

From individual choice to social good

Hazel R. Wright, Anglia Ruskin University

Introduction

This paper describes how a group of adult women students from a range of social and educational backgrounds pursued personal goals aimed at integrating their lives around the three core foci of family, work and education and how their actions unintentionally contributed to the social good in their community. It uses detail from individual narratives to illuminate the broader social benefits that arise from people choosing their own lifestyles, in a reversal of the normative top-down processes associated with policy-making.

Research context

The discussion is supported by data taken from a research project that initially set out to explore the student experience of adult education but found, in process, that there was a much broader story to tell, one that draws upon students' biographies and their life choices. The emergent nature of this research is discussed in detail in a reflective article on methodology (Wright, 2009) and a monograph *Women Studying Childcare: Integrating Lives Through Adult Education* (Wright, 2011) but the basic research design is outlined here. This was a study of 33 women who enrolled on a childcare diploma over a ten-year period from 1997 to 2006 (selected from and typical of the 150 who returned background questionnaires). The students signed up for a vocational diploma course in an English Further Education college and many (but not all) had taken this opportunity after a period of volunteering in their own children's pre-school settings. They enrolled on the course because it was convenient, affordable (supported by the local authority) and fitted around their family obligations. However, on completion they acquired a level three vocational qualification (equivalent to an English A-level) and this opened up many new opportunities. For all students it provided a licence to practice, and several existing science and liberal arts graduates valued this focus, using it to develop a career in childcare. For some, achievement at level three in a post-compulsory context made it possible to enrol on a Foundation Degree, so the diploma contributed to the widening participation agenda.

The study developed a "recall" methodology with the researcher using psychosocial interviewing techniques (a variant of close listening skills) (Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) to assist the students in probing their own stories for deeper meaning. Interviews were taped and transcribed in full and where necessary conversation analysis coding (Ten Have, 1999) was used to clarify the construction of shared meaning. Analysis was carried out as broadly as possible. Following Richardson's (2000) lead, I adopted a process of analysis-through-writing that encouraged immersion in the data and enabled holistic interpretation as well as within-narrative and cross-narrative (thematic) analysis. Scrutiny of the data raised new queries even as I sought to answer the basic research questions: "What is the student experience in adult education?" and "What are the expectations, the practices, and the consequences?". In particular I needed to understand how women who described very busy lives, straining to manage the competing demands of family, work and study, also claimed high levels of well-being. To generalize, the women were lowly paid but mostly content to live in the present rather than striving for future gain, wanting the "best of both worlds" rather than an escape from domesticity as is more common in studies of women's education (Edwards, 1993; Pascall and Cox, 1993; Merrill, 1999;

Parr, 2000) and this aspect of the research is given due attention in an article in *Gender and Education* (Wright, 2012b). I came to understand that it was the reciprocal relationships connecting their family, work and study commitments that made the women's lives manageable and satisfying and that this complex triangle of interdependent needs maintained their lives in stasis. This focus on current "beings" and "doings" led to adoption of Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA), a policy initiative that argues for the individual and collective freedom to choose "what life we lead and what we can or cannot do" (Sen, 1987 p.16) and offers a means of linking individual choice to social good. My contribution to the operationalization of this theory is detailed elsewhere (Wright, 2012a; see also Wright, 2012d for a discussion of the effects of part-time work on learning processes) but here it is important to note that the CA offers a relevant policy framework. This paper links the interview data to existing government policy. It builds on an earlier publication that examined the research material in an Early Years context (Wright, 2012c) to demonstrate the value of a flexible vocational training course like the diploma to the field, knowing that it was to be replaced by a standardized childcare course that assesses practical knowledge but offers little opportunity for further personal development and so, perhaps, limits the social good to the stated objective of better practice in the workplace.

Student expectations

The demise of the childcare diploma is unfortunate but the research project offers insights with a more general application. It demonstrates how a course can be vocational in nature yet support students in many different ways. It shows, too, how the achievement of personal ends can benefit society – not necessarily in ways that policy makers intend. Asked to comment on the purposes of education, the participants expressed a broad range of views that show considerable insight.

Arianne captures the notion of lifelong learning in her comment that:

You can be taught something when you are very, very young and that is relevant then but you need ongoing teaching and learning and training in it to actually keep up with the world with everything, you know ...

