

Childcare, children and capability

Empirical research focused on women studying childcare in an English further education college found the participants strangely contented despite demanding lifestyles. They were intent on integrating their family, work and educational commitments rather than actively seeking future gain, an understanding that led to the development of an original model of integrated lives, later recast as an example of a capability set. This paper describes how Sen's capability approach was customised to make further sense of the empirical findings, and, in particular, how common interview themes were developed into capability indicators and grouped into capability chains to enable comparison between otherwise disparate narrative accounts. The women's biographies emphasise the importance of fostering early capability in young children and reveal how, frequently, this is overlooked. The paper argues that educational policy should accord people the freedom to choose their own lives before reiterating how the capability approach can support such choices.

Keywords: capability approach, education, women, childcare, student experience

This article draws on research that set out to explore the educational experience of mature women training to work in childcare using an emergent methodological framework. The research adopted a biographical approach to the women's lives and this led to an exploration of their own experiences as children alongside their contemporary roles of early years worker and, in many cases, parent. Thus, it addresses education from a number of perspectives and over a considerable time frame as some of the students were already in their early fifties when their views were sought.

The article explains how the narrative data supports new theoretical perspectives and how these embody aspects of the Capability Approach (CA), Amartya Sen's vision for an alternative path to economic development. In advocating choice over prescription, Sen (1999) identified a new conceptual space 'capability' or the potential to act, which may later be 'converted' into new activity or 'functioning'. His theorization made sense of the way that the students accrued knowledge and

expertise but delayed change until their children were older: a connection that encouraged me to explore my findings further in light of the CA.

The study in context

The study is an unusual addition to the body of work on the capability approach for there was no intention to connect to Sen's ideas at the outset; it was only after data collection and preliminary analysis that some of the findings suggested links to capability theory. This *post-hoc* adoption is one of the strengths of the study, increasing the validity of the claim that it captures the capability approach in practice and in an English context. This is unusual. Apart from Deprez and Butler's (2007) account of marginalized female adult students in the US, much of the work linking education to the capability approach has tended to focus on the less-developed world. For example, Unterhalter writes on Africa (2003, 2007), Flores Crespo on Latin America (2007), Arends-Kuenning & Amin (2001) and Raynor (2007) all study Bangladesh. The capability approach is also used to address specific areas of inequality whereas my work has a broader scope. To give examples, Unterhalter (2008) explores CA in relation to gender, Terzi (2005a, 2005b, 2007) writes on disability, Hart (2007) and Watts (2006) on widening participation.

Studies described as 'empirical' tend to rely heavily on statistical analysis (see chapters in Comim, Qizilbash & Alkire, 2008) whereas my own work is largely qualitative with theorization grounded in narrative data. This is significant, for after Nussbaum's bid to 'generate debate' (1995, p.80) considerable attention has been paid to drawing up ideal-theoretical lists (see Walker, 2006a, p.131). Mostly, such lists have general applicability but Biggeri who specifies fourteen capabilities does this in relation to children (2004, in Biggeri, 2007). Ironically the diversity of these lists supports Sen's decision to leave the approach 'incomplete' and 'open to different

accounts of valuation' (Qizilbash, 2008, p.53) even as the quest for universal capabilities challenges this freedom.

In contrast to these initiatives, the current study started with data collection. It set out to explore the lives of some 33 students selected from a cohort of 170 who enrolled on a childcare diploma in an English Further Education college between 1997 and 2007. I had formerly taught all of the 150 students who agreed to participate and this existing relationship and shared context enabled me to carry out in-depth interviews with wide-ranging content. In accessing this student cohort I served as my own gatekeeper and I undertook the role with care recognizing the ethical implications of this freedom and the potential power imbalance within the relationship. I collected background data from all 150 participants and created a simple matrix to ensure that interviewees were representative of the entire cohort. I also transcribed the interview data fully to ensure that I considered all the evidence and gave due attention to both positive and negative comments. Whenever complex verbal exchanges required more detailed analysis, I used conversation analysis coding (Ten Have, 1999) to demonstrate accurate interpretation.

This was lively real world research leaving me, as Robson (2002, p.4) describes, 'seeking to say something sensible' after generating a mass of disparate narrative accounts. I was loath to fragment this data by subject coding so instead immersed myself within the life stories seeking a holistic overview. Working so closely with biographical data I was continually aware of the need to respect students' privacy even though all had given permission to publish. The use of pseudonyms protected participants from identification by external readers and my own change of affiliation added an additional layer of distance. However, it was inevitable that students would recognize their own stories and those of their peers so I was always

careful to keep my language constructive whilst protecting the integrity of the research.

