

A sector in transition: changing expectations for the early years' workforce

Hazel R. Wright, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

In Britain, as in many countries, universal education developed piecemeal over several centuries with the State intervening at intervals to monitor, challenge or direct but never quite taking complete control or responsibility for underwriting the costs. Forster's Education Act introduced compulsory elementary education in 1870, the 1944 Education Act (extending the initiatives of the 1918 Fisher Education Act) made secondary education available for all. In these sectors and in higher education, the State played an active part in shaping the nature of the provision. In comparison, until recently, non-compulsory education within the community and in further education (FE) colleges, catering for adults, young children and the less academic, attracted less interest enabling it to continue to develop organically. As someone with teaching experience in all three of the latter areas, I claim that this provision shared a range of common and constructive characteristics that are being carelessly swept aside in the name of progress, masquerading as professionalization, standardization, accreditation, managerialism and instrumentalism. In making this claim, I am not arguing against change or improvement, quite the opposite, but I am arguing against externally derived and imposed changes that fail to recognize and protect good practice and intangible outcomes. Also against the destructive practice of imposing new changes before earlier ones have had time to settle and tacit knowledge to surface. These are problems that are widely recognized, hence my growing collection of relevant policy descriptors to which I would welcome additions: Ball's 'overload', Dunleavy & O'Leary's 'hyperactivism', Smithers' 'churn', Stronach and Maclure's 'hysteria', and Rhodes identification of 'succession rather than success'. Perhaps, to these we should add the notion of policy 'immunity' for there is evidence in my research that one result of excessive externally imposed change is a decrease in motivation.

As part of a doctoral thesis I was able to investigate the educational and workplace practices of successive cohorts of mature women who decided to train in childcare work as their own children grew older. I collected background questionnaire data from a total of 150 students and carried out informal interviews with 33 who studied during a ten-year period roughly coincident with Tony Blair's New Labour government. Their detailed biographical accounts illuminated the ways the women organized their lives, how they managed the competing demands of family, education and workplace and how they viewed the changing workplace practices being imposed from above, and I acquired a breadth of material that will be more fully discussed in the presentation. Here, however, I think it useful to focus on the theoretical background and to consider further the parallels and differences between adult education in general and this specific vocational instance.

The historical context

Firstly, we should consider the shared historical and structural contexts. Studies of adult and/or community education (of which childcare training for mature

women is an example) reveal how it developed in a laissez-faire fashion often through a series of grass roots movements (Kelly 1992, Fieldhouse 1996). Its piecemeal development over several centuries embedded variety and this is a strength and weakness, making it hard to control (perhaps in part explaining the resort to the swingeing cuts of the last decade) but also hard to defend (the valiant efforts in the national press of National Institute of Adult and Continuing Education and Association of Colleges spokespeople could only monitor and publicize, curb but not prevent, the recent decimation of provision). From its early inception, adult education has been sensitive to the needs of its students, operating flexibly in terms of curriculum content, physical location and timings; characteristics later enshrined in humanist approaches (Rogers 1983) and andragogy (Knowles et al 1998). These are characteristics, too, that have exacerbated its marginalized status. An educational provision that is respectful of people's lives tries to identify and meet their needs rather than enforce a set curriculum, and fills vacant slots rather than demanding core time and a central location. This multiplicity of function and flexible delivery is beneficial for the students but at times has diverted academic attention away from useful theorization and onto issues of definition and classification (eg: see Foley 2004). Thus, overall the field reveals a paradoxical alignment of strengths with weaknesses that leaves it vulnerable to external criticism as in the following critique of early years education:

‘the confusion over training, the piecemeal way in which courses have developed, the low status that many carry ... are but a symptom of a wider malaise’ (Pugh 1998).

In Britain (but especially in England) the long gestation has led to a confusion of educational purpose and social stratification. Some current initiatives show a remarkable path dependency challenging the notion that change equals progress. For instance, the new educational diplomas in adopting a ‘framework’ over a ‘unified’ approach (Hyland & Merrill 2003) only partly bridge the skills / liberal / vocational division of educational purpose despite its known classed origins in the Platonic stratification of society into rulers, farmers and other workers (Lea et al 2003). This perpetuates a cyclical reappearance of tripartite divisions in theory and policy: in the 1867 Taunton Commission Report, the 1944 Education Act (Skilbeck et al 1994) and more recently, the academic, applied and vocational routes of the 1996 Dearing Review. Current plans within early years training, to develop a common core curriculum may lift work-based learning beyond the limitations of the national vocational qualification (NVQ) system, but it is too early yet to tell whether this change will provide more than an ‘accreditational’ veneer. Recently too, the extension of faith schools has broadened debates about race and ethnicity beyond the historical anglo / catholic / secular divide, projecting greater educational segregation into new generations in the name of diversity.

