In Search of Stability: Women studying childcare in an English further education college

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This article demonstrates how women who study childcare achieve congruence in their lives. Rather than simply juggling the needs of family, work and study in order to escape the domestic sphere they choose to minimise dissonance, finding that parenting children, working with children, and studying children, creates a stable framework with reciprocal rather than conflictual links. The framework is captured as a model of 'integrated lives' and, drawing on Amartya Sen's capability approach, further conceptualised as an example of a capability set for childcare students. The pattern of drifting into childcare, representing the students' choices, is made visible through the creation of a set of occupational typologies.

Qualitative empirical evidence is used to explore the educational and broader social implications of integrating lives and how this congruence encourages the uptake of new ideas as learning is multiply relevant. However, shortage of time causes students to modify their approach to learning, causing many who espouse liberal values to favour knowledge transmission over more demanding styles, attracted to its apparent efficiency. Time constraints also encourage a retrospective acceptance of criterion-based assessment because fragmented knowledge is more easily manipulated when study patterns are sporadic and college work confined to those moments free from other commitments. The findings are discussed in relation to concerns that full-time students now need to undertake part-time work and introduce some interpretive detail to this debate.

Keywords: adult education; women's education; work/life balance; childcare; capability approach

The Research Context

The barriers to women succeeding, even enrolling, in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom are well researched and the notion of women juggling the different aspects of their lives, widely accepted. This does not justify the lack of government support for women's

education, as many feminist educators point out. Burke (2002) demonstrates how inequality limits potential. Edwards (1993) explains how those who use role theory as an explanation actually disregard women's structural position, implying that 'a bit more skilful juggling' would solve the problem. Merrill (1999, 156, 158) claims that 'coping with the competing demands, and the different and sometimes conflicting roles expected by varying institutions is a dominant aspect of being a mature female student' and describes the 'pressures of juggling roles'. Parr (2000) evokes the 'superwoman syndrome' to describe those with both domestic roles and paid employment. Indeed, in a recent article in this journal, Brown and Watson (2010, 395) explain how, for women, even the doctoral journey 'was characterised by juggling the demands placed on them'. They cite several references (Ramsey 2000; Neale and White 2004; Thanacoody, et al. 2006) in support of the claim that 'the ability to balance work and family responsibilities is a major factor in women's ability to make academic progress'.

In all of these studies, the women are entering higher education to improve their lives, to develop careers, and move away from the domestic sphere of the home although time constraints make this stressful 'in terms of health and quality of life' (Brown and Watson ibid, 395). In Edwards' study the women were seeking broader career opportunities but also valued 'the process of becoming educated' (ibid, 57) and the prestige that conferred, desiring a shift in status. Merrill's work (ibid, 204) found education to be 'a mechanism for personal change and self-development' and she claims (ibid, 205) that the women in her study 'no longer wanted to be dominated by domesticity'. Parr, too, describes her participants' 'determination to change aspects of their lives' (ibid, 126) Even Pascall and Cox (1993, 76) who approached educational research from a social reproduction perspective found that their mature women respondents saw education as 'unambiguously the route away from domesticity'. Hill and McGregor (1998, 146) writing from a vocational perspective, point out that 'the process of transition for a woman in any professional role

may bring about cognitive dissonance' (the simultaneous experiencing of conflicting impulses, Festinger 1957). This introduces a psychological explanation and takes the discussion beyond Edwards' sociological categorisation of women into those who separated or connected their private and public lives and those who selectively pursued both objectives.

In contrast to these earlier studies, this recent doctoral analysis of mature women training to work in childcare in an English further education (FE) college[i] draws attention to a stratum of students motivated to avoid such dissonance. Exploratory research into the student experience found that the participants were making educational choices that supported their existing lives rather than seeking to move on. The student accounts were intertwined with elements of personal, family and workplace narrative that demonstrated the complexity of real life and made it impossible to tell their stories about education in isolation. Like other women, they still needed to balance the competing demands of education, work and family and did this with varying levels of effort and success but overall their actions sought to 'integrate' their lives, using education to create stasis rather than to instigate change. Thus they offer a very different account of the purpose of education to those emanating from higher education.

As the childcare students demonstrably choose to integrate their lives around family, education and workplace, this study is an important addition to the research into work-life balance, and offers some insights to questions raised in quantitative studies of this subject despite occupying a different academic space. There is currently considerable interest in the effects of full-time students working part-time to fund their lifestyles and/or fees and research tends to focus on either post-16s in colleges (eg: Canny 2002, Hodgson and Spours 2001) or traditional undergraduates in higher education (eg: Bradley 2006; Carney, McNeish and McColl 2005; Metcalf 2003). Such studies only incidentally consider

adults, even though 'the concept of the "non-traditional" student is gaining ground' across Europe (Bienefeld and Almqvist 2004, 431). The research is predominately quantitative and 'students' accounts have received little attention'; a gap that Moreau and Leathwood (2006, 25) have started to address, as have Carney and McNeish (2005) in their study of seven mature students.