After a while I began to identify patterns and connections that were later developed into attitudinal and occupational typologies (see table 1) and these are described below. I was beginning to recognize the impossibility of separating the student's educational narratives from their stories about their families and their work in early years settings, and understanding this led me to develop a model of 'integrated lives'.

Attitudinal and occupational typologies

Some student narratives strongly articulated repeated patterns of behaviour that resonated in my mind even while I was focused on different accounts, causing me to look for similar patterns in other interview transcripts. This process of analysis was more complex than thematic coding. I was searching for longitudinal patterns re-enacted over the life span rather than identifying sections of text with a specific focus and this required a deep familiarity with the material. It was relatively simple to suggest different labels to describe ways of associating with childcare work but less easy to define the categories so as to be both mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive. Attempting this possibility, made me aware that these occupational categories were confounded by a second behavioural, or attitudinal, set.

Table 1: A taxonomy of typologies © Wright, 2010

The occupational typologies (sampler, stager, settler, switcher and step-upper) describe the different ways that the women 'drifted' into childcare work. In representing women's employment patterns over time, they also capture repeated patterns of work-related behaviour and convey the relative 'permanence' of the

decision to make childcare a career. These typologies are derived from retrospective accounts and this increases their validity as the women have no need to guard against failure – they already know what they have achieved in relation to childcare and openly discuss any mismatch with original expectations.

The outcome typologies were first designed as discrete categories but I later realised that they can also be used as an ascending scale as commitment is progressive from sampler to step-upper. *Samplers*, for instance, quite openly admit to trying childcare work ‘for fit’ and had often tried a range of other occupations previously. Irma, for instance, had worked in an antiques shop, as a carrot-packer, as a waitress in England and abroad, in a petrol station, a supermarket, and in telesales and then drifted into childcare because a friend suggested it. Irma sounds like a typical *sampler* but I classify her as a *stager* rather than a sampler as her commitment was knowingly short-term. She only intended to stay in the sector ‘while I’m at home trying to have another baby, sort of thing’. In contrast, *settlers* adopted childcare work as a career once they had tried it. Cindy, for example, found the work ‘so interesting that I just kept doing it’. Others, *switchers*, chose childcare work over an earlier career. Emily had been in retail since she was 18 but found that ‘childcare suits me and my family’. The category *step-upper* normatively describes those students who not only stay in childcare or related work but also rise above the level of nursery worker to gain a well-paid role. In some instances, the ‘step-up’ took students into a career other than childcare and this was something that I supported despite the vocational nature of the diploma. In an ideal world capability is not restricted to a single pathway or confined to ‘feminized’ employment.

It was evident that women achieved a ‘proper’ job by different routes. Some, particularly accumulators, relied on sheer hard work but this was not always the case,

for attitudes to life play an important part in mediating achievement. Here the attitudinal typologies (accepter, agonizer, accumulator, and asserter) were important for together they demonstrate how the women interacted with their environment. Accepters were laid back waiting for opportunities to occur, accumulators demonstrated a methodical approach to achievement, and asserters often bent the world to their own will. Agonizers, as we shall see, found progress a challenge.

The stories of three successful step-uppers illuminate how the two typology sets interact to facilitate individual levels of achievement. Felicity, Avril and Fiona, exhibit very different outlooks and, coincidentally, typify three of the attitudinal typologies. Felicity, a student from an advantaged background (she went to a 'very strict convent school') is a *step-upper* but also a long-term *accepter*. At school, she only 'did what I had to do to get by'. She became 'complacent' about homework, gained average exam grades at 15 and decided to get a job rather than study further. She went into banking 'because I thought you went home at half past three' and, after maternity leave, was not prepared to return full-time in order to ensure promotion. She liked the sociability of pre-school work, and took the opportunity to complete a foundation degree as she had enjoyed studying for the diploma. The degree enabled her to be selected for an advisor's job with 'holidays built in', so she became a step-upper (but admits she applied for the job just to 'see what happens').

Avril, formerly a bookkeeper, became 'addicted' to studying and carved herself a niche as an adult education tutor, training childcare workers. She became an *accumulator*, methodically collecting every qualification that she could, and juggling her time to study different courses simultaneously when they overlapped. Self-aware, she claims 'it was almost the courses shaping my career'. In contrast, Fiona's story shows *asserter* tendencies. She wanted to work with children with special educational

needs and when her attempts to work in the local school failed, decided to apply for paediatric nursing 'to go to the heart of the problem'. She is someone who had a difficult childhood. 'Kicked out' by her stepdad she determined not to be a victim. In adulthood, she 'went through an armed robbery' but this just spurred her on to succeed 'I don't want to die having never tried'. At the time of the interview she is just about to graduate and experience the rewards from 'stepping-up'.

