

From Caring to Career?

A case study of mature women entering childcare in the UK

This paper reveals how training and working in childcare may be undertaken for personal reasons but, nevertheless, offers society a range of benefits that could not have been anticipated, benefits that, although small-scale, fill the interstices in the social fabric. In demonstrating how personal motivation can ultimately create public good and exploring the unplanned social payback consequent upon this instance of adult education, it seeks to remind policy makers that educational second chances and diversity matter, and that practices that ‘work’ well on the ground may be damaged by an instrumental pursuit of workforce professionalization.

Over a ten-year period (1997-2007) I taught some 170 mature women who enrolled on a Pre-school Supervisors’ course in an English Further Education (FE) college and 150 were persuaded, retrospectively, to complete questionnaires detailing their personal characteristics and the expectations and consequences associated with their studies. The women predominately but not exclusively claimed white British ethnicity and most (80%) were married or cohabiting and parents (70% had children of primary school age on enrolling on the course). Despite sharing certain core characteristics the students were not a homogenous group. In terms of class, age, prior qualifications and work experience, their backgrounds were highly differentiated. One major commonality I did identify was their pathway into childcare training. There were significant exceptions but the majority, rather than pursuing a clear career path, had drifted from parent to volunteer in a pre-school to part-time paid assistant, taking on additional hours and responsibilities as their children grew older and needed less dedicated parenting. It is mainly these former parents that I aim to discuss in this paper, but occasionally I may refer to one of the younger or childless students in which case I shall make this clear within the text.

From the population of 150 I chose a representative sample of 33 for further investigation, using open-ended conversational-style interviews to ask them about the significance of education for themselves and their families. Conscious of my prior knowledge of some of the events they described, I adopted a form of free-association interviewing technique (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000) more common to psychology whereby I listened closely for contradictions, hesitations and odd juxtapositions of ideas in their narratives and challenged these ‘disfluencies’ when they

arose, often taking the discussion to deeper and more satisfying levels of explanation. Thus, I developed a role that was both co-constructor of knowledge and realizer of hidden truths, using myself as an additional research tool to clarify rather than simply accept the student's subjective experience as retold. On transcribing the 'interviews' I needed to make these nuances visible within the text and therefore adopted the coding techniques used in conversation analysis (Ten Have, 1999), to highlight such patterns and to evidence my consequent interpretation.

Why childcare?

My research describes and analyses a particular group of childcare trainees, those who move from mother to worker (whether paid or voluntary) to mature student, and the main finding deriving from the research was that this pattern of transition was common because it enabled the women to combine and balance personal, familial, vocational and educational goals. These are women who have experience of children and choose to work in childcare because it fits in with their families' needs. It is the concern to be around their own children that shapes their intentions, and the desire to integrate their own lives that leads them to a career pathway where part-time work in the local community dominates their discourse *not* a familiarity with children that encourages them to seek work in this field, although this is also an important factor.

Antonia, a pre-school manager, makes claims on behalf of her staff that: 'All of these girls do this job because it goes well with their children', and Bethany states: 'I knew that I wanted to do something that would enable me to spend time with the girls'. Knowing about children makes this pathway possible. Indeed for Evie this was a vital connection for she claims: 'I didn't have any knowledge, only my own son'. In the words of Hita, the Supervisors' course as a mature entry qualification, characteristically 'captures the mum market, carers who have been out of work' ... as it is 'something they know because they've got their own children'.

Interestingly all the students interviewed were positive about the choices they made; any negative feelings were attributed to unnamed others. Holly, for instance, believes that some women stay in childcare because of inertia:

For most women I would suggest that they are in childcare positions because it works for them while their children are young and then they get stuck in this rut and so they carry on.

Theoretical explanations

The overall evidence suggests a much more agentic approach. The women are recognizing and actively forging a network of reciprocal links between the family, the workplace and the training course that enable them to live their lives at a pace where they can support their own children at school, earn some independent income to boost the family finances, and refresh their intellectual skills.

I'm not looking to go anywhere, not yet - I've still got a son that is still at home, it's nice to have a bit of time with him (Barbara).