This article will examine the student narratives, the associated theorisation and the consequences of integration on educational practices in more detail, before considering how the research offers some insights into issues relating to the growing work involvement of full-time students, but first it describes the research design.

The research design

Research rationale

This study is an example of 'real world research' (Robson, 2002, 4) using a flexible design that 'evolved', 'developed' and 'unfolded' during the research process in order to 'say something sensible about a complex, relatively poorly controlled and generally "messy" situation'. It aimed to develop rather than test theory, so set out to understand and interpret students' accounts of their lives, investigating their perception of the role of education in mediating their experiences. It sought to develop in-depth portraits of individuals and their complex, sometimes competing, needs and desires rather than to treat them as units for statistical manipulation. Such an approach creates a mass of personal narratives that capture peoples' thoughts and feelings and the reasons for their actions but not material that is easy to handle, or data that is easy to contrast and compare. Nevertheless, as Atkinson and Delamont (2005, 823) claim, it is important that biographies are 'analyzed and not just reproduced and celebrated'. Thus, from the outset my intention was to seek out the 'patterns, narrative threads, tensions, and themes either within or across individuals' personal experience' (Clandinnin and Connelly 1994, 423) whilst respecting the integrity of the individual accounts.

The core of the study is a series of unstructured conversations with former students who had enrolled on an FE level 3 Childcare Diploma, taught annually, over a ten-year period starting in 1997 and was inspired by Nias's classic work, Primary Teachers Talking (1989). Like Nias, I was able to work with students that I had taught personally and this facilitated the excavation of rich seams of data suitable for both microscopic and holistic analysis. However, to counter any later suggestion of selection bias and give my findings greater validity, I sought background personal data and responses to simple questions about motivation and outcomes from the entire population of 170 and created a sampling matrix.

Selecting the participants

The matrix set study period against current employment type, identifying characteristics like educational level, parental status, ethnicity, to ensure these cross-cut the data. It established a series of cells to fill, enabling piecemeal selection of interviewees as questionnaires came in or responses were chased by telephone. These practices, though iterative, were far more stringent than are commonly adopted in small-scale qualitative research studies that, like this one, use biographical methods. Sample selection is often opportunistic, choosing those capable of telling useful stories (Goodson and Sikes 2001) or those 'willing to assist in the research process' (Erben 1998, 5). The questionnaire data later facilitated simple statistical confirmation that the sample was largely typical of the general cohort in terms of social characteristics and viewpoints (Wright 2010); again introducing a level of verification beyond the norm for this type of research.

The students came from ten successive cohorts and interviewees were drawn from the first nine cohorts to avoid undue pressure on continuing students. The tenth group, the completing students, were still in regular contact as data analysis began. This allowed clarification of any general issues arising during analysis and a degree of informal triangulation of holistically derived interpretations, and thus increases confidence in the authenticity of the findings. In the thesis I discuss the issue of veracity at length, discounting

many of the suggested methods of 'evidencing' this as fundamentally dependent on researcher integrity, and still hold this view (Wright 2010, 55).

Characteristics of the participants

From the 150 willing to take part, 33 women were selected for interview. In the ten cohorts and sample, the women were mostly married (80%) and living with young children (70% had children of primary school age or below at the time of interview). However, the women came from a mix of social backgrounds and exhibited a wide range of prior qualifications, from those with very few CSEs (Certificates of Secondary Education) to a number who were already graduates. Some had considerable experience of working with children but others were just starting out; a varied group.

As the Diploma targeted mature women the study cohort included very few women under 25 but when this category was excluded from the Labour Workforce Survey data for 2001-5, other indicators demonstrated broad parallels with the national workforce (Simon, et al. 2007). To summarise, like the national childcare workforce, the students were predominately white, female, middle-aged, under-qualified and poorly paid.

Methodological approach

As I had personally tutored all ten student groups, I already had a detailed contextual knowledge of the course and college and a good working relationship with the students (demonstrated by the return of 150 of a possible total of 170 questionnaires). I recognised the importance of utilising this familiarity and, although I initially drew up a schedule of questions, found in the first few interviews that the students chose to talk freely about their lives so I accepted this flexible style of interviewing (influenced by Kvale 1996). Simply encouraging the students to talk about education privileged their views of relevance over my own. However, I was continually monitoring the coverage of the interviews as I responded to the student comments so was able to introduce more focused questions seamlessly to keep

the conversation flowing or steer it away from areas of little interest to the study. Indeed, I quickly discovered the benefits of 'interviewer participation' and found I was instinctively using the psychosocial techniques described by Hollway and Jefferson (2000), challenging the hesitations, contradictions and juxtapositions within a conversation in order to draw out deeper meanings.

