

Enclaves, empowerment and education

Hazel R Wright, Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge & Chelmsford, UK

Introduction

This paper firstly considers the processes whereby adult education lecturers can create environments (or enclaves) that encourage student transformation whatever the current educational regime. However, in offering evidence from a study of childcare students it favours the term empowerment over transformation for there is evidence that for some students the goal is stasis rather than major change. Secondly it considers and contextualises the findings from an empirical case study that resulted in the creation of a theoretical framework for 'integrated lives' and, holistically derived, occupational and attitudinal typologies. These are linked to existing theory, Amartya Sen's 'capability approach', demonstrating how the association enabled further theorisation about change across the life-course and a means of co-considering detailed biographical accounts.

The empirical research used an emergent methodology. Rather than setting out to test a new or existing hypothesis, it used open conversational techniques to explore the student experience of education, often employing psychosocial methods (after Hollway and Jefferson, 2000) to gently probe the students' comments and reveal additional layers of explanation and meaning. The study sought to disclose the expectations, practices and consequences of education for students and it is the broadness of the enquiry that enabled theorisation to extend beyond the boundaries of education alone. Indeed, it was the focus on current 'beings' and 'doings' – the interest in present lives rather than future achievements – that suggested an association with Sen's theoretical framework. The capability approach advocates policy that enables citizens to choose their own lifestyles. Sen believes that, ultimately, what matters is our everyday life experience. What might be possible in the future is important but what really matters is what we can do now, the life we lead. Yet modern society is obsessed with change and in Britain, at least, this often focuses on the superficial – changes to detail that create stress in people's lives rather than significant improvement.

The research context

In Britain, the embedded class divisions within society enshrined in political allegiances and intertwined educational and economic policies make radical change very difficult to achieve. Philosophically we can debate the relative merits of liberal, radical and vocational education and argue, path dependently, for a tripartite division. More innovatively, we can support a merging of aims; or, decide to compromise and advocate a mixing of routes. However, having spent some considerable energies considering just such ends, and aware that the tripartite divisions continually reappear, I have come to believe that for individual educators more is achieved by focusing at the grass roots, working with the students one can support and influence. In practice, adult education has a long and glorious tradition of doing just this. Johnson (1988, p.29) explains how radical educators are adept at creating 'a counter-educational element in formal education, minimising the pressures of assessments and requirements, engaging students' real interests, inciting self-education'. This approach is developed in the notion of protected enclaves whereby lecturers shape their own classrooms, building 'microcontexts, which operate as enclaves that have features separate from dominant cultural influences and which are conducive to particular kinds of reflective activity' (Boud and Walker, 2002, p.98) thereby empowering students to learn, maybe to transform their lives, perhaps just to develop their capability for future change.

As an adult educator I have always tried to create a supportive classroom environment but only overtly acknowledged this as creating a ‘protected enclave’ on completion of a doctoral study. This was a retrospective investigation of ten cohorts of mature women who chose to enrol on a Childcare Diploma in an English Further Education (post-compulsory vocational) College between 1997 and 2007. The decade marked a period of unprecedented change in education, and particularly Early Years education, under the New Labour Government of Tony Blair with its ‘education, education, education’ agenda. With an initial desire to explore their views of the educational experience, I selected 33 students to interview from a possible 150 who returned questionnaires. These women were mainly white British, married (80%) and living with young children (70%) but came from a diverse range of class and educational backgrounds. Indeed one of the students, Ilsa, captures this pattern very clearly in her all-too-pointed analysis of the divisions within cohort ‘I’:

... you had a very much working class section, and then you had your kind of normal people at the back and then you had your elder people and people that a lot of us felt placed themselves far too highly on that side, you know.

I had personally taught and tutored all the participants so already had a detailed knowledge of their time as students and the nature of the course and college. More importantly we had established good interpersonal relationships that enabled us to talk freely and in-depth. To ‘make the familiar strange’ I needed to find ways of exploring the student perspective and this meant relinquishing overall control of the interviews. In adopting a biographical approach I was able to encourage students to extend their narratives to include their lives beyond the classroom. This allowed an exploration of areas of which I had very little prior knowledge. Ironically, it was these broader and unsought elements that, after a considerable struggle at the analysis stage, gave up new and unexpected insights about students’ attitudes to adult education, fully justifying the use of a biographical method.