As they get older I feel I can do more - extra at work ... It fits in really well, yes it's perfect for what I want at the moment. (Gina).

It's like a step into using their brain again (Hita).

The students are balancing their responsibilities and avoiding restricting their choice. Eliza clearly articulates this view when she insists:

I want the best of both worlds. I want to be able to work and also I want to be at home with my children when they are at home. And childcare, teaching, working within that environment allows me to do that and it's rewarding...?.

Indeed, this understanding led to the formulation of a model (Figure 1) that demonstrates how the links help the students to maintain stasis and integrate their lives.

Women wanting to focus on their families adopt childcare with differing degrees of commitment. Indeed, one of the earliest findings derived holistically after immersion in the data was a set of typologies categorizing the women by occupational pattern. Showing the least level of commitment were *Samplers*, students who tried out childcare work to see if it was an appropriate career for them and finding this not to be the case, moved on fairly quickly. Some students, the *Stagers*, only ever intended to work in childcare whilst their offspring were young, but others, the *Settlers*, found a new sense of direction for their lives and determined to make childcare a long term career. *Switchers*, arguably demonstrated an even greater commitment to childcare, as they chose this career over an earlier one, thereby making a choice between viable alternatives. *Step-uppers* represented the ultimate in career orientation, achieving serious promotion into higher-level employment: manager status or a specialist role in a related occupation where childcare knowledge was important; for instance, paediatric nursing, hospital play specialist, or childcare tutor. A second set of typologies drew attention to the behavioural characteristics underpinning some of these transitions. I was able to classify the students into

four main groups: *Accepters*, who drifted along taking advantage of opportunities that arose but not actively seeking them; *Agonizers*, who dissipated their energies worrying about how to proceed and what to do next, some of whom resolved their anxieties and some of whom did not; *Accumulators*, who systematically planned their next stages, accruing qualifications to support their development as they went along; and *Asserters*, who made things happen, manipulating their environment to meet their own ends, sometimes at the expense of friends and colleagues.