I had been aware when interviewing that some students needed considerable prompting to tell their stories coherently. During analysis, it became clear that they represented an additional attitudinal typology – that of agonizer. *Agonizers* are women who deliberate long and hard before they make decisions, and whose narratives, in consequence are often highly complex. Some agonizers, are held back by uncertainty when this shades into self-doubt. Daisy, for instance continually modifies her claims, as in 'It suits me for the time being, I think'. Others, have learned to cope with 'agonizing', and are able reach a decision and move on. Evelyn, for instance, coming to the realization that 'I needed to do something for myself' took a job in a school as she found this rewarding. As a category, I place agonizers between accepters and accumulators as they do put effort into making things happen, even if this is sometimes counterproductive.

The typologies gave me a means of loosely grouping the women's narratives in order to examine them further. They also captured some of the complexity of real lives for there were only loose correlations between occupational and attitudinal typologies so little possibility of oversimplification. Thus, in classifying and comparing the narratives I was beginning the process of exploring the cumulative significance of educational and more general life experiences and starting to recognize the consequences of both social constraints and human agency. In Sen's

terms, I was beginning to consider how capability is constituted and how it can be turned into functioning but was not yet using this terminology or framework. I was still deliberating the significance of the data *en masse* and learning how to listen to what it was telling me; that education, family and work were intricately interlinked for this group of childcare workers. Beginning to pick out and compare the links I was able to see that these were reciprocal, and both personalized *and* impersonal.

The integrated lives model: a capability set

The integrated lives model (figure 1) shows how the women operate within a triangular network of reciprocal relationships connecting family, education and workplace, transferring learning between contexts. They avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) as they move between different aspects of their lives as all three elements centre on children, giving a positive twist to the more customary notion of women students ‘juggling’ their commitments (Brown & Watson, 2010; Burke, 2002; Edwards, 1993; Merrill, 1999).

Figure 1: The triple triangle maintaining integrated lives © Wright, 2009

The model operates on two levels. At a personal or inner level, the women’s lives are bounded by their relationship to family, education and childcare work but these three aspects are also independently linked through a series of external or impersonal reciprocal exchanges that strengthen the triangular framework. This model is deliberately simple as it seeks to filter out the detail and capture the essential strands that maintain connectivity. We can however, link the theory to real life by tracing the connections through the words of actual students.

If we take the inner layer of linkages first and start with the family aspect, Faye describes how her husband supported her studies: ‘he used to take the children

out and give me a couple of hours on the computer ... at weekends'. In turn, Faye positioned her family's needs above her own: 'I still don't feel that you should compromise family life'. Imogen voices a complex reciprocal relationship with education. From studying, she claims to have developed the confidence to do new things, for example to 'stand as a school governor'. In turn, she demonstrates a deep-level engagement with education as she acknowledges a transformation of her worldview when she confesses to being 'much more tolerant of people'. Here we are seeing not only a commitment to education, but also how this reverberates to create an additional positive outcome.

The students' relationships with the workplace are also complex, for there are many women who, even if paid, work for other rewards, too. Status and self-esteem are motives that are often evident in the interviews. Evelyn, for example, does additional unpaid work in her local school 'because I know that a job needed doing', demonstrating a commitment beyond her work role. She claims to have done the work for personal reasons, or for 'self-pay', and insists that the teachers 'don't need to know but I know that I went in, and I've done my best'. Elsewhere in the interview she sounds very pleased 'when they think, oh yes, she's not as daft as she looks', suggesting an underpinning desire for public approval that the work setting provides. Evelyn actually says: 'my reward isn't the pay'. Others express a more common attitude to remuneration, and some, like Frieda, voice dissatisfaction. In her case, this intensifies as she becomes qualified, suggesting that she is aware of her increased capability and frustrated that she cannot immediately convert this to a functioning: 'you start to think 'hold on, I'm not being paid enough for this now ... I'm undervalued now because I know more'.

On the outer layer of the triangle, Heena verbalizes the reciprocal links between family and work. Her workplace benefits because her husband ‘actually joined the committee with me and they had never had a man on the committee so that was fantastic for them’. Conversely, she believes that pre-school work benefits families, explaining how it ‘captures the mum market’: ‘because it’s handy, because it’s near school, you get the school holidays’. Demonstrating the links between family and education, Frances shows that she brings a strong sense of inclusive practice to her educational studies and this derives from her daughter’s experience of being ‘put into some of the bottom classes for some other things just because her English standard isn’t there’. Conversely, for Alex, it is the educational input, specifically the ‘background knowledge into how the systems work’, that helps her to support her family. Alex’s son has problems in school but she knows: ‘if I push and I push and I push I am going to get somewhere’. To complete the triangle, the link between education and work is directly stated by Bethany who ‘can still remember quite distinctly... certain things that I was taught ...that I still do today’. Conversely, Ilisa uses her workplace knowledge to make sense of her learning. She describes how she had to curb her urge to share the practical examples that sprang to mind whenever I introduced policy and theory perspectives, lest she dominate the class. Ilisa claims that she ‘found nearly every sentence you said I wanted to say something back’. This is evidence, again, of deep engagement with learning processes.