I was careful to transcribe the interviews in full to build a comprehensive picture and used the coding and structural pairing common to conversation analysis (Ten Have 1999) to unpick the meaning in those areas of the interview where co-construction could potentially obscure the integrity of the interpretation. I developed a combination of holistic and thematic analysis, through a process of exhaustively writing out the evidence (after Richardson and St Pierre 2005). On achieving a state of data saturation, some 59,000 words later, I was satisfied that I had captured the students' beliefs rather than my own ideas.

Thus, the research design was maximally flexible, with the interviews and later analysis drawing out the students' viewpoints rather than steering these towards *a priori* expectations. At the writing stage, in particular, this presented a number of challenges as it proved very difficult to separate the educational content from other elements. It was this complexity that led me to a new theoretical understanding: the data was loudly arguing for the creation of a model describing 'integrated lives'. For the students, integration was achieved as a gradual process; one of minor adjustment rather than radical change.

Selected research findings

The drift into childcare work and training
The tentative way that students entered the profession first drew attention to their desire to integrate their lives. Few of the students planned a career in childcare. The majority were parents first and foremost.

> I wanted to be at home with the children… I didn't need to work for the money … I would have hated that juggling of 'can't come into work today because someone is ill'. (Amy)

Many 'fell' into childcare work after a period of voluntary engagement in their own children's settings and found it convenient.

> I had my own children and started doing volunteer work in pre-schools and I was interested in that work and obviously it fits around your own children. (Avril)

It could, however, be rewarding too, sometimes unexpectedly so.

> It was just so different from how I expected it to be that I really, really enjoyed it. (Ingrid)

Thus, the common pattern was to become a parent, volunteer for election to the management committee and/or to help in the setting and wait for a paid assistant post to arise. Some students undertook training when they got a job, some decided to study in readiness or out of general interest. In a few instances, students took responsibility for running a group even while they trained. Bethany, Danni, and Irene found themselves in this situation.

This pattern of 'drifting' into childcare was very marked but took a variety of forms, supporting the creation of a set of occupational typologies. These are explained in considerable detail elsewhere along with a set of attitudinal typologies (Wright 2011) but here we should briefly note the common occurrence of specific behaviours. The least committed students, the *samplers* tried childcare work for a short while – often the duration of the training course – decided it was not for them and moved on or back into less demanding or prior occupations. The *stagers* saw this to be a suitable career while their children were young but not longer term. *Settlers* however, made a commitment to

childcare work relinquishing earlier patterns of transient employment and *switchers*, elected to stay in the profession, despite having the option of returning to an earlier career pathway. Commonly these decisions were made after experiencing the training and the work rather than prior to enrolling on the diploma course. Only a small minority of students the *step-uppers* deliberately sought career progression and quite often this took them into related occupations, paediatric nursing, hospital play specialist, or management positions in the caring sector.

The decision to study was frequently opportunistic, too. Existing staff who had already made the shift from helper to worker often encouraged parents to enrol and for a few this was liberating. 'I loved that sort of learning environment, going to college for the day' (Bella). For others, however, the process was quite daunting. 'I was quite nervous about it all but, em, you get used to it' (Heena). Certainly most students mentioned the importance of face-to-face contact with staff and with other mature students. That they talk about 'being in the same boat', remember helping each other, and need a defined framework to help them maintain progress, demonstrates the importance of taught courses (an important consideration when, increasingly, cost factors encourage online learning).

> I need the discipline of going into college and actually seeing people and
> having a bit of competition … I think I would have struggled to have done an
> NVQ [National Vocational Qualification]. (Frieda)

Frieda clearly has a competitive streak but for many students the emphasis was more collegial; belonging, even nurturing, was important.

The theory of integrated lives
Nursery education traditionally provides a transitional space for small children from which to learn about the real world beyond the home environment, and I would argue that both childcare settings and training courses similarly serve a transitional purpose for women who have spent some time at home caring for their own children and want to return to work. The

students desired a degree of independence and self-fulfilment but their children and families' needs were ever at the forefront of their minds. They valued convenient hours and geographical proximity over formal working conditions and acceptable rates of pay. They linked their learning to their children's needs and blurred the boundaries by working at home, unpaid, over and above their paid hours in the workplace. Study time was snatched from busy schedules, filling the gaps when the students were free of other demands but that it happened at all demonstrates its importance in busy lives. Overall, the data analysis supported a model of integrated lives where the student forged reciprocal links between family, work and education, but where these elements in their lives were also independently interlinked. This is seen quite clearly in the triple triangle (figure 1).