Creating the enclave

Aware of existing work on the barriers to women’s education (McGivney, 1993, Coats, 1994) I, and colleagues before me, had successfully striven to ensure that the Diploma course met women’s access requirements. College offered preferential timetabling (eg: convenient hours, school-term timetables, provision of a single teaching room); a relaxation of normal college rules (eg: on use of mobile phones, eating in class, presence of children, partial attendance); and supportive marketing and recruitment practices (single contact-points, out-of-hours cover, knowledge of local authority funding). Thus the structural conditions for a ‘protected enclave’ were in place from the outset. However, the research drew attention to many less tangible supports that students found important, not least the creation of a non-judgemental culture in which students share skills to support each others’ learning.

This ‘sharing’ was very evident in the student narratives. Emily describes how:

There was a lot of mixed abilities, high achievers there who found it very easy, you know they had been to University, whatever, and there were others who maybe dropped out of school so it was quite interesting and also if anybody did (...) we were quite (...) helping each other.

Deirdre claims: ‘I wouldn’t have done it without the people at the course to help me’ and describes visiting another student at home and finding ‘as soon as she read it through I’d think, yes I do understand’. Arianne describes how she ‘used to go round Alice’s one night a week – nearly every week we would sit and do stuff together’. Sometimes this sharing was pre-planned: Frieda, who was going to run a playgroup with Felicity decided to study with her so that ‘we developed at the same level all the way along’. Sometimes it was practical:

Greta came with a colleague who ‘was very happy to drive but she doesn’t like new experiences’. Overall, the vocational nature of the course acted as a leveller. Some students, with practical experience, ‘wanted to know more about how the whole thing actually worked’, whilst others, with academic qualifications, who ‘hadn’t really had much experience of childcare work ... felt maybe they know a lot more than me’. In a competitive environment these benefits would have been lost, only through developing mutual support mechanisms were all the students empowered to optimise their learning. The teacher role, also, is important here. Arianne described the need for individualised teaching that recognises ‘that you might have to learn something differently to another section of the class’.

Identifying the enclave

Some aspects of the enclave are more visible in retrospect. When asked to consider the consequences of studying many of the students mentioned achievements that lay beyond the confines of the course aims, demonstrating that a nominally vocational course can enable broader transformative learning. Such discussions also revealed in detail, the very different needs with which the students enrolled.

The consequence most commonly mentioned was ‘confidence’ but this was a phrase that covered a very broad range of meanings. Some related to the workplace (knowing *what* or *how* to do something), but many were more personal (knowing that one *could* do something). A considerable number of the women were making good earlier deficits, both real experiences and internalised beliefs. Many were overcoming negative experiences of schooling – there were numerous tales of bullying and humiliation at the hands of teachers and fellow pupils – but some revealed more distinctive issues. Faye’s story, for instance, seems typical except for its final twist. Faye, who ‘knew I’d got to go into a field where I had the holidays’, ‘kind of fell into’ childcare work and found she ‘loved it, really loved it’. Her life centres on her children: ‘I don’t feel that you should compromise family life’ and as a result she had to study ‘late into the night’, when the children were ‘down’. She is enthusiastic that she learned about planning the curriculum and organising the setting: ‘learning, you know, that this just doesn’t run itself’ and learning ‘how you deal with children’ and parents; all very normal. However, she focuses repeatedly on being able to write accurately: ‘being able to put how I feel into the correct words’, ‘having the confidence to say, “yes, I can write things down”’. Picking up on this need, my gentle probing provoked an account of schooling in which ‘certain’ teachers ‘made me feel very inadequate’ but eventually to a poignant story about her mother’s death when Faye was only eleven. Bravely, she confessed that before achieving the diploma she hadn’t known ‘whether I had learning difficulties or not’. My suggestion that Faye may have passed through secondary school in a state of shock straddles, even crosses, the interviewer/therapist divide but seemed appropriate and was positively received. It was part of the process whereby Faye was enabled to transform her self-image and move on in life.