The triangularity of the model creates a tension that keeps the women’s lives in balance. All three elements (family, education and work) are greedy institutions (Coser, 1974) that demand (unachievable) total commitment from the women. Thus, there are always two opposing forces to counteract excessive demands from the third and all change has to be negotiated within this interactive ecological framework. This

theorization and its development is explained in detail elsewhere (Wright, 2009, 2011). Here it is important to recognize that, individually and collectively, the triple triangle describes the range of choices that each woman can make without disrupting the structural alignments in her life.

Sen describes the capability approach as having two foci for evaluation. The ‘*realized functions*’ are the things that the person actually chooses to do. The ‘capability set’ represents the range of alternative options from which the person could make his/her choice or choices, the *real opportunities* available to the person (Sen, 1999, p.75). The capability set is a vital constituent of the CA for it renders visible the ‘freedom’ to choose but also sets boundaries to choice, making it practicable. In policy terms the ‘capability set’ can be used to define an array of options, making individual choice administratively viable. Actual capability sets define choices at different operational levels. Social groups (like the study participants) can have a collective capability set even while individual members (particular students) each have a unique capability set. I believe that the integrated lives model can be recast as the participant’s collective capability set, for it represents the framework within which the childcare students choose to live. For them any decision they make needs to be supportive of family, educational and workplace demands if they are to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957) or undue mental stress. When they talk about their lives they continually link these aspects. For instance, Bella describes being able to work longer hours now that her child is at school. More negatively, Frieda talks about getting up early on a Sunday to study while the family sleeps.

The biographical nature of the interviews draws attention to long-term capability acquisition revealing how students frequently pull together a range of

capabilities in order to create new functioning – within or outside of the childcare profession. Celia's story illustrates this point. At different points in her interview Celia recalls schoolgirl capabilities for riding, music, art and writing poetry. She describes how, unable to continue on an academic trajectory, she is offered work in a stables at 17. This turns the capability to ride into a new functioning but also adds working with young children to her capability set as she is required to give riding lessons. Later she trains as a veterinary assistant, education turning her capability for work with animals into a new functioning. As a mother she volunteers and is offered work in her children's pre-school. Again education, the diploma course, enables her to turn a capability into a new functioning. After ten years, new family circumstances precipitate a desire for change. Unwittingly, she uses the interview as a space to set out her capability set. Celia reveals future plans to combine her knowledge of children and interest in the arts (two capabilities) in a new project (functioning), writing children's books. She explains that planning activities for children and success in adult education have honed her creative and writing skills and given her the self-confidence to make this decision. This reveals capability to be a multi-level concept. Celia's story shows how capabilities can be acquired directly or incidentally and can be transferred across different fields. However, fledgling capability may require multiple triggers to encourage the conversion to new functioning. Celia's account also shows how easily functioning reverts to capability: the abilities to ride and to work with animals remain part of her capability set but are no longer activated.

The centrality of choice

In the initial holistic analysis I found certain 'perturbations' to be worthy of attention.

The women described complicated life styles. Fuzzy life/work boundaries, low rates

of pay, complicated childcare arrangements and fragmented study patterns sounded intrinsically stressful yet the women were content with their current lives focusing on their ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ rather than future aspirations. Indeed, it was this concern with the present that initially led me to consider the capability approach, mindful of Sen’s belief (1987, p.16) that ‘ultimately the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be’. I began to see that the women were satisfied because they were *choosing* their current lives. As Sen states (1992, p.50): ‘If the ability to choose between substantively important alternatives is seen as valuable in leading a worthwhile life, then the capability set ... can be directly influential in the determination of a person’s well-being’. Research participant, Evelyn, specifically sought the ‘best of both worlds’, to work and study and still be around to look after her own children – and the view that these are substantive needs is implicit even where it is less clearly articulated. Arianne, a pre-school supervisor claimed: ‘All of these girls, do this job because it goes well with their children’ and many talked about convenient hours and geographical proximity to their children’s schools. Similar connections were made between education and childcare work. Although the majority of the women held liberal views of education they had chosen a vocational course. In part this was a reactive decision: the course was funded so the capability existed. Most, however, were ‘actively’ motivated to learn. Like Greta they sought ‘the knowledge to use when working with children’. Some, like Irene, saw it as ‘a time thing’. She claimed that ‘working more towards a career for me is more important to me at the moment’.

