

From Parent to Practitioner: Alternative pathways to professionalism in the United Kingdom

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Abstract

This chapter presents research evidence that reveals how, in the UK, training and working in childcare may be undertaken for personal reasons but, nevertheless, generate a range of benefits for society that could not have been anticipated; benefits that are small-scale but play an important role in strengthening the social fabric. In exploring the unplanned social payback consequent upon this instance of adult education and demonstrating how personal motivation can ultimately create public good, 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 a rigidly instrumental pursuit of workforce professionalization. In making this claim it is not arguing against progress in the childcare sector but arguing for a more sensitive approach to change that recognizes human values.

Introduction

In June 2008 four eminent British scholarsⁱ sent a letter to the Independent newspaper complaining that ‘government policy is no longer the solution to the difficulties we face but our greatest problem’ and expressing concern that the ‘permanent revolution’ was endangering the very policy objectives being pursued. Their fears focused on the demise of lifelong learning opportunities with the decimation of adult educational provision in further education colleges but the reasoning could apply equally well to the early years sector in the UK where Margaret Hodge’s ‘silent revolution’ continues to address the quality agendaⁱⁱ. Spurred on by the *Every Child Matters* legislation the early years sector is subjected to reforms at a pace that threatens to overwhelm the voluntary sector, where pre-school education is serving the needs of local communities in ways that have not been fully acknowledged.

The research project underpinning this chapter (Wright, 2010) set out to study the educational experience of a number of mature women training to work in childcare mostly within the voluntary sector. It found that their motives and indeed their learning biographies were more complex than initially assumed and that for these women, education was just one strand of their very busy lives; lives that were firmly embedded in

their local communities and that privileged the needs of their children, partners, extended families, neighbours and other community users. Being able to train to work in childcare carried more significant consequences than the government vocational agenda presupposes, allowing the women to choose to fulfil a range of different needs and desires, many of which related to their present lives rather than their future aspirations. Indeed, the students were closely focused on their current 'beings' and 'doings' rather than their future aspirations, a pattern that can be related to Sen's *Capability Approach* (1999) (see Wright, 2011).

The research found that at the micro-level the childcare workers were making individualized choices that suited their families and their personal lives regardless of the policy framework but also that managing continual change was cumulatively stressful and many women were beginning to tire and to consider alternative occupations. It is this process of attrition that may eventually lead to the loss of the little recognized but important social consequences of this area of training and work.

The research context

The study cohort

Over a ten-year period (1997-2007) I taught some 170 mature women who enrolled on a pre-school Supervisor 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 were married or cohabiting (80%) 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 here.

The study design

From the population of 150 I selected a representative sample of 33 students 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 and 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 students' subjective experiences as retold (see Wright, 2009). On transcribing the conversations, 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. Throughout the project, I worked iteratively, adopting a flexible, emergent design as befits this type of interdisciplinary, real-world research (Robson, 2002).

The research findings

Why childcare?

One of the main findings of the research was that the pattern of transition (from mother to worker, paid or voluntary, to mature student) was common because it enabled the women to combine and balance personal, familial, vocational and educational goals. The study cohort comprises 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 the students' 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.

Arianne, 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 Emily this was a vital connection for she claims: "I didn't have any knowledge, only my own son". In the words of Heena, the Supervisor 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 ..." but a researcher overview suggests a more complex pattern.

Theoretical explanations

The overall evidence also implies 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. (Heena)

The students are balancing their responsibilities and avoiding restricting their choice. Evelyn 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 ...

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. They worked at odd moments "... fitting the college work around everything else" (Frieda), late at night and early in the morning, occasionally relying upon help from friends, husbands or grandparents. The majority, like Bella, used "windows of

opportunity” rather than “putting the vacuum round”; those “times when you might have just sat down and have a cup of tea you just had to get on” (Beryl).

The Benefits to the Childcare Sector

Although many of the women drifted into childcare work rather than seeking a definite career path, the sector benefits from the caring attitude that these women have towards children, a characteristic 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 Supervisor 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!” (Cindy). 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”. Ingrid was persuaded to help in the local pre-school and was amazed to find “it was just so different from how I expected it to be” and insightfully claims that the course “taught us to sort of look behind the behaviour” as an important step underpinning discipline. Heidi also believes that the Supervisor 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 the low salaries paid to childcare staff. Heidi 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”, in preferring adult-led to child-led activities. Fiona goes into paediatric nursing eventually, “right to the heart of the problem”, because she “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 agree with observation because that helps the children’s learning and progression – but some of the forms ... you know! (Emily)

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 significant 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” (Evelyn); sometimes to altruism: “My mum’s ethos is that if you want to see something happen you get involved and that 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 it is a desire to get on: “I don’t mind going through the ranks as long as I can see a quick progression” (Bella). Whatever the motivation the extra work is often to the detriment of family harmony. Gina admits “You do get a bit of grumbling, you know, at home. Beryl’s husband, like others, complains “You are doing more hours than I am working and you’re getting a pittance”. Heena, 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 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". Evelyn, 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:

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, for instance, talks of supporting a foundation co-ordinator who has "not actually been trained in early years". Frances, in her new role as a subject co-ordinator in a secondary school, claims that her ability to reason with badly behaved children stems from her early years training. Bethany, however, remains in the voluntary sector, running an "extremely successful" pre-school that attracts parents into the local and very small village primary school that "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 Supervisor Course also turns students into informed parents who can both contribute to and challenge the system: Ingrid, 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: "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 (Hevey and Curtis, 1996; in Pugh, 1998 p.12).

In part the students choose the Supervisor 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 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 Supervisor 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 ... 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”. Ingrid, 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 their lives 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. (Ilsa)

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

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, Ingrid 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”. Ilsa 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 – e.g. 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. Aileen’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 students integrate aspects of their lives to create a stable framework within which they can bring up their own families, choosing to juggle their own needs as parents, students and workers.

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 somehow think the world has gone on without you to an extent”, and need a place in which to readjust. Thus, the voluntary pre-school sector unwittingly supports British government initiatives to return women to the workforce and the coincidental provision of subsidized childcare training makes this

possible. Too great an instrumental focus on training itself or on professionalization of the workforce could unintentionally destroy a system that works. Quite apart from those 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.

Notes

ⁱ Emeritus Professor Frank Coffield, Institute of Education, London; Professor Richard Taylor, Director of Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning, University of Cambridge; Professor Sir Peter Scott, Vice-Chancellor, University of Kingston; Professor Stephen Ball, Institute of Education, London; 'Government education policy is damaging its own objectives', Letters: Education Policy, *The Independent*, 2 June 2008.

ⁱⁱ 'Silent revolution' was a phrase used by Margaret Hodge as Minister for Education on the *Matter of Fact* documentary broadcast on 3 February 2000, BBC 1.

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