In terms of gender the picture is more positive, as adult education has served an emancipatory function for women in a nation with a long tradition of privileging the education of its male offspring. Indeed, the first adult Sunday School in Nottingham in 1798 was set up to teach basic literacy and numeracy to female hosiery and lace-makers and by 1851, the census shows that women accounted

for a third of those enrolled in adult and night schools (Kelly 1992), a significant percentage given the political and scientific nature of the earlier 'café' societies and mechanics institutes and their domination by males. Indeed, a contemporary account, specifically mentions the inclusion of women as members of the more sociable Lyceum groups (Hudson 1851). From that time onwards, women started to establish their own domains, the Women's College (1864), Morley College (1880) and the Women's Cooperative Guild (1883); later, around the first World War (1914-18), the Women's Institutes in rural areas, and their urban parallel, the Townswomen's Guilds (Kelly 1992). From the outset, these later groups focused on a mix of citizenship issues and domestic craft activities, underwriting the association of adult education with 'flower-arranging', so often used in contempt and encouraging gendered divisions within the field. Despite the name change from 'working men' (1903) to 'workers' (1905) women were slow to populate shared provision like the Workers Education Association (WEA) classes (Kelly 1992).

Where women's education has aligned with their role as educators, however, the content has been more academic in orientation. Northern campaigners for higher education for women (eg: Josephine Butler and Anne Clough, later Principal of Newnham College) were instrumental in developing the University Extension Movement (Jepson 1973) and this association of teaching and training was significant in the early years' sector, too. Internationally, childcare groups have a history of training women to work with children. The Froebel kindergarten movement in the second half of the nineteenth century played a key role in 'enlarging women's fundamental rights and professional opportunities' (Brosterman 1997 p.93), as did the Montessori and Steiner/Waldorf movements in the early twentieth century. However, the impact of these initiatives in England was limited as they received no state financial support. By 1900 some 43% of 3 to 5 year olds attended private kindergartens, nurseries or Board schools, but often in classes with a ratio of 60 children to 1 teacher (David 1990).

The contemporary scene

A national swing towards vocational education after Callaghan's 'Great Debate' of 1976 heralded the alignment of education with economic progress. Under Margaret Thatcher, the Conservatives encouraged further commodification and under New Labour educational change was given a social justice gloss. All these trends, in their different ways were used to justify increased state intervention in the professional domain, often indirectly through the apparent 'empowerment' of parents or businesses as clients. The compulsory sector, by its very nature, was relatively easy to 'reform' through a process of legislation and financial incentive. In higher education (HE) the key sites for control were student fee structures, widening participation and bursaries and number capping with the unpopular Equal and Lower Qualification (ELQ) embargo in 2008 channelling retraining into vocational areas by exempting foundation degrees. The purpose of FE was investigated in the Kennedy report (1997) and Foster review (2005) with the Leitch report (2006) enforcing the embedding of skills for staff and students alike. Adult education has been brought under control by the manipulation of funding streams, resulting in major cuts in non-qualificatory activities, an instrumental focus on basic skills and low level vocational

qualifications, and as a palliative rather late in the day, the promise of finance for 'community based learning', sanctioning the reinvention of earlier self-study groups.

In contrast, the early years' sector has survived and expanded throughout these changes and challenges, probably due to a fortunate coincidence of several political and economic agendas. The social justice initiative advocates early intervention in children's lives through a Sure Start programme modelled loosely on the American Head Start scheme. To be successful this required expansion and improvement of provision for under-5s and more specialized staffing. Concerns about the ageing workforce and economic prosperity focused on returning women to work more quickly after childbirth, also justifying the expansion of daycare for young children. The encouragement of commercial concerns, day nursery chains, to implement this expansion allowed the government to meet policy objectives without taking direct responsibility for costs and implementation, although the inclusion of the private, voluntary and independent provision as a single PVI sector may well disguise the extent of the indirect funding that these national chains could access.