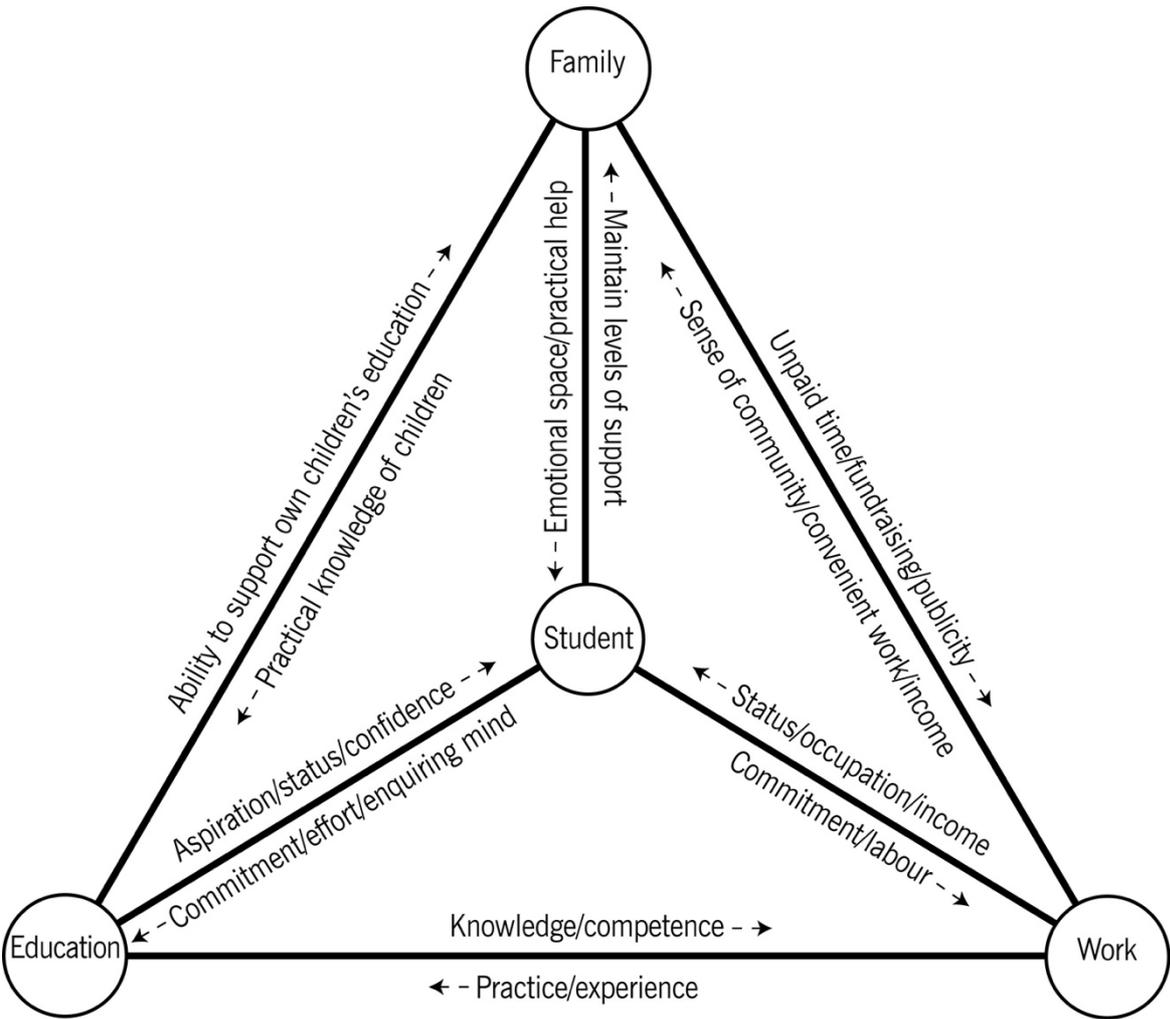


Figure 1: The Triple Triangle Maintaining Integrated Lives

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Carving a space for study

The importance of the family is apparent throughout the student narratives: an integrated life is one that values relationships. As Faye says: ‘I still don’t feel that you should compromise family life’. Although excessive work commitments were tolerated by some of the families, unpaid

study held a much more marginal position yet this was a vital element as without a qualification the students could not expect to continue to work in childcare. Students found a range of ways of ensuring that they studied whilst avoiding drawing attention to their need to do this, making education both marginalized and a luxury. Some students worked late at night, others on days off or between morning work and picking the children up from school. A few relied upon friends and husbands to take the children out occasionally (Amy, Claudia, Daisy, Frances, Faye, Diane and Hita) or parents to help out in the holidays and at weekends (Eliza, Irene and Isabella). The majority, like Frieda talked about ‘very much fitting the college work around everything else’. She used to ‘get up early in the morning on a Sunday and do it - things like that because then it didn’t affect anyone or affect a day out at all’: Felicity worked round her children: ‘I could put them to bed and start doing work then. It didn’t impact on the family at all’. Most students studied in a piecemeal fashion working whenever it was possible. Aileen ‘always had my assignments out on the living room floor’ and did them ‘when I could’; Becca used ‘windows of opportunity’ when she should have been ‘putting the vacuum round’; and Beryl described how she both ignored housework and eschewed inactivity; how those ‘times when you might have just sat down and have a cup of tea you just had to get on’.

Only Avril and Holly, both self-confessed accumulators planned their working times meticulously, and with Avril this was a learned behaviour:

My first thought is whenever I could snatch an hour really. I did go through a really organized phase, kind of later on. I think I was actually finishing off my level 4 when I started to do my 7302 [teaching qualification] so I had a crossover of two courses at that point and I did actually have a timetable showing where I would fit everything in (Avril).

I like to get everything out of the way, clear the decks and then settle down to it... When we started a new assignments, that’s when I started - not waiting until I’d got all the information ... I used to go E1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, and 8 and A, B, C, D [the criteria and grading codes] and make a heading on a piece of paper and putting my thought on that piece of paper right from the word go (Holly).

Hita talks for the majority when she describes starting by ‘pushing the deadlines’ and learning to do ‘one little question at a time’ but despite acquiring study skills, for many, that ‘final sort of splurge’ (Becca) remained a common pattern.