The students offered many examples of formal and work-based learning and these more than justify the vocational nature of the course. However, their learning spans much broader areas too, from functional skills, through family oriented learning, to personal development supporting social integration. A few examples will illustrate this claim. Barbara and Irma acquired basic study skills. Barbara talks of a fellow student who ‘would help me with my grammar’ and ‘correct my spellings’ and a manager who gave ‘advice about stuff’. Irma, who ‘didn’t even know what an assignment was’, had a friend who showed her how to use her computer ‘little tips like spelling and word count, margins’ and a husband who would ‘help me out with the grammar sort of thing’ and make her cut out excess words: He said ‘you’ve got to!’

Celia learned why her ‘son struggled so badly through primary school’ and Ilsa learned about her own toddler: ‘Say before I wouldn’t have realised that say he was tired and that was why he was being a bugger for two hours’. She can now help other family members to understand children’s needs, reassuring her sister-in-law about her own son: ‘I can say to her that this is the way he is developing’. Cindy learned how to talk to parents ‘especially if they have different cultures or religions’, ‘how to approach them and to get them involved’ whereas before she ‘would probably be too scared to do things like that’. Ingrid too, describes the benefits of working with others. She asked an Asian family to help her arrange an authentic Holi celebration as part of her curriculum assessment, and admits that she gained insights that enabled her to transform her worldview, no longer thinking their habits ‘strange’ and ‘a bit weird’. She believes that overall this made her ‘a lot less judgemental’ and ‘a lot nicer person’, someone able to talk to strangers ‘whereas I would probably just have passed them by in the street before’. These are all broader advantages of adult education that could easily remain unnoticed as they arise from open conversation rather than direct questions about residual learning. Indeed, questions targeting residual learning provoked limited comments, usually specifically related to curriculum areas like planning or child development. They failed to evoke the many examples that emanated from the freely offered life histories – the personal transformations that represented the students’ *real* achievements.

Living flexibly

The women talked about their reasons for entering childcare and enrolling on the Diploma course and these accounts sensitised me to the possibility that they were seeking stasis rather than change, gradual transition rather than radical transformation. Most talked about ‘drifting’ or ‘falling’ into the profession. With a few exceptions, the common pattern was to send a child to pre-school, and subsequently volunteer for either or both of the ‘helper’ rota and parent management committee. Thereafter, many were encouraged by existing staff to enrol on the Diploma, sometimes on being offered work, sometimes in anticipation of a paid part-time job when other staff moved on. As Amy says:

You know how it is, quite casual in playgroup, or it was in those days. Yes I applied for it but people knew me, and things like that, and I’d been on the committee at the playgroup. I’d been secretary. I’d been the treasurer so I’d been quite involved in the voluntary running of it and then I got a paid job there.

Possibly this semi-voluntary pathway into childcare work explains why the women were content even though they worked for very little pay, often no more than the UK minimum wage. Indeed, many of the women still seemed to see themselves as volunteers even after gaining paid jobs. Bethany boasts about the ‘hours and hours I spend of my *own* time, doing things’ and Evelyn complains about a co-leader who ‘wanted paying for every single thing she did’. Many pre-school staff accepted the need to carry out additional tasks at home. Danni admits that £20 per week is inadequate recompense for her administrative duties but explains ‘that in all fairness to the committee, they can’t afford to pay any more’. Heena describes how she has learned to say no, ‘to make a point’, to extra work that ‘builds up, builds up, builds up until it’s too much’ because her husband will complain. She asks herself: ‘how am I going to go home and tell my husband I am taking home all this extra work and I’m not going to get paid for it’ but the majority describe very fuzzy life/work boundaries.