Capability captured

Valuing Sen’s essential ‘pragmatism’ (Qizilbash, 2008, p.64) I determined to examine the overall research findings in light of the capability approach. I found it provided a

coherent conceptual framework for the study, for the CA supports the individual's right to choose and the women were exercising this right even when this challenged policy initiatives seeking to reform early years services. It was possible to create narrative accounts that traced the conversion of capability into functioning across an individual's life-course and this attention to detail enabled me to recognize that certain key themes recurred across the individual biographies. These included social class, levels of familial support, and attitudes to compulsory education – captured using combinations of Bernstein's (2003) instrumental and expressive 'means' and 'ends'. Capability was also identified through level of qualification and job status, with health added, rather simplistically, as either a positive or negative factor. When I used the attitudinal typologies (of acceptor, agonizer, accumulator and asserter) as indicators of agency, it became possible to analyse each student narrative according to seven factors/themes that conjointly influenced her final occupational typology. Reviewing this list, I realized that race and gender might also be significant factors in a study that was less homogeneous, but could not verify this as my participants were all female and mainly white, as was the overall population from which they were drawn.

Table 2: Capability indicators © Wright, 2010

I was able to allocate simple ordinal values to each theme (see table 2) and this enabled their later use as 'capability indicators' (Wright, 2010). I was interested in gaining an understanding of the factors that affect achievement (in this instance expressed as occupational outcomes) and in enabling comparison between individual life stories. I was not trying to facilitate interval measurement or establish causal connections but I did experiment with visual means of summarizing the data. I found

that I could use the indicators to create simple block diagrams or ‘capability chains’ (Wright, 2010). These allowed ‘at-a-glance’ comparison within and between individual narratives and this is important when meaning derives from lengthy personal accounts. Although the valorization established only basic rankings, the capability chains offered a means of demonstrating how capability can be converted into functioning and how complex the process can be. This is currently a ‘work in progress’ with rankings applied retrospectively to existing data but suggests the possibility of later more focused research using predetermined and more finely graded rankings to measure the relative importance of different indicators.

The concept of a capability chain is a simple one but it conveys the notion of connectedness and flexibility. A chain is made up of a number of links and at any one moment they are configured in a linear fashion to enable the chain to exist. However, links can be replaced, new connections inserted, or order changed, without losing the essential characteristics of a ‘chain’. Thus a capability chain offers a novel way of considering people’s life stories with potential application beyond my own attempt to illustrate how multiple factors can have an effect on educational achievement.

As a generalization it is true that ‘education is in itself a basic capability which affects the development and expansion of other capabilities’ (Walker, 2006b, p.168) and this was evident in Celia’s story told earlier. The capability chains draw attention to the part played by education but also show how individual choice and agency play a significant role in converting capability to functioning, for those who are determined can turn their life-stories around. If we compare the capability chains of two agonizers, Greta and Frieda, we can clearly see that a range of factors can interact to create different outcomes (see figure 2).

Greta's early childhood was difficult as her family sent her to an outmoded private primary school. She struggled at secondary level but recognized the value of qualifications and did well despite being bullied, revealing a detached attitude to schooling. Later, she graduated, as a mature student. However, early stress factors leave her prone to changes in mood so health is classed as negative. For Greta, the process of 'agonizing' is inwardly directed and therefore hard to manage. She struggles to resolve issues satisfactorily, so she flits from job to job, usually working below her academic potential. Even in childcare she only samples the work and then moves on.

Frieda's parents showed a much greater awareness of educational contexts, even moving house to ensure her enrolment in a suitable secondary school. Frieda found the academic workload overwhelming and, becoming an alienated student, decided to drop out rather than complete her A-levels. She enjoys the workplace – in insurance in the city and in childcare – and is ambitious. For Frieda agonizing leads to decision-making; her frustration is outwardly directed and focused on society's shortcomings. Thus, she is able to process her resentment and move beyond it. Despite her lower levels of academic achievement, Frieda is able to 'switch' into childcare and find ways of adapting to the sector to support her aspirations. At the time of the interviews she was managing an early years group and about to move to another setting. This was part of a local school network so satisfied her desire for recognition and official support.

Figure 2: Capability chains for two agonizers

Thus, the capability chains draw attention to the variety of experiences and the risks inherent in generalizing from social characteristics to economic outcomes, a

common occurrence when small-scale qualitative studies are extrapolated to large-scale databases. Capability can be cumulative but conversion is individualized, and advantages in early life do not necessarily facilitate functioning as an adult. Indeed the attitudinal typologies clearly demonstrate the significance of agency in converting capability to functioning revealing how this can mediate achievement. To take another example, Amy and Bella are both step-uppers who achieve salaries and status above the national average while continuing to work with children. Yet, in other respects their biographies are very different.