Amy neatly encapsulates the arguments underpinning this paper, identifying both personal achievement and social good.

I think in a way it's about ... fulfilling your potential as an individual, about improving society as a whole ... and there is the vocational side of it obviously. It is important but I see it as more than that. It's a civilizing influence, I suppose.

Aileen draws attention to the importance of choice.

... some people do educational courses just for the fun of it, they don't need an English ... degree whatever but they just like English literature and they do the course. Other people want to go on to teach English as a language and therefore need a qualification, so... Choose, definitely choice vocational or pleasure.

In contrast, Alex recognizes the constraints on freedom to choose when this conflicts with other people's needs:

I think sometimes your personal life, you know, pushes you into one route. If everybody was really, really selfish and thought right I am only going to do this because *I* want to then I suppose we would all go down different routes but sometimes we have others to think about as well...

Others take a more pragmatic stance identifying functional skills, confidence, motivation, and career progression, but also deeper understanding.

To educate people to a certain, if not basic, standard. As long as everybody can read and write and do basic sums we are half way there so if we can educate them more... Definitely functional. (Aileen)

I think the qualifications give you the confidence ... and I'm not saying that I'm any better at it, for having them than I was before but I think it gives YOU the confidence to know that you know that you've got the background. (Faye)

It increases confidence, you have more confidence, obviously you can get a better job. (Ingrid)

... actually understanding why we do *do* things and then being able to have, form, an opinion about whether that's sensible or not but unless you've got the education that's difficult to do. (Danni)

From individualized benefits to social good

At the individual level, women were pursuing a hybrid mix of objectives but those with children (the majority) expressed a desire to integrate their lives, avoiding cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) by making childcare the focus of family commitment, study and work; all part-time. They talk repeatedly about the importance of flexible working hours, about fitting study around their family commitments and about studying to get a qualification that will protect their current employability, validate what they are doing, and be useful in the future. However, this longer-term aim remains comfortably distant. There is a general feeling that change will happen gradually when the time is right. When the children are old enough to cope, mothers will (and do) consider different arrangements. The participants frequently stated this for themselves but it is also clearly said by a manager who took part in the study. Arianne explains: 'All of these girls, do this job because it goes well with their children'.

Thus childcare work benefits the individual mother and her children and is often viewed positively by the father, too. Heena explains that her partner dislikes the idea of sending their children to be cared for by strangers: "my husband has never been happy with putting my kids in with a childminder". Ease of transition between caring within the home and in the community setting provides the workplace with a steady flow of carers and this benefits society. For some women, childcare work is a temporary activity, "it was appropriate while the children were small certainly", but this transience does not imply poor quality. Indeed, the evidence from the research is that 'stagers' (who see childcare work as a short-term commitment) are highly motivated carers during the period when they work in childcare. In undertaking training, they act as agents for change and support government plans to raise standards within the workforce (Dahlberg and Moss, 2005). Those who continue and develop careers in the profession, becoming graduate leaders or Early Years Professionals, support new initiatives to raise quality over the longer term.

However, this positive interpretation is open to challenge within Early Years discourse. Urban (2008, p.137) states that European "political agendas are driven by common concerns about employment, competitiveness and gender equality" and cites the OECD (2006, p.12) "wish to increase women's labour market participation" as an underpinning objective for Early Years reform. In effect, European governments are focusing on childcare work as it has the potential to meet multiple objectives simultaneously. Expanded nursery provision directly increases female participation in

the workforce and indirectly enables other mothers to enter paid work beyond the field. Thus it is an essential element in the “welfare to work” agenda (Levitas, 1998). However, the “quality” objective is often confounded with the debate around “professionalism” which Osgood (2009, p.747) construes as a “highly politicised construct” creating a deficit model of childcare work in order to disempower practitioners and legitimize the imposition of a centralized vision of good practice. Thus the demand for quality improvement becomes a means of claiming control of the Early Years sector. Certainly, the closure of the diploma raises questions about the outcomes (and possibly the intentions) of the processes of reform. The closure is an indirect (and negative) outcome of the Children’s Workforce Development Council (CWDC) being charged with “simplifying and streamlining the sector so that career pathways are less confusing and opportunities for progression more readily understandable and available” (ibid, p.734).