Early years' reform

Expansion of the Early Years' sector is a recent event. At the start of my study period there was widespread concern about the small number of qualified early years practitioners, the lack of availability of even a level 4 NVQ in childcare, the dominance within training provision of low-cost, non-assessed courses, and the very limited incidence of in-service training. Childcare workers generally divided into a 'largely unqualified army' of childminders and playgroup staff and teacher-led provision within the state sector, of whom only 20% of those teaching under-8s were graduates (Pugh 1998). Indeed, it was only in the 80s and 90s with the advent of 'educare' that real attempts were made to merge the caring and educational traditions within childcare, stemming from a historical division between the responsibilities of the Department for Education and Science and that of Health and Social Security (David 1990).

Initial moves towards a national programme of childcare originated in the 1960s but through a voluntary organization, the Pre-school Playgroups Association (now the Pre-school Learning Alliance), started as a 'stopgap' measure to overcome the lack of state provision for nursery-age children. Having inadvertently discovered the power of parental involvement for the social development of children, parents and indeed communities (David 1990), a pattern now artificially replicated in schools, it continues to train mothers to work in childcare, to support families and to lobby for governmental funds to promote their work. At times, the organization has been accused of preventing the expansion of state nursery provision (David 1990; Philips, *Guardian* 29 March 2000). However, had the government chosen to act on the recommendations of the Plowden report (1967) this need not have been the case, the organization grew because a vacuum existed.

I believe that the current impetus for change in childcare standards can be traced to the early 1990s, partly to continue the work of the Education Reform Act (1988), partly stemming from the *United Nations Convention on the Rights*

of the Child ratified by the UK in December 1991, and implemented in the UK through the *1989 Children Act*, itself implemented in 1991. Indeed, no less than four reports on early years' provision were published in rapid succession. The government commissioned the Rumbold report, *Starting with quality* (Department of Education and Science 1990) and *Counting to five: education of children under five* (Audit Commission 1996). *Start right: the importance of early learning* (Ball 1994 for the Royal Society of Arts) and *Learning to succeed* (National Commission on Education 1993, and the Paul Hamlyn Foundation) were privately commissioned. These prompted the Conservative government to introduce an early years curriculum based on 'desirable learning outcomes' and an element of state funding through a nursery voucher scheme in 1996. Coming into power in 1997 the Labour government replaced this with capitation, focusing objectives into 'early learning goals' later codified as a *Curriculum guidance* framework, voluntary in 2000, statutory in 2002.

The National Childcare Strategy (May 1998) set goals for the training of an additional 230,000 staff by March 2004 and the introduction of the National Qualification Framework (1999) led to radical changes in many childcare courses and some degree of standardization of assessment through performance criteria. The Ofsted Early Years Directorate was formed with inspection consequent on government funding, and the *National Standards for Childcare* (Department for Education and Employment, 2001) gave the early years sector an orchestrated document detailing the legal requirements they needed to meet. In 2003, the need to plan learning activities for younger children was endorsed by the publication of *Birth to Three Matters* (Department for Education and Skills, 2003). Under the Children Act 2004, major restructuring led to the merging of education and social care services and the establishment of Children's Trusts with a director of children's services in each local authority and a national Children's Director; to the inclusion of Sure Start programmes and the establishment of children's centres in each local authority; and to the implementation in September 2008 of the new Early Years Foundation Stage incorporating provision for children from 0 to 5 and codifying the curriculum and care standards. This act also established the *Every Child Matters* outcomes for children under 5, a national children's database, and the possibility of parenting orders for parents who fail to accept support.

The Workforce Strategy (headed by the Children's Workforce Development Council from 2006) was to oversee the increase in flexible training options and the administration of recruitment and training incentives, of which to date we have seen the 'Grow your own graduate incentive' and the allocation of transmission fund moneys to those groups employing a graduate member of staff. In 2006 the Childcare Act legalized parental right to high quality services and childcare and a new policy initiative within the early years' sector aimed to tackle the prevalent low standards outside of formal school provision by 'importing' graduate staff to break the pattern of in-house training that can lead to continual recycling of bad or moderate practice. The requirements for this Early Years Professional Status (EYPS) were officially announced in June 2006. These policy initiatives were accompanied by many changes to the names of structures and personnel, mirrored at national levels in the repeated renaming

and regrouping of government departments. This adds to practitioner confusion, impacting further on training needs.