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

These women's lives are stabilised by this triangular structure, for all three aspects – family, education and childcare work – function as 'greedy institutions' (Coser 1974); structures that demand total commitment. As this is impossible to achieve – no one can give one hundred per cent to each of three competing elements – the triangle describes a tension between all three areas that actually balances each woman's choices. If she decides to give more time to any one aspect, the combined strength of the other two institutions keeps this in check, making it impossible to favour any aspect to excess. Thus the woman is 'pacifying' competing demands within a give-and-take framework rather than randomly juggling disparate needs and this creates a quite stable lifestyle because cognitive dissonance is negligible. Once postulated, the links between the aspects are very believable. Learning about children is a part of education and useful to both family and work. Working in childcare is part-time and local so beneficial to family but it also supports the woman in

gaining a qualification as her education is vocationally based. Bringing up a family gives each woman real experience of children to flesh out her academic learning and increases her credibility in the workplace as other parents know that she understands their problems.

Through these reciprocal links, the triple triangle defines the women's 'capability set', identifying the range of choices that they can freely choose to develop to fruition if they want to achieve higher levels of functioning (Sen 1999). This connection to the capability approach[ii], as I argue elsewhere (Wright 2010), gives the triangle further explanatory power. The research evidence shows that most of the participants do make choices from this set. Some choose to study further, some to concentrate more on their children, others decide to develop their careers in childcare or related areas rather than do something entirely different. Only six of the 33 students moved out of the profession and often when they did this they were still using elements of their childcare training but adding this to prior work or life experiences. Diane, for instance, decided to work for an environmental organisation using the degree in geography achieved before becoming a mother, but recognises that she uses her knowledge of community work and of egalitarian practice in her new occupation, so her choices, although individualised, still demonstrate integration.

Thus, the doctoral research describes and theorises the lives of women who choose to compromise. They welcome part-time work, part-time study and part-time caring and family responsibilities and accept that this results in fuzzy life-work-study boundaries. Workplace responsibilities leak into the home but the workplace supports educational endeavours:

> Hours and hours I spend of my own time, doing things, it doesn't bear thinking about. (Bethany)

> [Manager] supports me and encourages me a lot to do other courses.

Friends and family members are asked to help with children so that students can fulfil their educational obligations but some children help with the studying:

> I am really lucky to have both the grandparents who would have the children which was absolutely fine – which was brilliant really, I would have struggled without that help. (Irene)

> [Teenagers] sat there, sometimes until about 12 o'clock at night doing word counts for me and reading things through. (Ingrid)

Students prioritise their commitments to others to keep relationships harmonious and fit their studying around household responsibilities and children's plans:

> Well, perhaps I didn't vacuum everyday or whatever. Sometimes the washing was left out for two days on end ... or, the children went out to play with a friend so you took that opportunity to get on and do it. (Beryl)

However, they do all this willingly as they value life's complexity.

> 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 ... (Evelyn)

Perhaps, as Gilligan (1993/82, 127) suggests the students are seeking a sense of connectedness 'the realization that self and other are interdependent and that life, however valuable in itself, can only be sustained by care in relationships'. Certainly their actions support Hakim's (1998) 'preference theory' whereby she, somewhat controversially, suggests that many women *choose* partial domesticity. In contrast, Walby (1997, 1999) views women in part-time work through a patriarchal lens. She believes this to be a legacy of the limited opportunities and low salaries in the past that made childcare provision too expensive for many women and prevented them from returning to earlier careers after motherhood. Hakim challenges such 'feminist myths' (1995) believing that many seek part-

time work from choice and that this decision is supported by their partners. Describing as 'adaptives', those 'who drifted into careers or developed workplans within the context of plans for motherhood and family activities' (1998, 139), she later (2004, 14), after considerable statistical analysis, confirms that this category is 'generally the largest group among women' and accounts for 'up to two-thirds of all women in any country'.

I can see elements of truth in both positions but the empirical findings do independently support Hakim's analysis. It is reassuring to find the data interpretation so validated but this does not mean the findings can be generalised to include 'all women'. Before we consider the their significance and examine the implications of 'integrated lives' theory for educational practices, we should note there is no intention either to embrace or alienate those who make other choices.

Discussion

Implications for educational practices
We already know from Beryl's comments that women study in spare moments when housework is done (or shelved) and young children otherwise entertained. and this is a common finding in the data. Aileen is typical when she talked of 'always' having the assignments 'out on the living room floor' and doing work 'when I could', as is Bella who makes the most of 'windows of opportunity'. Family support is often passive – not complaining – but some partners cook or take the children for a walk and, exceptionally, Irma's husband not only read her work out loud to her so that she could 'see if it sounds all right' but sat 'up till 2 o'clock in the morning cutting them all out' when she had seriously exceeded the word count the night before hand-in. Unusually too, we have seen that Ingrid's teenagers helped their mother with her work: while one 'did the word count', the other 'did the hole-punching'. Thus we can see that 'integrating' study with family life can positively influence family relationships, even family learning.