Indirect benefits to society

The research evidence provides examples of unplanned social payback consequent upon the women’s pursuit of their individual plans to qualify to work in childcare. My theorization that the women’s lives are bounded by or integrated through a “triangle” of interdependent concerns demonstrates the connectivity between family, work and study and this shared focus encourages women to link their own learning with that of their children. Many of the women talk about better understanding their children’s needs, being able to help their children study and having their older children help them to study. This is a form of intergenerational learning, a core focus of the European policy for Lifelong Learning publicized by the 1993 *European year of solidarity between generations* and an accepted social good. According to a NIACE study supported by the Department for Industry, Universities and Schools (Thomas, 2009), the UK was slow to take up the notion of intergenerational learning but in 2007 the European Commission (EC) encouraged member states to “establish a new solidarity between the generations” to secure social capital in ageing societies (EMIL, 2012). Early contributions to the Informal Adult Learning Review (2009-2012) saw learning within families as a way of “breaking the cycle of disadvantage and enhancing parenting skills” (Thomas, 2009, p.4) and the UK became a member of the European Network for Intergenerational Learning (ENIL) Project established in 2011 (supported by the EC) to encourage countries to share good practice in this field.

Voluntary pre-school settings are staffed by, and accessible to, members of the local community and the Early Years diploma operated an open recruitment policy, so both were inclusive in nature and attended by a cross-section of society. Thus, they played a role in involving “hard-to reach” parents – “those who are deemed to inhabit the fringes of school, or society as a whole – who are socially excluded and who, seemingly, need to be ‘brought in’ and re-engaged as stakeholders” (Levitas, 1998 in Crozier and Davis, 2007, p.295). “Hard-to-reach parents” is a contested term; more often the parents are excluded by practices in the establishments that so label them. Indeed, Crozier and Davies (2007, p.311) researching this subject, found that “schools expend huge amounts of energy, time and resources in sending out information to parents” unaware that “it is not an effective way of ‘involving’ parents or empowering them to take a more proactive role”. Sending out information is uni-directional: it does not deal with the barriers to inclusion that the schools unwittingly erect. This requires educational institutions to adopt user-friendly practices, to listen to parents’ needs and share power more equitably.

Community settings are more informal than schools and this makes it easier to consult families, a process encouraged in the vocational training course. At interview, some students talk about learning to be more inclusive (and are therefore directly increasing the social good). Some accounts are straightforward. Ingrid describes how, as a result of carrying out a planned activity in her group, she invited parents and grandparents to celebrate Holi and is now more comfortable with cultural diversity “because I know now why they do that” and this boosts her self-esteem: “I feel as though I am a lot nicer person for it, as well”. Other accounts are more nuanced. Arianne describes how her pre-school group learned to recognize the needs of a grandmother who spoke no English and was isolated within her rural community. As her daughter worked, she had been bringing her grandchild to the setting daily and staying to take him home again by bus. Believing this to be inconvenient, the setting manager arranged for another parent to give the child a lift. However, after two weeks the mother came in specially to ask them to review this arrangement. The grandmother relied on her daily contact with the pre-school for company. Observing the group in session was greatly preferable to staying at home alone. The grandmother liked to make a contribution and, unasked, collected together coffee cups and undertook their washing up. Perhaps, over time, there will be language benefits too from watching children at play, maybe efforts to join in the play.

Pre-school training covers child development and behaviour management strategies (among other subjects) and workers often share their knowledge with other parents and family members. In contemporary communities where young parents live at a distance from older relatives the pre-school may become the source of informal advice about children, disseminating parenting skills in the community. (“Friends who had babies... wanted to know what was normal at what age”.) This too contributes to the social good. In the UK, the Government has had to legislate to make good the deficit of knowledge on parenting. The 1998 Crime and Disorder Act introduced Parenting Orders for those whose children broke the law and this was extended to education to cover excluded children and truants in 2004 because many parents were proving unwilling or incapable of disciplining their children. It is surely better to minimize compulsion and stigma by making advice, guidance and good role models available informally within local communities.