Amy had a privileged middle class childhood but, perhaps as a result, became an ‘accepter’. She is educated to degree-level but ‘just was happy doing what I was’. She is ‘keen on sort of developing personally so [does] go on any courses that I can get onto’ but thinks that she ‘probably’ comes ‘from a generation that thinks once you are in a job that’s it, you are in it for life’. She only achieves a graduate salary when changing circumstances force her to find alternative work and even then she overlooks her potential to work at a much higher level.

In contrast Bella is a student who from an early age wanted a job that allowed her to be ‘smartly dressed’: her dad was a ‘hands-on machine-operator working in a factory’. She knew that ‘it was never going to be on the cards for me to do any more than A-levels’ but made up for this lack of opportunity by consistently assertive behaviour in adulthood. She does not mind ‘going through the ranks as long as I can see a quick progression’ and shapes the world to suit her own ends, ultimately achieving a headship in a private nursery – employment ‘at a level that I probably thought I’d never get to’. To achieve this she is continually converting new capability into new functioning and this requires considerable effort. Her colleagues complain that ‘you’ve got to realize ... probably no one will do it to the level that you do it’.

Capability suppressed

Overall, students identified ‘confidence’ as the major outcome from the diploma course, and this was both personal and work-related, confidence to ‘be’ and confidence to ‘do’. The research cohort predominately comprised mature women, so it was to be anticipated that the childcare diploma would include an element of second chance education. Many of the women’s stories abounded with accounts of negative childhood experiences, demonstrating the importance of encouraging early capability. The interviewees were roughly divided into those who had enjoyed school, those who were indifferent to it and those who had loathed the experience and the latter group offered graphic accounts of bullying (from peers) and ritualized humiliation (from staff), behaviour unlikely to encourage learning. Celia believes her inability to remember anything ‘harks back’ to a headmaster who would ‘give us a hard time’, a viewpoint echoed by several others. Younger students described how bullying continues. Both Ilsa (aged 29) and Imogen (aged 21) complained that the current practice of keeping primary cohorts together to assist the transition into secondary school can be negative in effect. Ilsa explains how you are ‘never actually removed from the situation’. Imogen, more agentive, tried to ‘move away from the group’ but ‘got flack for it, they didn’t like it’.

Very few accounts portrayed teachers as caring or supportive; often teachers seemed unaware of students’ personal situations. Fiona, trying to avoid an abusive stepfather, was teased for her poor attendance; Irma who had ‘such an unhappy home life, it made school not important’ was continually ‘told off’ for wearing make-up or arriving late but never asked what the problem was. Consequently she left school at the earliest opportunity and is still drifting from one occupation to another, although the diploma has taught her the mechanics of study and given her the confidence to

undertake it: 'I can do any course now, I know I could do it, just sit and listen, write everything down – fine.'

These accounts serve as a timely reminder that we should foster early capability but there is contemporary evidence that this is not always the case. Imogen talks about a poorly run private day nursery where 'they run out of cleaning things' and 'don't interact with the children very well'. Beryl works in a maintained nursery class where 'they forget that these children are pre-school' and three-year-olds are subject to policy initiatives intended for older children. Heidi describes the secondary school curriculum as too 'regulated'. Her four teenagers are 'bored' and she wants more scope for students to be able 'to choose an area that they find interesting'. Celia recounts how at four and a half her child is unable 'to colour inside the lines' and his 'first bit of homework comes home with a *red* 'very untidy' written across it'. She is upset and angry but assuages these feelings by complaining that 'some teachers are clueless about child development'. Her son, however, is 'miserable, miserable, at school' and his capability diminishes as his dislike for drawing affects other curriculum subjects: 'even when he brought a reading book home he would have to draw a picture about the story he had just read and he *hated* drawing so reading became horrible'.

These are narratives that demonstrate just how uncaring the professional workforce can be, doing little to refute the view that England has an educational system that sees children as a labour market supply factor (Dahlberg, 1996, pp.46–47), as apprentice workers who will guarantee the country's future economic prosperity rather than individuals whose emotional and intellectual development is precious. As Ball (2008, pp.11–12) states:

Within policy, education is now regarded primarily from an economic point of view. The social and economic purposes of education have been collapsed into

a single overriding emphasis on policy making for economic competitiveness and an increasing neglect or sidelining (other than in rhetoric) of the social purposes of education.

