

EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY COHESION: HOW TRAINING IN CHILDCARE ADDS BENEFIT

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Abstract

This paper examines the education of the semi-voluntary pre-school workforce in England in terms of the benefits to local communities to capture its utility in real terms.

It revisits qualitative research data collected as biographical narratives from ten cohorts of adult women training to work in childcare in English pre-schools during the political reforms of the New Labour Government, 1997-2010.

It examines the advantages to their local communities of the women gaining a qualification and found positive educational, social and economic consequences beyond the direct benefits to the women and their own families and the children with whom they worked. The training also created a local resource, raising the level of education received by local children and the learning levels in the communities in which the women lived. There were clear economic benefits in terms of women returning to work and low-cost upskilling of local provision for children but also less tangible changes. There was a greater incidence of networking and social cohesion as a consequence of students broadening their outlook on life.

This study supports recommendations that policy makers should be careful to protect initiatives that work, and that grew up slowly to serve the needs of local people. The benefits to local communities may be far greater than those derived from changes imposed from above in the name of “raising standards” and “establishing cost-effective childcare”, and once lost such initiatives are hard to recreate.

Keywords: women education family childcare communities

1. Introduction

This paper examines data collected for a doctoral study of women training to work in childcare with a view to identifying how the training adds benefit to communities beyond that which would be in place if the women remained untrained. Thus it applies a finer filter to data that in the first instance was analysed to ascertain expectations for, practices within, and consequences of, studying to become a childcare worker (Wright, 2011).

The original research involved the retrospective collection of background information from nine cohorts of students, all of whom enrolled on a childcare diploma in an English Further Education (post-compulsory and vocational studies) College that I taught. An additional tenth ongoing cohort were occasionally asked to verify or clarify some of the findings to enable further validation that, when this was intended, I was developing an appropriate group voice.

2. Research design

The focus of the research was the student experience not the tutor role so I had to be inventive to ensure that it did not become a form of action research (McNiff, 2013). Rather

than follow a set methodological framework I decided to adopt the notion of “emergent methodology” (see Wright, 2009) and develop my research strategy as I worked on the project. This idea derived from Robson’s (2002: 5) *Real World Research* where he draws upon Anastas and MacDonald’s (1994) distinction between “fixed” and “flexible” designs. He defines the flexible as one in which “much less pre-specification takes place” and this conceptualisation offers an alternative to the postmodern notion of “bricolage” as it offers a principled approach to method choice rather than accepting that “anything goes”. I combine methods that share similar or complementary ontological positions when carrying out biographical research, as the focus must be holistic when dealing with people’s lives.

Clearly as a former tutor I was an insider-researcher (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995) so needed to consider my role and any biases that I might bring to the project very carefully. Seeking ethical approval from the University (which I did) was only the starting point in ensuring that I respected student confidentiality and the boundaries between tutor and researcher. I have worked with former students on several occasions in the past and have a long track record of teaching adults so felt fairly confident that I could manage the “enactment of power relations between researcher and researched” (Usher, 2000:165-6). The project was to be a qualitative one to enable exploration of the student voice but I was ever mindful of the need to offer all students the chance to become involved so that I could not be accused of choosing those I liked, those who were articulate high achievers, or those who were easily accessible as they had chosen to stay in touch. Thus I eventually contacted nearly all the students eligible to participate and established a process to ensure fair sample selection even though this is not a requirement for qualitative studies.

2.1 Population and sample

In total there were 170 students in the population. I was able to contact almost of all them and 150 agreed to complete simple surveys. These later enabled me to determine whether the complete group was representative of the larger cohort of childcare workers (which they were according to the *Labour Force Survey*, Simon et al, 2007) and to ensure that those students that I was able to interview in depth represented the larger group. This was achieved by drawing up a matrix that set cohort against type of childcare work to ensure that data spanned the Early Years sector before cross-cutting the sample with known characteristics like age, marital and maternal status, ethnicity, prior educational qualification and work experience. By grouping the nine main cohorts into threes, and then selecting two out of three possible interviewees for each category of work I was able to correct for differences in cohort size and add another level of anonymity to protect student identity. One cohort only comprised six students so this was necessary to avoid exposing an entire group at the interview stage. Through this process I was able to select 33 students to interview in person.

2.2 Interview style

There was a level of adjustment in the first three interviews as I experimented to find the best way to exploit my insider knowledge without allowing my own role to dominate and thereby diminish the student voice. I had decided to use an open biographical approach to interviewing so that ultimately the choice of topic and level of depth was determined by the student. Asking them to consider their whole life in relation to education encouraged them to talk about aspects that were new to me rather than just the educational process we had shared.

I went to the interviews with a list of prompts I could use if the conversation failed to flow but rarely needed to do more than express interest in their views. However, I found my insider knowledge enabled me to question areas of discourse that seemed problematic and learned from the literature that I was instinctively adopting a psycho-social method of interviewing whereby I probed any hesitations, contradictions and juxtapositions as they arose, taking my understanding (and often the student's too) to a higher level. This is a method clearly expounded by Hollway and Jefferson (2000) in their invaluable text, *Doing Qualitative Research Differently*.