Parental involvement in the Early Years sector often leads to interest in other aspects of education and this is also a social good. Students talked about helping in their children’s schools and several (6 of the 33) went on to work as teaching assistants on qualifying, seeking more regular hours and working conditions. Others talked about being more confident in asking schools for support with problems their children encountered (“if the same kind of problems appear I will respond much more quickly”) but some still found this prospect too daunting (“I didn’t do anything about it - I’m too much of a coward”). One developed the confidence to become a school governor and directly attributed this to her training (“I put myself forward for the parent-governors at the school which I would never have dreamed of doing before”). Parental involvement in schools is a social good that has progressively developed in terms of rights and representation since the 1967 Plowden Report acknowledged that working with parents was beneficial to children’s education (Hornby, 2000). More recently the importance of parental involvement was formalized in the White Paper *Excellence in Schools* (DfEE, 1997). Indeed, it is claimed that “one of the major concerns in running a modern school is trying to get parents to engage more” (Campbell, 2011, p.4) and that the goal is “engagement” with children’s learning

rather than simple involvement with processes of schooling such as parents' evenings. Thus, in policy terms the local pre-school extends the social good by establishing patterns of parental involvement that may persist as families progress through successive educational sectors.

Parents choosing pre-school work appear to contribute significantly to safe practice within settings, a point I briefly mentioned in the conclusion to my book (Wright, 2011) but would like to develop further here. Parents who volunteer to work in settings have already adjusted to the needs of small children. As Frances says, they see them as "little people that are going to grow into big people" and most have realistic expectations based on their experience. When parents work in settings, children are cared for by people who know about them and care about them and many of the study participants see childcare as a vocation rather than a "job". A mix of volunteers and paid staff usually means that children are cared for by members of the community in which they live, so the community takes a collective responsibility for the youngsters, developing a positive ethos founded on trust; an important social good. In a community pre-school that welcomes parent helpers, a range of parents are continually coming and going and this open access itself reduces the likelihood of abusive relationships developing. There is growing evidence that despite universal Criminal Records Bureau checks on personnel such activities are harder to prevent within the closed environment of the private day nursery, as recent investigations in Plymouth (Morris, 2010), Welwyn Garden City (Metro News, 2010), Winfrith, Dorset (Lusher, 2011), Birmingham (Carter, 2011) and South Lanarkshire (BBC News, 2012) attest. In making a case for parent volunteers I am not condoning unpaid work or the low levels of pay that many childcare workers receive nor am I arguing against professionalization *per se*, but I do believe that commodification of childcare is potentially double-edged. Better pay may encourage more highly qualified workers into the sector but it also increases the extrinsic reasons for undertaking the work and the latter may not always be in the best interests of the children.

The confluence of family, work and study interests creates networks of reciprocal relationships that bind together parent, workplace and student roles, and commits the participants to serving their local community. This fosters social capital development at a local level for it creates the "connections among individuals - social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness" so essential to the social good (Putnam, 2000, p.19). Thus, in pursuing their own ends the individual childcare students make a significant contribution to the social good of their community, and collectively, to society in general.

References

- BBC News (2012), "South Lanarkshire nursery worker admits sex abuse of toddlers", 10 May, available at www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-glasgow-west-18023422 (accessed 10 November 2012).
- Campbell, C. (2011), *How to Involve Hard-to-reach Parents: Encouraging meaningful parental involvement with schools*, Research Associate Full Report, National College for School Leadership, Nottingham.
- Carter, H. (2011), "Nursery worker admits raping child", Guardian, 7 June, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2011/jun/07/nursery-worker-admits-raping-toddler> (accessed 10 November 2012).