The Benefits to the Childcare Sector

Although many of the women drift into childcare work rather than seeking a definite career path, the sector benefits from the caring attitude that these women have towards children, a

characteristics difficult to instil in younger students if not naturally present. Daisy, mother of four, extends her caring to all the children she works with: 'as a mother I can feel that all the children are like my own children. I love them like my own really'. Frieda enthuses that 'there is something about that age group that I still find exciting even though my children have moved on from it'. Greta, herself childless, is concerned 'never to cause any harm or crush a child in any way and always to encourage blossoming' and focuses on the children's happiness when working in the group, fearing that even observations are disruptive: 'children know that they are being watched and written about'. Imogen, one of the youngest members of the group (and childless), is a natural carer, who loves 'figuring' the children out and is distressed by the staff behaviour in the day nursery where she works. She listens to and tries to apply 'the little things' that make a difference, but eventually, disillusioned with the profession, enrolls for a psychology degree instead, using the Supervisors' course to complete the matriculation requirements. She does make sure her degree includes a child development module and still wants to work with children, but maybe in a position from which she can influence practice.

In addition to this natural caring there is evidence that these students are receptive to further learning:

I was fascinated by how children work ... no child's the same so everyday in nursery is different so I think it just made me go deeper and deeper into it. I'm hooked!' (Claudia).

Training brings out latent qualities and knowledge. Beryl describes how: 'I look at children differently, what they are learning, what they are doing, why they are doing it'. Iva was persuaded to help in the local pre-school and was amazed to find the little children that she had considered to be 'little rugrats running round the place' were 'like little sponges. They soak up knowledge so much'. She states that 'it was just so different from how I expected it to be that I really, really enjoyed it' and insightfully claims that the course 'taught us to sort of look behind the behaviour' as an important step underpinning discipline. Hope also believes that the Supervisors' course has 'made me look at children ... watch the expressions on their faces, and listen to what they are saying to each other' and claims that 'you do actually start thinking and looking at them in a whole new light'. Somewhat controversially, she argues 'I think you have to have your own to understand what children are really like because children are not text books', and whilst this viewpoint can easily be contested I think we should remember that the parenting experience is a useful asset when working with children for it represents a long-term commitment far in excess of what we could expect from a paid worker. Hope verbalizes the

importance of such in-depth learning when she muses: ‘if you tie it all in together there is no reason why you should ever have a child ever crying’.

The community aspect is important too. Danni, a sensitive worker, talks about the ‘hope that you have done the best for them’ not only for the children’s sake but ‘because being village-based you know that you’re going to see them for the rest of their primary lives’. Frances describes them as ‘little people that are going to grow into big people’ and explains how ‘we loved children and we wanted to help them and we wanted to help the community and the mothers that perhaps couldn’t do that’. The women really do put the children first. Frances, who had enjoyed working with children, decided to move on when the Supervisor training caused her ‘to worry that I wasn’t doing it quite right’. She considers herself ‘very admin based’ and on learning that children should be creating their own art rather than following template ideas created by her, decided to find a more administrative post in a secondary school, admitting that ‘if it was like too messy, it messes my head’. Fiona, goes into paediatric nursing eventually, ‘right to the heart of the problem’, because she ‘wanted to help, I knew I wanted to help children with learning difficulties so that’s why I went into childcare’.

Many recognize that working with children requires superior skills and value the nurturing and playful elements over the managerial. Indeed, it is concern that some of the trends associated with increased professionalization reduce their contact time with children that is causing some to leave the sector.

I find the constant change of demands by the government and the powers-that-be utterly frustrating (Celia).

It was becoming more like a classroom and it was vital that we prepared them for school and I didn’t really believe that, I thought they were too young and so we kind of started going our separate ways (Diane).

One [staff member] left because of the stuff that is coming in and she wasn’t prepared. She said ‘I’m not, I can’t take it from here’ (Faye).

I just feel it is drudgery now ... I don’t think I would ever drift back into pre-school’ (Greta).