Many of the women express concern that educational policy no longer considers people's wider needs. In relation to the early years sector Greta complains: 'it is drudgery now'. Cindy complains that 'you have to start assessing them [children] as soon as they are born' and 'it's such a shame' that 'you don't have time to play with them'. Celia is leaving the sector and eschewing teacher training as that 'puts me straight back into the governments *thou shalt do it this way* and that's something that I have no wish to continue to be involved in'. Frances, who enjoys paperwork, finds it 'dreadful' to be 'brushing them [children] aside because you've got to go and fill out a form'. Heena explains how she 'did end up doing all the paperwork – the newsletters and the writing up of the plans and stuff' and how 'it builds up, builds up, builds up until it's too much'. Irma leaves the sector when the supervisor goes: 'they offered me the job here and there's absolutely no way when I've seen what [Irene]'s been doing which is a lot of work'.

The importance of a capability approach to educational policy

The capability approach embraces a more humanist stance, focusing on the well-being of the individual and in policy terms offers an alternative discourse to contemporary instrumental practices. It recognizes the importance of choice in allowing each individual to personalize their opportunities, and to some extent, by financing the childcare diploma the government did open up a 'co-realizable capability' (Williams, 1987, p.100) for mature women. However, this diploma is no longer available, replaced by a standardized vocational course that merely assesses early years practice: one more example of contemporary strategy restricting educational choice. In policy terms, there is an argument that 'choice systems in themselves promote inequality' as

they create ‘social spaces within which “opportunistic behaviours” can flourish’ (Ball, 2008, p.133). This does not, however, authorize the reduction of opportunities. At the very least we should be challenging ‘substantial unfreedoms’ (Sen, 1999, p.xii) that restrict our options for the research evidence supports Sen’s (2009, p.18) continuing belief that:

The freedom to choose our lives can make a significant contribution to our well-being, but going beyond the perspective of well-being, the freedom itself may be seen as important. Being able to reason and choose is a significant aspect of human life’.

The women’s narratives demonstrate that having the freedom to choose is as important as the benefits that arise from the pursuit of chosen pathways and for me that justifies further engagement with the capability approach and its operationalization.

Conclusion

This paper has described how exploratory research into the lives of adult students yielded narrative data that was analysed and theorized independently of the capability approach. It also explains how the students’ focus on their current lives and their actual ‘beings’ and ‘doings’ suggested links to Sen’s ideas through the concept of the capability set, leading me to recast the original model of integrated lives as the collective capability set for this group of women. This recasting facilitated the linking of real life data to the capability approach, offering an alternative to the more usual attempts to operationalize this framework. Rather than working from economic and philosophical theorization to real life the trend is reversed enabling an exploration of the formation of capability and its conversion to functioning at a grass roots level.

Having real data to analyse enabled further conceptualization using thematic patterns found within and across the narratives. This led to the creation of the

concepts of capability indicator and capability chain as I strove to make sense of students' levels of achievement and develop my analysis around the themes they considered significant. I make it clear in this article, and in my thesis that this work is embryonic and the analysis crude. The data has noticeable lacunae as it was collected through unstructured interviews but credibility compensates for incompleteness as the students were recalling information that they held to be relevant rather than responding to questions imposed by the interviewer. The overall process also suggests the possibility of operationalizing the capability approach through inductive research.

The capability set represents individual and collective co-realizable choices. However, it can be used empirically to frame the capabilities that are important to people and thus to set out the choices people might want to make. In policy terms this identifies the *content* for new initiatives – the array of choices that people actually desire.

The notion of capability indicators introduces two new dimensions. Firstly, indicators offer a framework to group the general factors required for successful capability development and conversion – the areas towards which generic policy should be addressed. The entire population needs access to, for example, healthcare and education, in order to achieve in life. Detailed qualitative analysis offers the scope to capture these needs in a more refined way and, perhaps, to explore those factors necessary for capability development separately from the triggers that support conversion. Capability indicators therefore enable us to consider basic capabilities from a real life perspective rather than through ideal-theoretical lists. Secondly, capability indicators offer a means of studying levels of achievement, as they introduce 'hierarchy' into the framework. On first sight they merely record success but on further consideration they also facilitate an analysis of the relative impact of

different indicators and suggest where compensation may occur. The capability chains enable these hierarchies to be collated and analysed over an individual life-course introducing a useful longitudinal dimension into the framework.

Taken together these elements suggest scope to better understand and operationalize the capability approach through inductive means rather than the top-down application of theory to real life.