The women’s narratives demonstrate that they were aware of the disadvantages of pre-school work but nevertheless choose to continue with it. Complaints about poor standards, low pay, excessive paperwork and extended hours were voiced but rarely reasons for moving on. Indeed, Imogen finds childcare work intrinsically motivating and believes that compensates for its shortcomings.

I think you have either got the passion – and the people who haven't got it complain about money, complain about doing things, and cleaning, and doing their job (laughs).

Many women are altruistic; certainly Frances believes this to be a significant motivation.

I think a lot of women who – you know, like you, me, and [colleague] that went to work in playgroups – we did it for a very natural reason and that was that we had children, 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 – for the children of the mothers who couldn't do that.

However, by far the commonest reason is the convenience of childcare work. Felicity represents the majority of the students when she praises the geographical proximity and child-friendly hours of pre-school work.

It started off with being very, very convenient in terms of fitting in with my family and, in terms of its location, its been wonderful because I can still bring my children to school because they are still here, I can pick them up, I get all the holidays off.

Integrating lives

My early attempts to analyse the narratives and isolate the educational elements proved very difficult, leading to a 'eureka' moment when I learned to listen to the data and realise what it was telling me. The women were choosing to integrate their lives, choosing options that enabled them to work, study and care for their own families on a part-time basis. In Evelyn's words, they were positively seeking: 'the best of both worlds'.

From this understanding, holistically derived, I was able to construct a theory of integrated lives that showed how the women existed within a balanced framework, a triangular structure whereby reciprocal links between their family, their workplace and their educational involvement maintained stasis in their lives. Indeed, as family, childcare work and education are all demanding spheres, possibly greedy institutions (Coser, 1974) that seek total commitment from those involved, the students' lives are bound by a tension that maintains stability as any two aspects combine to counter excessive demands from the third. Change is possible but gradual, the students carefully considering all aspects of their lives before setting in motion plans that would temporarily destabilise their integrated lives triangles before achieving a new equilibrium. Elsewhere I have described the students as 'living in a slowly shifting present' at a pace in keeping with their children's development (Wright, 2010, 2011).

It was possible to recast this triangular framework as a capability set, Sen's term for the co-realizable choices that an individual, and hierarchically a collective group, can effectively make. Thus, the integrated lives theory is set within an accepted liberal policy framework and one that recognises the importance of choice and human agency. Indeed, Sen (eg: 1982, 1987, 1999) developed the capability approach to overcome the inequalities inherent within utilitarian and rights-based policies that treat individuals the 'same' regardless of their differing needs and abilities to 'convert' goods into things that are useful. Sen is concerned that policy operating at the level of the household conceals the unfair treatment of its weaker members – women, children, the elderly and the unwell – and supports the view that governments should facilitate choice to empower individuals to make decisions for themselves. As Sen himself claims: 'ultimately the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be' (Sen, 1987, p.16). The key aspect of Sen's capability approach is its focus on people's potential to achieve rather than on what they actually achieve, thus identifying a new space for political intervention. Sen's theorisation is

deliberately incomplete, opening up the conceptual space to enable individuals to determine their own values and make their own choices. He talks about ‘functionings’ and ‘capability’, defining functionings as ‘the various things a person may value doing or being’ and capability as ‘the alternative combinations of functionings that are feasible for her to achieve’ (Sen, 1999, p.75). Thus a capability set represents an individual’s ‘real opportunities’ those things that a person can choose to do, be, or have, from which a person can make a co-realizable selection. In other words, choice involves deciding which options to favour and whether it is possible to choose several options that are complementary or to choose more of one option over more of another. In terms of integrated lives, the students are balancing the needs of family work and education and fully recognise that more time spent in one sphere leads to less spent in another but nevertheless the options are co-realizable because they share a core focus on children creating a degree of overlap rather than opposition.

The claim that women are choosing integrated lives cuts across feminist initiatives to wrest women out of the ‘domestic sphere’ but does have a degree of independent support in Hakim’s work on Preference Theory (1998, 2004) for she has carried out large-scale statistical analyses to support *her* claim that across a range of cultures some two-thirds of women, the adaptives, are choosing to combine part-time jobs and family work, a pattern visible across childless women too (Hakim, 1995, p.436). Hakim (1991, p.113) believes that women ‘having different life goals from men’ are actively choosing part-time employment and as ‘self-determining actors’ (ibid, p.114) find this very satisfying. Certainly, the women in this study live contented lives but are fully aware that they are compromising on individual freedom and financial autonomy, choosing part-time status.