The time constraints associated with integrating lives have consequences for classroom practices, too, but here the links are less clearly visible. In particular, students who voiced liberal views of education in the abstract often showed a preference for knowledge transmission when they discussed practice. A considerable number seemed to be operating at the second level of women's ways of knowing (Belenky, et al. 1997/86, 15), the received stage, 'a perspective from which women conceive of themselves as capable of receiving, even reproducing, knowledge from the all-knowing external authorities but not capable of creating knowledge on their own'.

On reviewing the students' prior educational experiences this seemed an appropriate stage for many, but others who were clearly independent thinkers still insisted upon linear lesson delivery. For example, Greta, a history graduate, was very reflective when she discussed her own life and experiences but nevertheless admitted that when other students recounted personal anecdotes she 'sometimes felt "oh I wish you would be quiet and just listen a bit and actually learn something"'. Later she identified the source of her irritation as time pressure 'when I felt things had gone off on a tangent ... I felt we had lost time. I used to think, I'm here, this is a valuable day'. Ilsa also complained about interruptions from other students 'you would be trying to teach us something and [another student] would come up with some bizarre story...'. She then expressed her concern that 'we haven't covered the criteria that we needed to cover today', again demonstrating a real need to see progression in her learning. Other characteristics of their narratives suggest that both of these students would more naturally fall into a higher category of learning but they clearly wanted to maximise their knowledge uptake during classes. Teaching time was precious and transmission of information seen as efficient.

I think, too, that students' attitudes to assessment criteria were affected by pressure on time. During class the majority had complained bitterly about having to write to detailed

specifications and many teaching hours were spent going over the criteria to ensure that everyone understood what they had to do. In part, the problems stemmed from ambiguity in the wording of criteria that left them open to different shades of interpretation. In many cases students also found it difficult to plan ahead and structure their answers to ensure that they covered all the necessary aspects. However, when the students were considering criteria in retrospect at interview, freed from the fear of misinterpretation, they typically viewed them favourably. Aileen freely acknowledges this contradiction. Smiling wryly she states: 'It was set out really well. I mean, I know I complained bitterly through most of the course but it was quite easy to do and work through'.

A few of the graduates did find the criteria prescriptive. Gina thought they were 'a bit restrictive', and Irene expressed concern that this method of assessment was 'less of a challenge'. She recognised that there was no point in 'trying to make it flowing' as this would not affect the grade. Irene preferred to write an essay but saw that criteria focused her work.

> I think it makes it so much easier to actually get the right information out of somebody whereas the essay type that I am used to doing from many years ago, you could potentially quite easily miss the point.

Ironically, for other graduates, like Greta, it was precisely the fear that they might miss the point of the criteria and therefore fail that loomed large.

In retrospect, many students found criteria useful but for non-educational reasons. Criteria fragmented learning into manageable segments making it possible to focus on one element at a time and therefore to make progress on an assignment in those snatched moments when not needed by others. Heena describes such a piecemeal approach:

> Whenever I got a chance. I found that if I did one little question at a time it seemed to be a lot easier than trying to fit it all into a week or a weekend or a day. So I worked in little bits.

She found the fine shades of meaning difficult, the 'little slight difference' between the levels, but also found the criteria useful in answering the question 'where do you stop?'. She worried that 'if it was just a big heading' she would never know if she had 'covered what the examiner is possibly looking for' and be confident to declare her assignment complete, enabling her to refocus on other aspects of her life. Holly talks about 'working on it over a period' and using the criteria to structure her research from 'when we started a new assignment'.

> What I used to do, I used to go E 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 8 and A, B, C, D and make a heading on a piece of paper and putting my thought on that piece of paper right from the word go.

Despite finding criteria supportive in retrospect, few valued National Vocational Qualifications (NVQs); describing poorly organised ones as a 'conveyor belt' (Avril); complaining that students 'weren't actually being taught anything' (Arianne); and that students lacked 'oomph' (Imogen). Ingrid who had actually completed a paperless NVQ level 2 prior to enrolling complained about the isolation 'you have no support system and no networking system' but also that having 'to write little sentences in the box' gave her no preparation for further study when three thousand word assignments were expected.

Within the classroom, students quickly recognised that they came from a diverse range of backgrounds and needed to personalise their learning. They formed study groups to support their areas of weakness and asked the tutor for specific help. In this respect, the open entry system worked well as academic skills could be traded for help with practical elements from those competent in the workplace, and vice versa. The vocational nature of the course acted as a great leveller as workplace experience could compensate for academic deficit. For example, a graduate, Gina, measured herself against experienced staff and doubted her abilities: 'I felt maybe they know a lot more than me'. In contrast, lower-

qualified Irma who 'didn't think I could do it for one minute really' took encouragement from a graduate friend who asked 'why don't you do it?' and learned 'a lot more of the computer' and developed essential study skills. She claims that 'when I started I didn't even know what an assignment was' but 'I can do any course now'.