Frieda, in particular, is angry that salaries and expectations no longer match up: ‘a professional should be being paid by the government on a reasonable wage, not on a hourly rate that can be equalled by Morrison’s’ [supermarket chain].

Even those who stay express concern about the changes:

Sometimes it just feels that we're not getting down with the children and learning through play. We're too busy writing things up. I know we do lots of observations and I agree with observation because that helps the children's learning and progression - but some of the forms ... you know! (Evie).

Perhaps because of their transfer from volunteer to paid staff, perhaps because they are motivated by values other than remuneration, many of the women work many additional unpaid hours, doing planning, preparation and record keeping in their own homes and own time. Sometimes it is possible to trace this commitment to a need to boost self worth: 'your confidence does get a bit of a knock when you've got children' (Eliza); sometimes to altruism: 'my mum's ethos is that if you want to see something happen you get involved and still is very much what I believe' (Danni); sometimes to status: 'other people have said to me that I have made a damn good successful playgroup' (Bethany); sometimes to a desire to get on: 'I don't mind going through the ranks as long as I can see a quick progression' (Becca). Whatever the motivation the extra work is often to the detriment of family harmony. In the words of Gina 'you do get a bit of grumbling, you know, at home: "you do all this work and there's not much money coming in", that sort of thing'. Beryl's husband complains 'you are doing more hours than I am working and you're getting a pittance'. Frieda's voices her husband's complaint that: 'okay you have to be working but you don't have to be taking on board stress - you don't need it' commenting that 'he has a stressful job, I don't need to be having a stressful job as well'; a family does not need two stressed adults. Hita, on the other hand, finds that her husband tolerates her unpaid hours because she is 'getting the holidays with the kids' and he wants to avoid them going to a childminder.

We should take care to avoid dismissing the contribution of these women because their work patterns lack a professional orientation. The children, the families and the communities that use these voluntary-run pre-schools benefit from the efforts of these underpaid workers and so, ultimately, does society as a whole. Students who move on often seek jobs in school or go on to teaching, thus children continue to benefit from their knowledge and nurturing skills. Working in childcare or as a teaching assistant (TA) motivates some to train as teachers. Barbara and Irene are considering this possibility, as did Felicity. Bethany is often asked if she will go on to teach and says 'maybe, maybe once my [daughter] is established in secondary school'. Conversely, several others seeing the profession close up decide *not* to teach. Beryl decides to remain an assistant 'after seeing all the heartache and hair-tearing that seems to go on'; Gina explains: 'I had thought of teaching as well but I'm now quite sure about that ... I have a few friends of mine who have done a PGCE in teaching and often it doesn't sound as good as what we have here';

Eliza, now a TA, says: 'I would not want to be a teacher for love nor money these days'. Aileen, also a TA explains exactly why teaching is not an attractive option for many:

A lot of people have said 'you should do the teaching qualification' but no, never, I would not want to go into teaching. When I go home at the end of the day, that's it. If I choose to take work home with me, that's my choice. Teachers don't get that - they've got reports to write, they've got IEPs, they've got work to mark and work to put together and planning and no, that's not for me.

However, we should not underestimate the role that these qualified and experienced childcare staff play in schools. Sometimes this is a result of taking up a teaching assistantship. Beryl talks of supporting a foundation coordinator who has 'not actually been trained in early years'; Frances in her new role as a subject co-ordinator in a secondary school successfully 'reasons' with badly behaved children and describes this attitude as 'a big thing from the course actually'. Bethany runs an 'extremely successful' pre-school that sends 90% of its children on to the local primary school, a small Church of England school that is not allowed to promote itself and 'needs the playgroup children to filter into the reception'. Danni works closely with the local primary school and talks of the Head sending a newly qualified teacher who was 'really struggling' with her class, to visit the pre-school 'to see what we do and to see how we operate'; implying that the mature worker can help the more highly qualified novice.