2.3 Data analysis

One problem inherent in this style of interviewing is that the researcher amasses vast quantities of highly variable data. Transcription itself is time-consuming and analysis very demanding (but also exciting). Immersion (Strauss, 1987) enabled a degree of holistic analysis and I began to see patterns within and across the narratives. This led me to create two sets of typologies (see Tables 1 and 2), categorising students by their occupational level (a form of educational outcome given this was vocational training) and their attitude to life (a means of identifying their sense of agency, in part their personality). This served two purposes.

Table 1: Typology based on occupation

<i>Name</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Sampler	One who drifted into childcare, found it lacking and quickly moved on
Stager	One who found childcare work convenient when the children were small
Settler	One who chose childcare as a career after experiencing a range of alternatives
Switcher	One who chose childcare as an alternative career to a previous one
Step-upper	One using childcare work to access an associated, better paid position/career

Table 2: Typology based on attitude toward life

<i>Name</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Acceptor	One with a relaxed, opportunistic approach; often a reactive decision-maker
Agoniser	One who reflects intensely before making decisions; may analyze guilt
Accumulator	One steadily acquiring qualifications and experiences; maybe with a focus
Asserter	One with goal-oriented behaviour; a striver to 'get on' in life

Initially the typologies provided me with a "handle" on the data, a means of starting the process of seeing connections across the different life stories. Later they enabled further analysis in association with Amartya Sen's Capability Approach (CA) (Sen, 1999). Their contribution to the CA lies beyond the current paper and is addressed elsewhere (Wright 2012, 2013a,b,c) but for completeness the two typologies are included here (Tables 1 and 2). Some understanding of the capability approach is useful, too. Briefly, Sen recognises that policy making can be more effective when personal choice is enabled. There is less wastage and individuals and groups derive satisfaction, and consequent efficacy, from being able to decide what they want to achieve from the possibilities open to them. He claims that resources are no more than a means to an end "ultimately the focus has to be on what life we lead and what we can or cannot do, can or cannot be" (Sen, 1987: 16) and calls for

governments to abandon utilitarian practices and, instead, provide options so that individuals can turn (*convert*) their potential abilities (*capabilities*) into actions or achievements (*functionings*) that they find desirable.

I chose not to use mechanical means of data analysis but hand-coded the transcripts, marking recurrent themes and conceptualisations, significant words and phrases, apt quotations, and embedded stories; able to keep these within the individual narrative structure even when I saw connections across the narratives. This is important in biographical research to avoid fragmentation of the data (West, 1996) and reduction of people's lives to disconnected elements. At times the transcripts failed to reflect the nuances of the interview process fully. Where I prompted a student it could appear that I was asking the question and then answering it. To record the verbal interchanges accurately I decided to adopt the coding common to conversation analysis (Ten Have, 1999), using this selectively within the text for areas where it assisted a more accurate interpretation. Such coding can highlight examples of hesitation (which can reveal uncertainty as well as need to recall) and places where we were working with a high level of intersubjectivity through marking cut-ins and simultaneous talk. By showing tone of voice, codes can make visible irony, jest, negativity, exaggeration and many other linguistic devices where the words do not precisely convey the intended meaning. Possibly this occurs more frequently when the interviewer and interviewee already know each other, so interact informally.

Together these processes enabled me to make initial sense of the data and I chose to develop a process of analysis-through-writing whereby I turned my hunches and themes into argued narrative that enabled me to consider every piece of evidence and add to the bigger picture. Like Richardson (1994) before me, I found that through the process of writing I reached new understandings that I had not anticipated. This process gave me lengthy texts from which to write my thesis chapters but did not greatly assist me in reining in the data to enable a focus on education. Eventually, I came to understand that there was a reason for this. If I listened to the data rather than trying to bend it to my own ends it was telling me very clearly that the women sought an integrated lifestyle, that embraced family, work and study within a single framework, enabling them to avoid cognitive dissonance (Festinger, 1957). This shared focus gave them what one student termed "the best of both worlds", a foot in both the private and public spheres (Landes, 1998).

My analysis changed direction and I examined the data anew, realising that it supported a theoretical "Model of Integrated Lives". This shows diagrammatically how the student is reciprocally linked to elements of family, work and study, and where the community aspect of the childcare work further strengthens these connections. I have discussed this model in detail elsewhere (Wright, 2011) and here show the community as an encircling power protecting the relational associations (Figure 1).

Over time it has become clear that this model has some relevance to women in general (or so I have been told at conferences) but it was the positioning of the childcare settings – mainly committee-run pre-schools – in the local community that enabled me to see the reciprocal links so clearly.

In recent years these pre-school groups have been threatened by new policy initiatives in the early years sector so before proceeding further I need to provide an overview of the English context.