Broader educational outcomes

Individual student narratives demonstrate how they integrate their lives but also how difficult it is to predict what students will gain from their studies. Greta, a childless student, enjoys learning how to work with parents; perhaps fulfilling a need to know what parenting is like. Whereas Daisy, a graduate mother of four finds the Diploma compensates for the loss of her undergraduate 'dream' to do 'research into pure theoretical physics' following a serious head injury. Arianne who never 'envisaged going into childcare' ended up as a manager and is 'settled now'. In contrast, Alex, who helped set up a pre-school and saw this as a career move, needs more money as a single parent and takes a retail job instead. Avril who 'wasn't very good at school' now works as a tutor, having systematically acquired the necessary qualifications along with a love of studying. Fiona, a step-upper, trained as a paediatric nurse but attributes learning to write essays to the Diploma and still talks enthusiastically about spiral learning. These are just a few examples of stories that demonstrate the compensatory nature of adult education, the unpredictability of long-term outcomes, and the transferability of learning from one area to another. There are many more recounted in detail in my book (Wright 2011).

Arguably, it is the agentive effects of successful study that make adult education so vital. As Sen asserts through the capability approach, it is important for society that people are able to choose their own actions. This is satisfying and empowering, and can motivate people to take charge of their own lives and to help others. Aileen, for example, who failed her O-levels in Maths and English, returned voluntarily to retake them as a young mother. Now a teaching assistant (TA) in a local primary, she has specialised in numeracy and literacy

and is a strong advocate for children acquiring maths and English skills early in their lives. Made more confident by their own academic success, several women talked about intervening in schools on their children's behalf. Irene challenged the head teacher about self-esteem issues 'which I probably wouldn't have done if I hadn't have had this training'. Frieda says the course gave her 'the confidence to challenge a few things' and is definite that if her son encounters problems at secondary school she will 'get something done'. Alex recognises the value of understanding the educational system: 'I know if I push and I push and I push I am going to get somewhere'.

Parents who study childcare pay back into the educational system, over and above their employment in early years settings. Many later become teaching or learning support assistants. Often, like Evelyn, they take their volunteering mentality – willingness to do what needs to be done – into the compulsory sector: 'For me the reward isn't the pay … [but] thinking, yes, I've done that job well. It's self, self-pay if you like'. Ingrid, even gained the confidence to become a parent governor, something she 'would never have *dreamed* of doing before'. At times the pre-school leaders support the local primary schools directly. Bethany describes how her successful pre-school attracts additional children 'from out of the village' who feed into the small rural church school and keep it viable. Danni recounts how the local headteacher sent over a newly qualified reception teacher who was 'really struggling' with some challenging children, 'just to see what we do and to see how we operate'. Here we have an acknowledgement that the mature practitioner can help the more academically qualified newcomer when it comes to handling children's behaviour. Being a parent is supportive of workplace competence, childcare training supports both roles, working and studying share a common focus and dissonance is avoided.

Comparisons with full-time students who work
Contemporary literature on student employment approaches working from the perspective of its effect on full-time students, so is possibly predisposed to see work as an additional (if

essential) extra whereas for my students it was a goal in its own right and, in many cases, preceded the decision to study. Whether working is negatively viewed may depend on the elements the student sacrifices in order to pursue multiple objectives. Lindsay and Paton Saltzberg (1996, in Metcalf 2003, 316) found that term-time working 'mainly impacted on leisure time', a lack of which may eventually present as a health problem (Carney et al 2005). Moreau and Leathwood (2006, 34) also found limiting social activities 'a frequently mentioned strategy for coping' and, ironically, this could be one reason why the childcare workers encountered less problems. As parents most were accustomed to a domestic existence and reduced social life. Part-time work and study offered an alternative to their caring duties, a form of freedom and opportunity to interact with like-minded others.

Supporting a family and reciprocal family support, the third aspect of the integrated lives triangle, represents the 'caring' element that Moreau and Leathwood (2006, 36) see as an additional problem for Giddens' 'multi-tasking, flexible, self-managing individuals of neo liberalism'. These authors also claim a class distinction with regard to family support that is not always evident within my own research. The two middle-class students they mention, who lived at home and for whom 'combining work, studies and a social life does not appear to be problematic' (ibid, 36), may have had stress-free lives but this does not preclude such support for working class students. My research demonstrated that family assistance takes many forms. There was evidence that, historically, working class students were less likely to be encouraged to 'stay on' at school, but as adults many benefited from the help of parents, partners, even children. Indeed, marriage no doubt eased the financial pressure on 80% of the students but whether husbands were supportive or not defied class divisions. Practical and emotional backing was important too and Irma, whose husband stayed 'up till 2 o'clock' to help her edit, was a working class student as was Ingrid, whose children helped her to 'punch holes 'and 'do the word count'. In contrast, some middle-class students were

expected to cope alone. Frieda's husband tolerated studying 'as long as it doesn't affect me, or the children'. Celia's stipulated 'as long as you manage to get everything done here'.