References

- Arends-Kuenning, M., & Amin, S. (2001) Women's capabilities and the right to education in Bangladesh. *International Journal of Politics, Culture and Society*, 15(1) 125–142.
- Ball, S.J. (2008) *The education debate*. Bristol: Policy Press.
- Bernstein, B. (2003/1975) *Class, codes and control, volume 3: Towards a theory of educational transmission*. London: Routledge.
- Biggeri, M. (2007) Children's valued capabilities. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 197–214). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Brown, L., & Watson, P. (2010) Understanding the experiences of female doctoral students. *Journal of Further and Higher Education*, 34(3), 385–404.
- Burke, P.J. (2002) *Accessing education: Effectively widening participation*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Comim, F., Qizilbash, M. & Alkire, S. (2008) *The capability approach: Concepts, measures and applications*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

- Coser, L. (1974) *Greedy institutions: Patterns of undivided commitment*. New York: Free Press [www.questia.com].
- Dahlberg, G., Moss, P., & Pence, A. (1999) *Beyond quality in early childhood education and care: Postmodern perspectives*. London: Falmer.
- Deprez, L.S., & Butler, S.S. (2007) The capability approach and women's economic security: Access to higher education under welfare reform. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 215–235). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Edwards, R. (1993) *Mature women students: Separating or connecting family and education*. London: Taylor & Francis.
- Festinger, L (1957) *A theory of cognitive dissonance*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Flores-Crespo, P. (2007) Situating education in the human capabilities approach. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 45–65). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hart, C.S. (2007) The Capability Approach as an Evaluative and Developmental Framework for Education Policy: The Example of Widening Participation in Higher Education in England, *Prospero*, 13, 34–50.
- Merrill, B. (1999) *Gender, change and identity: Mature women students in universities*. Aldershot: Ashgate.
- Nussbaum, M. (1995) Human capabilities, female human beings. In M. Nussbaum & J. Glover (Eds), *Women, culture, and development: A study of human capabilities* (pp. 61–104). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Qizilbash, M. (2008) Amartya Sen's capability view: Insightful sketch or distorted picture? In F. Comim, M. Qizilbash, & S. Alkire (Eds), *The capability approach:*

Concepts, measures and applications (pp. 53–81). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Raynor, J. (2007) Education and capabilities in Bangladesh. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 157–176). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Robson, C. (2002) *Real world research* (2nd ed.). Oxford: Blackwell.

Sen, A. (1987) *The standard of living* (Ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Sen, A. (1992) *Inequality reexamined*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (1999) *Development as freedom*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Sen, A. (2009) *The idea of justice*. London: Allen Lane.

Ten Have, P. (1999) *Doing conversation analysis: A practical guide*. London: Sage.

Terzi, L. (2005a) Beyond the dilemma of difference: The capability approach on disability and special educational needs. *Journal of Philosophy of Education*, 39(3), 443–459.

Terzi, L. (2005b) A capability perspective on impairment, disability and special educational needs: Towards social justice in education. *Theory and Research in Education*, 3(2), 197–223.

Terzi, L. (2007) The capability to be educated. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 25–43). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Unterhalter, E. (2003) The capabilities approach and gendered education: An examination of South African complexities. *Theory and Research in Education*, 1(1), 197–223.

- Unterhalter, E. (2007) Gender equality, education, and the capability approach. In M. Walker & E. Unterhalter (Eds), *Amartya Sen's capability approach and social justice in education* (pp. 87–107). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Unterhalter, E. (2008) The capability approach and gendered education: Some issues of operationalisation in the context of HIV/AIDS epidemic in South Africa. In F. Comim, M. Qizilbash & S. Alkire, *The capability approach: Concepts, measures and applications* (pp. 489–509). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Walker, M. (2006a) *Higher education pedagogies: A capabilities approach*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Walker, M. (2006b) Towards a capability-based theory of social justice for education policy-making, *Journal of Education Policy*, 21(2), 163–185.
- Watts, M. (2006) What is wrong with widening participation in higher education? In J. Satterthwaite and E. Atkinson (Eds), *Discourse, Resistance and Identity Formation* (pp. 169–184). Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.
- Williams, B. (1987) The standard of living: Interests and capabilities. In A. Sen (Ed. Geoffrey Hawthorn) *The standard of living* (pp. 94–102). Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Wright, H.R. (2009). Trusting the process: Using an emergent design to study adult education, *Educate, Kaleidoscope Special Issue*, December 2009 [available @ www.educatejournal.org].
- Wright, H.R. (2010). *Integrating lives through adult education: A case study of mature women training to work in childcare*, Unpublished PhD thesis: Anglia Ruskin University.
- Wright, H.R. (2011). *Women studying childcare: Integrating lives through adult education*. Stoke on Trent: Trentham Books.

Late MS copy of:

Wright, H.R. (2012) Childcare, children and capability, *Cambridge Journal of Education* (Special Issue on children and capability approach), 42(3): 409-424.

For preference, please cite the published text.