Thus, integrated lives theory offers a framework to counteract oppressive views of women’s lives. It challenges the view that maternal childcare within the family is a facet of patriarchal domination (Walby, 1997, 1999) without undermining the belief that women should have equal rights to men. It challenges the view that childcare work, as an example of ‘caring’ is peopled by working class and poorly qualified individuals with limited options (Skeggs, 1997) without refuting rights to higher rates of pay. It challenges the view that part-time education is an inferior route, without disregarding the need for governments to adequately support educational opportunities (Burke, 2002). In looking along the students’ entire life histories the theory makes sense of the choices they make, seeing that for many women with children, partial involvement in a number of spheres is preferable to making stark choices that deny other aspects of their lives. This exercise of personal choice should not be misconstrued; ‘integration’ does *not* align with the views of an American report (Whitebook et al, 1990; in Pugh, 1998, p.15):

If a job in childcare is seen as an extension of women’s familial role of rearing children, professional preparation and adequate resource compensation seem unnecessary.

Comparison with other studies of women’s education

It is impossible to determine from one case study whether the empirical findings are confined to this one field of vocational training – childcare. Looking nationally across the UK context, an analysis of the Labour Force Survey data for 2001-2005 suggests that the women in this study have many characteristics in common with the broader workforce (see Simon et al, 2007) and from this we can surmise that the theory may have further significance within the childcare sector. Other studies of adult women in education suggest, in contrast, that often the student is seeking to ‘escape’ domesticity rather than to integrate the elements of her life. Pascall and Cox (1993, p.76) found women to be pursuing a ‘route away from domesticity’, Merrill (1999, p. 205) that they did not want ‘to be dominated by domesticity’, and Parr (2000) that they sought to change aspects of their lives. Even in Edwards study (1993) the

women students are seeking new career opportunities. Edwards did find, however, that in addition to those who sought to separate their family and educational lives, and those who wanted some areas of separation and connection, there was a further group who wanted to connect their educational and familial roles. These women only partly affirm the integrated lives triangle, however, as working is not included in their attempts to combine their different roles – at least at the point when they are making choices about what to study and why, and when actively involved in the educational process.

The earlier studies focus on women who enrol as undergraduates in Higher Education whereas the women in the current study are on level 3 courses (equivalent to A-level, the level below undergraduate entry) and this could partly explain their different aspirations. Perhaps, Further Education, in its aim to help students gain vocational accreditation and its requirement for contact with the workplace, is predisposed to encourage students to develop their existing associations rather than strive for something new and different. In part, this too may explain the way the students seek to integrate their lives but we should be aware that the desire for integration is causal to enrolment on a childcare course, not consequent to this decision.

Typical behaviours and outcomes

The integrated lives theory was not the only significant finding from the research project. A detailed holistic analysis, looking within and across the individual narratives drew my attention, also, to common patterns of personal behaviour and work orientation. Striving to make sense of the students' decisions in relation to childcare, I was moved to devise a set of *occupational typologies* that captured the ways the students came to work in childcare and how this related to their earlier working lives. I termed *Samplers* those who tried the profession and fairly soon decided it was not for them, *Stagers* those who chose to work in childcare but only while their own children were young, while *Settlers* were those who were satisfied to remain in the profession after previously flitting from career to career. *Switchers* took up childcare as an alternative to returning to an earlier career, and *Step-Uppers* not only settled in childcare, but also used their experience and cumulative qualifications to carve out a full-time career path in management or a related field. These occupational typologies were initially established as a series of individual outcomes, but I later realised that they also represented a continuum, and could be recast as indicators of the degree of commitment to a childcare career with some individuals progressing up the ranks over a period of time.

