Their explicit responses are based on hidden anxieties about achievement in education and their professional lives. The students have realised their academic abilities and that they can progress into more challenging roles. However, the students do not see this in a purely professional sense; for them HE has been a journey of personal change and growth, and this should not be undervalued. Maslow (1943) writes about deficiency needs and motivation. As the students gain esteem through their experiences in HE, the search for esteem is diminished; from here they seek growth needs and self-actualisation. HE has satisfied some of the deficiency needs and encouraged them to seek development. This is also reflected in Alderfer's (1972)

concept of achievement; their experience in HE has reduced their sense of 'risk', and they feel a new sense of confidence to further their careers.

The respondents demonstrate a need for autonomy- to be a person in their own right (Pink 2009) instead of subordinating themselves to others. They also seek 'mastery' (Pink 2009), and once tasted, they developed confidence to change and undertake more HE, and develop professionally. Finally, for some they found a renewed sense of 'purpose' (Pink 2009) after realising they can achieve against actual and perceived obstacles. This purpose gave them confidence and faith to develop and extend their professional roles. However, underlying this is a sense that they need to compare themselves with, and to distance themselves from, those they perceive to be destined to succeed. These conclusions were only possible to determine because of the emotional use of language by the respondents.

**Funding:** The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: The research was funded by the Research Innovation Fund awarded by the University of Chichester.

**Ethical approval:** This research project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee at University of Chichester.

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