The need to earn as you learn is made more difficult when educational providers and employers are inflexible (Moreau and Leathwood 2006), and this has a detrimental effect on those trying to 'straddle two "worlds" without developing deep commitments to either' (Bradley 2006, 483). Perhaps, conversely, it is the deep desire to combine aspects of their lives that explains the satisfaction of the childcare workers. Metcalf (2003, 323) claims that for full-time students 'the value placed on education ... may also affect willingness to sacrifice educational time for working' but for the childcare workers it is the value placed on education that encourages them to sacrifice family time and paid hours in order to qualify. All three of their commitments – family, work and education – are seen to be important and the congruence of childcare work enables the students to minimise stress. Others, too, have found improved outcomes when work and education align. Hodgson and Spours' (2001) typologies include *connectors*, who make 'active' links between education and work and thereby positively affect attainment; and (mainly female) *balancers* who are able to manage their dual roles effectively. Indeed Hodgson and Spours so favour 'connection' that they suggest there should be a 'national steer' to encourage this association.

In an Australian context, Bradley also found connectivity (or congruence) relevant. When testing five possible relationships between work participation and academic success he hypothesised that 'paid work interferes with studies only when work is experienced as stressful, dissatisfying, non-discretionary and/or incongruent with the student's life goals and values' (2006, 484). This correlation was not provable, but there was a tendency towards positive academic achievement for students with above average levels of job satisfaction, congruence and autonomy. Thus Bradley identifies an additional significant factor. Pre-schools fall within the voluntary sector, and are mainly community-managed.

Even now, challenged to standardise and professionalise, they enjoy a high degree of independence and this may explain some of the satisfaction the childcare students derive from their integrated lives. Emily, for example, knows she is paid less than a teaching assistant in a school but as a room leader she has 'lots of responsibility'.

Bradley (ibid, 498) also reports the 'discovery' of a group of students who 'work long hours, yet manage to achieve academically' and finds evidence that this is due to effective time and resource management. This too could be significant as the childcare workers spent considerable time discussing how they learned to study efficiently. Their habit of utilising every spare moment, their need to prioritise, and the tension deriving from balancing the needs of family, work and education ensure they are functioning alertly for a large proportion of their time. Organisation is a skill valued by Carney and colleagues (2005, 315) who believe it would be more beneficial 'to educate students how to manage time' than to police part-time working. However, in their Scottish study, the mature students seem to struggle more than the younger age group. This is partly attributed to the financial strain of home ownership but the effects include problems with emotions, social functioning, mental health and energy/vitality, suggesting that the reciprocal family, student, workplace triangle may significantly mediate stress.

On a more negative note, Bradley considers whether efficiency leads to an 'achieving' rather than a 'deep' learning style and advocates investigation of the specific strategies used by students who also work. My findings on how time constrains learning may be relevant here, for I reported that students who were capable of higher level approaches often preferred knowledge transmission and disliked it when others took us 'off at a tangent'. I also found an acceptance, even a retrospective liking, for criterial assessment as it enabled piecemeal working and set boundaries for 'what to include' and 'when to stop', suggesting a superficial approach. Bradley also questions whether the durability of student

learning is adversely affected by work participation, leading me to acknowledge that the section on 'residual learning' within the thesis is pitifully short as the students were reluctant to recall and refer to the course content. Nevertheless, I believe the students learned the things they found to be personally significant. The transcripts abound with comments that show they related their learning to their children, their work, and their lives; and there are numerous references to insights and nuggets of knowledge that had captured their interest. More importantly, they learned to see things for themselves. Consider Heidi's claim that she learned to understand children better: 'you then taught us to sort of look *behind* the behaviour'; Daisy's view that: 'some things you learn and you are not quite the same afterwards'; Frieda's belief that what mattered was: 'learning more about the realities of the child development rather than just about how to pass the exam'. Consider too the value of embedded skills, of having personal confidence, of knowing how to talk to parents, of valuing cultural difference; the feelings of self-worth, the aspirations for further study, and the belief that: 'I can do any course now'. Surely this is evidence of deeper and durable learning.