- Crozier, G. and Davies, J. (2007), "Hard to reach parents or hard to reach schools? A discussion of home-school relations, with particular reference to Bangladeshi and Pakistani parents", *British Educational Research Journal*, Vol.33 No. 3, pp. 295-313.
- Dahlberg, G. and Moss, P. (2005), *Ethics and Politics in Early Childhood Education*, RoutledgeFalmer, London.
- DfEE (2007), *Excellence in Schools*, CM 3681, Department for Education and Employment, London.
- Edwards, R. (1993), *Mature Women Students: Separating or connecting family and education*, Taylor & Francis, London.
- EMIL (European Map of Intergenerational learning) (2012), What is Intergenerational learning?, available at <http://www.emil-network.eu/about/what-is-intergenerational-learning/> (accessed 13 July 2012).
- Festinger, L. (1957), *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, Stanford University Press, Stanford.
- Hollway, W. and Jefferson, T. (2000), *Doing Qualitative Research Differently: Free association, narrative and the interview method*, Sage, London.
- Hornby, H. (2000), *Improving Parental Involvement*, Cassell, London.
- Levitas, R. (1998), *The Inclusive Society? Social exclusion and New Labour*, Macmillan, London.
- Lusher, A. (2011), "Nursery worker arrested amid allegations of sexual assault against a child", The Telegraph, 5 February, available at <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/uknews/crime/8305867/Nursery-worker-arrested-amid-allegations-of-sexual-assault-against-a-child.html> (accessed 10 November 2012).
- Merrill, B. (1999), *Gender, Change and Identity: Mature women students in universities*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Metro News (2010), "Nursery workers given suspended sentences for abusing 2-yr-old", 26 October, available at <http://www.metro.co.uk/news/845145-nursery-workers-given-suspended-sentences-for-abusing-2-yr-old> (accessed 10 November 2012).
- Morris, S. (2010), "Little Ted's nursery was 'ideal environment' for Vanessa George child abuse", Guardian, 4 November, available at <http://www.guardian.co.uk/uk/2010/nov/04/vanessa-george-serious-case-review> (accessed 10 November 2012).
- OECD (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development) (2006), *Starting Strong II. Early childhood education and care*, OECD, Paris.
- Osgood, J. (2009), "Childcare workforce reform in England and 'the early years professional': a critical discourse analysis", *Journal of Education Policy*, Vol. 24 No. 6, pp. 733-751.
- Parr, J. (2000), *Identity and Education: The links for mature women students*, Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Pascall, G. and Cox, R. (1993), *Women Returning to Higher Education*, Open University Press, Buckingham.
- Putnam, R.D. (2000), *Bowling Alone: The collapse and revival of American community*, Simon & Schuster, New York.
- Richardson, L. (2000), "Writing: A method of inquiry", in Denzin, N.K. & Lincoln, Y.S., (eds), *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed, Sage, Thousand Oaks, Ca. pp. 923-948.
- Sen, A. (1987), *The Standard of Living* (edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn), Cambridge University Press, Cambridge.

- Ten Have, P. (1999), *Doing Conversation Analysis: A practical guide*, Sage, London.
- Thomas, M. (2009), *Think Community: An exploration of the links between intergenerational practice and informal adult learning*, NIACE, Leicester.
- Urban, M. (2008), "Dealing with uncertainty: challenges and possibilities for the early childhood profession", *European Early Childhood Education Research Journal*, Vol. 16 No. 2, pp. 135-152.
- Wright, H.R. (2009), "Trusting the Process: Using an emergent design to study adult education", *Kaleidoscope Special Issue*, December 2009, pp. 62-73 [available @ www.educatejournal.org].
- Wright, H.R. (2011), *Women Studying Childcare: Integrating Lives Through Adult Education*, Trentham Books, Stoke on Trent.
- Wright, H.R. (2012a), "Childcare, children and capability", *Cambridge Journal of Education* (Special Issue on children and capability approach), Vol. 42 No. 3, September, pp. 409-424.
- Wright, H.R. (2012b), "Choosing to compromise: Women studying childcare in an English Further Education College", *Gender and Education (iFirst, September)*.
- Wright, H.R. (2012c), "From Parent to Practitioner: Alternative pathways to professionalism", in Papatheodorou, T. and Moyles, J. *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Early Childhood*, Sage, London, pp. 207-218.
- Wright, H.R. (2012d), "In search of stability: Women studying childcare", *Journal of Further and Higher Education (iFirst, January)*.

Paper presented to UALL Conference, Higher education for the social good? The place of lifelong learning, Clare College, Cambridge, 19-20 March 2012.

Published as:

Wright, H.R. (2013) From individual choice to social good, *HESWBL* (UALL Conference, Special Issue) 3 (2): 141-148.

For preference, please cite the published version.