The Supervisors' course also turns students into informed parents who can both contribute to and challenge the system: Iva, as a result of childcare training has developed 'the confidence to actually make a difference' and has joined her local school as a parent governor. Barbara claims that: 'I'm more confident to ask and query things with schools now ... when they quote Ofsted and things at me I'm not afraid of them'. Irene has talked to her children's Head 'regarding self-esteem issues' and admits that 'I probably wouldn't have done if I hadn't have had this training'. This confidence could be transferred to other educational sectors. Alex, for instance, thinks 'I understand a lot more how the school systems work from doing it' [the course] and uses this knowledge to support her teenage son: 'now I know if I push and I push and I push I am going to get somewhere. You have to persevere'.

The Benefits for the Students

Despite drifting onto the childcare course there is evidence that the students derive many benefits and that these extend beyond childcare knowledge. Many enrol on a vocational course because this is possible: over the years it has been funded by local, national or European sources as part

of the UK bid to improve standards in childcare and to dislodge the ‘largely unqualified army’ of childminders and playgroup staff (Hervey & Curtis, 1996; in Pugh, 1998).

In part the students choose the Supervisors’ course because others before them have demonstrated that this part-time study route is both practicable and enjoyable. Colleges, aware of the work on barriers to learning (McGivney, 1993; Coats, 1994) have largely addressed such issues, running courses that recognize the needs of the adult women. In my college, in particular, we scheduled recruitment, teaching hours, coursework deadlines, study and counselling support to mirror school attendance patterns; prioritized adult timetabling to provide students with a single base room in which they could eat and drink; and delegated administrative responsibilities to a few named individuals so that students knew whom to contact and when they would be available.

Despite generally favouring liberal educational values, several make it clear that vocational learning is all they currently have time for. Yet once on the course, the evidence is that they take whatever they need from it and the more personal outcomes described - like confidence, self-esteem, status, sense of achievement - demonstrate that liberal values matter, too. Indeed, the students relate outcomes that span the entire educational spectrum and several focus on study skills whilst admitting that they would not have enrolled on skills-oriented training, demonstrating that a narrow focus on specific objectives is not necessarily the best way of ensuring that people acquire the skills the government believes they need. Embedded skills can be acquired through other practices, a form of unplanned social payback.

Certainly two of the women who held the lowest levels of prior education used the Supervisors’ course to learn the skills they needed for twentieth century living. For Irma, the entire study experience was novel. She describes learning note-taking, word processing and basic grammar and claims that: ‘when I started I didn’t even know what an assignment was’. Barbara, having left school prematurely due to teenage pregnancy, talks of colleagues who would ‘correct my spellings’ and ‘help me with my grammar which has improved considerably’. She is now Deputy Manager of a setting and studying for a Foundation Degree. As she claims: ‘I’m doing it all backwards’. Iva, too, admits that writing essays was a new experience as her previous National Vocational Qualification (NVQ) had only taught her to ‘write little sentences in the box’.

Broader benefits

There is evidence within the data that students freely transfer knowledge from one area of the triangle to another. Ideas relating to young children in settings are transferred to issues affecting their own children...

If I learn all this I can transfer it to my children, my children shouldn't go amiss. I'll be one stage ahead of some of the other wives' (Holly).

Students also pass knowledge on to other parents. Several talk of being able to advise other family members about their children and some about helping friends or parents in the setting.

My sister-in-law is struggling with her youngest at the moment ... and I can advise her, I can say to her, that this is the way that he is developing ... (Isabella).

Friends who had babies used to come up to me ... and ask me about child development so that was good (Evie).

Collectively, this sharing of knowledge forms a flexible alternative to parenting skills classes, supporting young families who lack nearby relatives.

The caring curriculum also teaches lessons in tolerance and co-operation that should not be underestimated. Working on a HOLI festival project as part of her coursework, Iva gets to really know some local Asian families and begins to see that understanding why people do certain things stops her seeing behaviour as 'strange' or 'weird'. She describes herself as 'a lot less judgemental now', and claims: 'I have much more confidence in looking at people as just people'. Isabella also feels that involvement in childcare has made her more relaxed, claiming: 'I think working with children has calmed me down because I'm patient. ... I've obviously grown to be more patient with the children. For the first few months I found working with them really hard'. Alex now works long hours in a local shop and extends her caring to the youngsters who attend the nearby drug dependency unit: 'I mean I have actually had some good old conversations with some of them and they have some hard old lives'. For, Gina too, her work involves contact with young adults. She runs a crèche for teenage mothers in a community centre as well as working in their pre-school and this involves 'sort of modelling for the parents and that sort of thing but it's a delicate area because they are quite sensitive'. These students partly attribute their confidence to carry out these roles to the experience of educational success and to the training that covers additional material on working with parents and other adults. So, their stories demonstrate how benefits accrue beyond the traditional childcare setting.