Policy uptake

This level of detail is offered here simply to demonstrate how the biographical profile of just one sector of adult education - the training of childcare staff - has suffered a period of exponential change - on paper at least. Practitioners, trainers, and parents alike, struggle to keep up with new initiatives and to develop a body of tacit knowledge to inform their decisions. Students find it frustrating that their learning becomes dated almost as soon as they qualify and some groups rely on enrolling successive students on courses just to have someone who is currently up-to-date.

Returning now to the empirical study, we are ready to consider what this has felt like on the ground and this is where my research findings become interesting. A minority of students strongly criticized excessive change (and generally these were the few who moved on or out of the profession) but the majority focused instead on issues of personal relevance, seeking to integrate aspects of their own lives. Paperwork, inspections, and new initiatives were a 'bind' but offset by the opportunity to work in their local community, to work flexibly with limited hours away from the home and never outside of school hours or term-time. Altruism and status in the local community were important and often compensated for low levels of remuneration. More importantly, children mattered. Most (but not all) women found the work engaging and their own success in merging and developing their caring and academic skills created further benefits in terms of confidence and self-esteem. They drifted into childcare training because it was accessible and state financed but nevertheless recognized its value in terms of employability. When asked about the purpose of education the women knew the significance of vocational / liberal / radical divides but, aware of their busy lives were almost unanimous in opting for a vocational course. However, their behaviour on the course and their retrospective comments made it clear that, in practice they found such divisions irrelevant. They actively strove to shape the course so that it met their multiple needs - for skills, for knowledge, for entertainment, for friendship and mutual support and for learning that related to their work, their families and their wider lives. This 'integration' is represented as a theoretical model that traces the patterns of reciprocity between different life fields.

Some students made good deficits in prior learning, some proactively prepared for future learning but the majority found great satisfaction in controlling the 'present', balancing their lives to achieve minimal dissonance. The students were focused on the minutiae of their daily existence, caring for their families and supporting the local community. In terms of personal and social capital development the diploma created significant levels of unplanned social payback demonstrating that flexible practices can generate unpredictable but positive outcomes. The women's lives were far from insular, reflecting a genuine interest in relevant broader issues and showing evidence of agentive but non-selfish decision-making but change imposed by policy-makers and politicians was seen as an irritant, an additional complication in already busy lives. Ultimately the focus was on 'the life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be'

demonstrating that in capability terms (Sen, 1987, p.16) choice and agency were vitally important. Changing policy initiatives were met but often without enthusiasm, leading me to question whether 'less' change might actually create 'more' change.

References

- Brostermann N (1997) *Inventing kindergarten*, New York, Harry N. Abrams.
- David T (1990) *Under five - under-educated*, Milton Keynes, Open University Press.
- Fieldhouse R and Associates (1996) *A history of modern British adult education*, Leicester, NIACE.
- Foley G (2004) (ed) *Dimensions of adult learning: adult education and training in a global era*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- Hyland T & Merrill B (2003) *The changing face of further education: lifelong learning, inclusion and community values in further education*, London, RoutledgeFalmer.
- Hudson J W (1851, 1969 reprint) *The history of adult education*, London, Woburn Press.
- Jepson N A (1973) *The beginnings of English university adult education – policy and problems*, London, Michael Joseph.
- Kelly T (1992) *A history of adult education in Great Britain: from the middle ages to the twentieth century* (3rd edn), Liverpool, Liverpool University Press.
- Knowles M, Holton E F & Swanson R (1998) *The adult learner* (5th edn), Houston, Texas, Gulf Publishing Company.
- Lea J, Hayes D, Armitage A, Lomas L, & Markless S (2003) *Working in post-compulsory education*, Maidenhead, Open University Press.
- Pugh G (1998) 'Early years training in context', in L Abbott & G Pugh (eds) *Training to work in the early years: developing the climbing frame*, Buckingham, Open University Press.
- Rogers C (1983) *Freedom to learn in the 80's*, Upper Saddle River NJ, Merrill.
- Sen A (1987) *The standard of living* (edited by Geoffrey Hawthorn), Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
- Skilbeck M, Connell H, Lowe N & Tait K (eds) (1994) *The vocational quest: new directions in education and training*, London, Routledge.

Paper presentation, please cite as:

Wright, H. R. (2010) 'A sector in transition: changing expectations for the early years' workforce.' Paper presented to the 40th annual SCUTREA conference, The University of Warwick, Coventry, Tuesday 6 to Thursday 8 July.