In seeking out and modifying the occupational typologies I found there were other significant patterns within the life histories and realised that I could develop a set of *attitudinal typologies* relating to the students' attitude to studying and to life in general. Initially I focused on certain students who exhibited strong and repeated behavioural patterns but slowly, as I immersed myself further in the data I found that other students too showed similar attitudes. The attitudinal typologies are four in number. *Accepters* are those who take life as it comes, making changes reactively when circumstances alter around them. At the other extreme, *asserters* worked on their environment and the people they met, sometimes manipulating others to achieve their own ends. *Accumulators* systematically sought to better themselves: with reference to education this took the form of collecting qualifications, sometimes with an end in sight, sometimes just for the sake of it. In comparison, *agonisers* allowed themselves to be pulled in different directions, finding it difficult to focus. Sometimes they were greatly influenced by other people's opinions; sometimes they tried to hold different views simultaneously and worked reflectively to find an appropriate route forward. Some agonisers were creative thinkers able to resolve their contradictory beliefs, whilst others muddled along not sure what they wanted.

These two typologies operated independently suggesting that common attitudes to life do not predict common occupational outcomes even when students are choosing the same career. I did, however, become aware that, in recounting their life stories, many of the students referred to similar types of achievement and common stages in their lives. It was possible to identify a series of themes, or capability indicators, found in all the narratives even if different in detail for each individual. Students regularly referred to six such capability indicators when explaining the advantages and problems they encountered in their lives: social class, family support, experiences in compulsory education, levels of qualification attained, job status, and health. Possibly with a less homogenous cohort age, race and gender would have featured, too.

After reflecting on these ideas, I devised a simple means of ranking each indicator (usually allocating five values ranging from low, through neutral, to high status) and stringing these numerals together sequentially for each individual, created simple personalised capability chains. Given the simple numerical values, these could be portrayed visually as block diagrams, providing at-a-glance comparisons between students. Adding the attitudinal typologies as indicators of agency, and the occupational typologies as indicators of outcome, I began the process of looking for further patterns and explanations. This was a useful activity, for it demonstrated the internal logic of students' life stories, clearly showing how different combinations of early dis/advantage, under/achievement and mis/expectations resulted in different outcomes. In Sen's terms, the chains revealed that capability is cumulative with early achievement enabling further 'functioning'.

The capability chains also made visible the complexity of real lives, and the impossibility of predicting outcomes and achievements from isolated social characteristics. In my research, it was very clear that personal determination could overcome the effects of negative early experiences: individual agency is a powerful force for change. Having charted the complex patterns of interaction and continual possibility of further change, albeit in a small-scale research project, I have concerns about the validity of generalising from individuals to major databases by matching social characteristics (like gender, class and status), as so often happens in large-scale quantitative studies. In my experience, even when a group of individuals share similar backgrounds, it was clear that you could not assume a connection between background and occupational outcome (remember that most of my study participants, were white, British, mature women, married and parents; and all had chosen to study and work in childcare). Why, therefore, should we assume such an act is valid just because the numbers are greater and the individual life stories not available for checking? My evidence raises the possibility that such acts of generalisation could be very misleading; creating false truths that cannot be challenged, as no complementary evidence exists.

In comparison, a biographical approach elicits a range of life stories that are intrinsically fascinating and that, through a combination of thematic and holistic analysis, can generate a range of new theoretical perspectives; in this case, exemplifying aspects of an important philosophical framework seldom operationalised. The in-depth exploration of ideas, the careful and comprehensive transcription *of* and immersion *in* the data, have illuminated life paths *at least as accurately* as spurious statistical associations, drawing attention to the processes whereby some women with small children take an agentive role in making sense of their own lives; and thus endorsing the validity of biographical methods.

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Published as:

Wright, H.R. (2011) Enclaves, empowerment and education. In J-M. Baudouin, L. Formenti and L. West, Human agency and biographical transformations – adult education and life paths, CD of ESREA Life History and Biographical Research Network conference, University of Geneva, Friday 4 March 2011.

For preference, please cite the published version.