Conclusion

Within this article it is possible only to mention the most noteworthy connections between individuals, and between families, education and the workplace. Those we have studied represent only a minor proportion of the benefits that can arise when women seek to integrate their lives. Practical support, advice and friendship are regularly offered, making the local pre-school a core feature of the local community and an important transitional space for children and parents alike. In encouraging intergenerational learning and improving the confidence and educational aspirations of mothers they play a vital but unsung role in supporting the social justice agenda, but most importantly, incorporate an element of choice that makes participation attractive and non-threatening. Despite time pressures, learning is light-hearted and this makes it enjoyable. In contrast, for full-time

undergraduates the cost of studying and independent living makes work a necessity and this

often involves unsocial hours and low levels of job satisfaction for tasks that have no

connection to the subjects being studied. Yet, as we have seen, there are explanatory

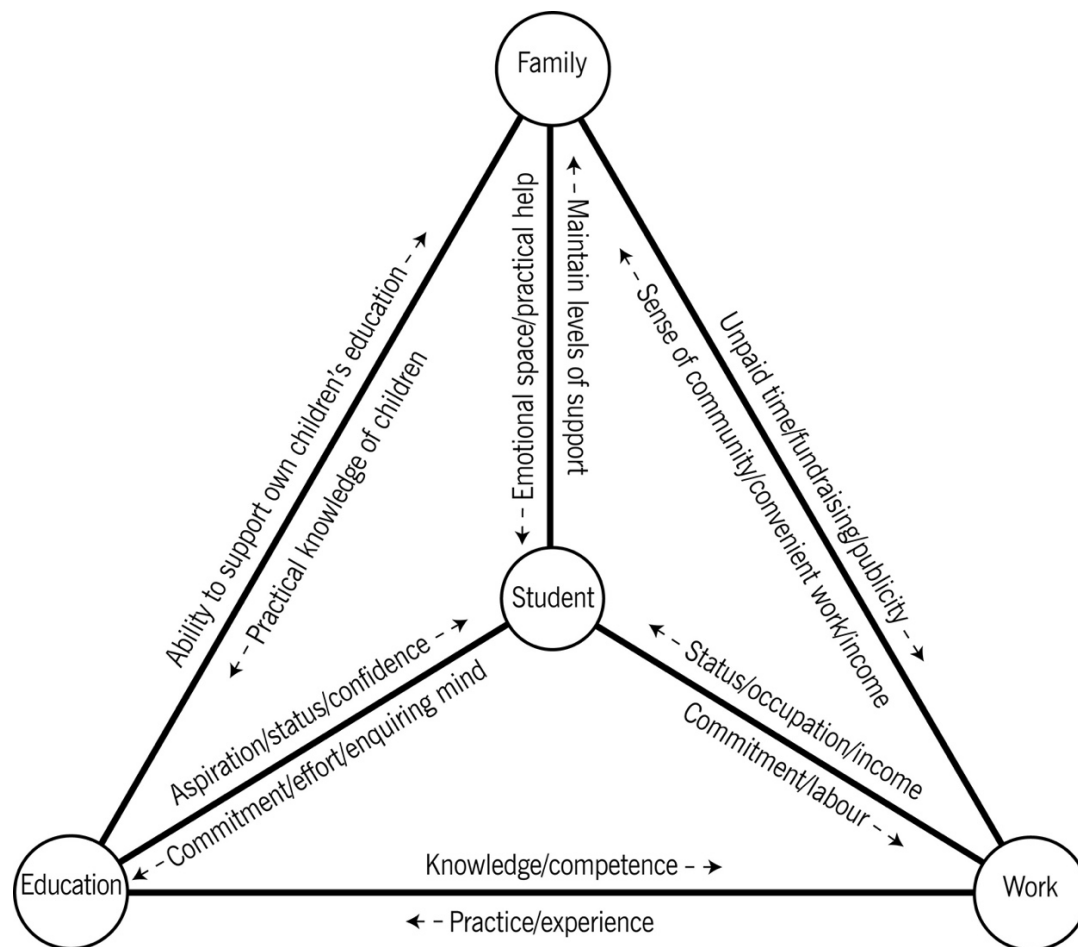elements that are transferable across the different contexts.

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

Figure showing a triangle diagram with nodes Family (top), Student (center), Education (bottom left), Work (bottom right), and a connecting arrows labelled:
- Ability to support own children's education → / ← – Practical knowledge of children (Family–Education)
- ↑ – Maintain levels of support / – Emotional space/practical help ↓ (Family–Student)
- ← – Sense of community/convenient work/income / Unpaid time/fundraising/publicity → (Family–Work)
- Aspiration/status/confidence → / ← – Commitment/effort/enquiring mind (Student–Education)
- ← – Status/occupation/income / Commitment/labour → (Student–Work)
- Knowledge/competence – → / ← – Practice/experience (Education–Work)

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has a 'capability set' of potentially realizable alternatives from which to select compatible options for implementation; a process Sen describes as turning capabilities into 'functionings'. Sen places the attention on this process of choosing. His discourse of people selecting 'beings' and 'doings' that matter to them individually relates to the present, on the achievement of functionings that support a current satisfactory lifestyle, rather than distant future attainments. The capability approach has an affinity with many liberal strategic positions in favouring diversity and is to be locally applied, each group determining their own priorities, and thereby taking responsibility for their own lives (Wright 2009).

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