Underpinning the student discourse of commitment to the workplace is a strong sense of community, suggesting that childcare work contributes to the localized formation of social capital. Only a few mention taking on additional roles - eg: Brownies, school governorships, out of school clubs - probably because their own lives are already so busy. Students develop friendships during the course. Some groups socialize with partners outside of teaching sessions; others enrol in pairs, travel together or form study partners. Being with others who share their aims and experiences is an important facet of the course; several talk of the importance of 'everyone being in the same boat'. However, this social contact soon falls apart after the course finishes: I think, because of the other commitments in their lives. A2's comment that 'life takes over' is a commonly expressed view. Indeed, considering the limited amounts of time that students could make available for studying and the juggling acts required to achieve a threefold integration of family, work and education, we should not be surprised that casual friendships were difficult to maintain. Generally, however the students were appreciative that they had contacts elsewhere in the county and individuals described incidental meetings with peers at other training sessions and at youth events.

Conclusion

These women may drift into childcare work and training but they are very motivated individuals who seek to meet their own needs whilst, for the main part, foregrounding those of others, their children and partners, the children with whom they work, their colleagues and others in the local community. The triple triangle model demonstrates how reciprocal relationships between the student and aspects of their lives - and between the aspects themselves, family, education and the workplace - create a stable framework within which childcare workers can bring up their own families. It also delineates the boundaries of the choices the students can make without destabilizing their lives: the 'beings' and 'doings' from which the students can choose co-realizable possibilities. It was this focus on the range of choices available 'now', this living in the present, which caused me to reconsider my ecological framework and recast it as a localized example of Sen's conceptualization of the 'capability set'.ⁱ This connection opened up new explanatory spaces and these are more fully discussed in the original thesis (Wright, 2009a). Here, there is only room for a brief consideration of the new possibilities raised.

Importantly, I would like to suggest that just as pre-schools serve as transitional spaces between the home and formal schooling for many children, they offer a similarly safe space for women

wanting to go back to work. Like Gina, many women find that ‘when you have been at home with children you do, you do somehow think the world has gone on without you to an extent’ and need a place in which to readjust. Thus it is the voluntary pre-school sector that unwittingly supports UK government initiatives to return women to the workforce, and the coincidental provision of subsidized childcare training that makes this possible. Too great an instrumental focus on training itself or on professionalization of the workforce, could unwittingly destroy a system that works. Quite apart from the step-uppers, who go on to develop serious careers, all the women in this study make a valuable contribution to society reminding us that policy-makers should consider hidden benefits too, the wealth of unplanned social payback, when seeking to expand and professionalize the childcare workforce

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ⁱ The Capability Approach is a flexible, theoretical framework developed by economist Amartya Sen (eg: 1985a, 1985b, 1987, 1992, 1999) that places individual choice at the centre of the decision-making process. It explains how governments could facilitate this by providing people with a range of opportunities rather than a single optimal option identified through the economic calculations of utility maximization. It seeks to delineate a means of empowering societies, focusing primarily on the developing world where current practices keep many, particularly women and children, in positions of deprivation within patriarchal family structures. Sen theorizes that choice is neither rational nor random, but bounded. Each individual has a ‘capability set’ of potentially realizable alternatives from which to select compatible options for implementation; a process Sen describes as turning capabilities into ‘functionings’. Sen places the attention on this process of choosing. His discourse of people selecting ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ that matter to them individually relates to the present, on the achievement of functionings that support a current satisfactory lifestyle, rather than distant future attainments. The capability approach has an affinity with many liberal strategic positions in favouring diversity and is to be locally applied, each group determining their own priorities, and thereby taking responsibility for their own lives (Wright, 2009b).