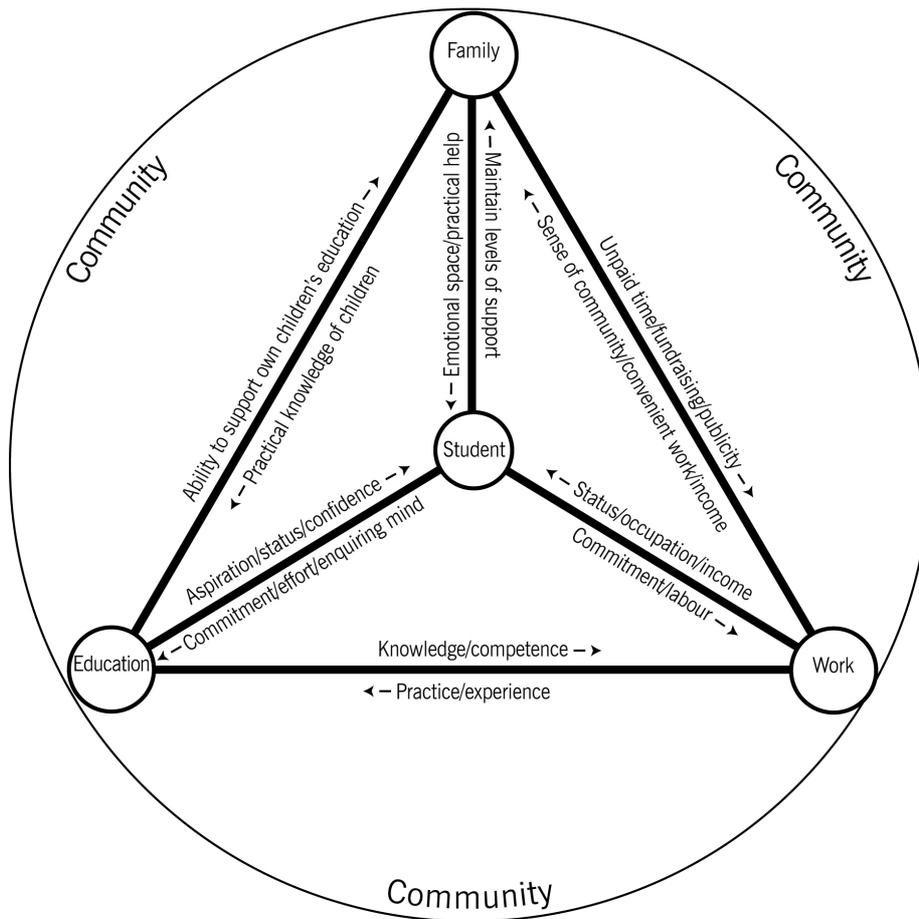


Figure 1
The Model of Integrated Lives showing how the students are vital to their local communities

3. The English context of Early Years provision

In England the compulsory school age was arbitrarily set at 5 by Disraeli’s liberal government in 1870 and provision for children below that age remained largely voluntary for more than a century. Fortunate children were able to attend the pioneering nurseries established by innovators – the followers of well-known European figures, Froebel, Steiner, Montessori, and British pioneer, Margaret McMillan. Some children attended Dame schools, where unqualified women “minded” multiple children, often in premises on or close to a private home. A very few children were accommodated in the state nursery schools that were set up during World War II to enable women to do war work or train as teachers to fill roles vacated by serving men (Wright, 2015). Even in the 1950s the majority of mothers and toddlers were isolated in their homes and this was viewed as normal in a society where Parsonian views of domesticity prevailed: in a functionalist society men went out to work and mothers did the household tasks and cared for children (Parsons & Bales, 1956).

This social isolation was publicly challenged by a newcomer to Britain, Belle Tutaev. With friends she set up the first community playgroup whereby groups of mothers met together in a local hall and took it in turns to care for their collective children while others enjoyed some

child-free space (Playgroup Movement, 2014). Tutaev encouraged other mothers to set up similar groups and from this first endeavour in 1961 a flourishing association of playgroups developed, supporting each other through the Pre-school Playgroups Association. Later (1995), bowing to political pressures for reform, this became the Pre-school Learning Alliance (2013). Groups continued to flourish and largely filled the role of Early Years provision despite the advocacy for state nurseries of the Plowden Report (CACE, 1967), and Margaret Thatcher's White Paper *A framework for Expansion* (Thatcher, 1972).

Following the Education Reform Act (1988) that established a National Curriculum for compulsory education (Taylor, 1999), attention turned again to the Early Years sector. A series of influential reports (DES, 1990, *Rumbold*; National Commission on Education, 1993, *Learning to Succeed*; Ball, 1994, *Start Right*; Audit Commission, 1996a,b) led the Conservative government to introduce a new curriculum initiative for Early Years in 1996 and this was taken up and modified by Tony Blair's New Labour government in 1997. In a frenetic effort to revolutionise the sector (the then Minister of State for Children, Margaret Hodge talks of a "silent revolution") Early Years provision was brought, in stages, firmly into the education fold. A new curriculum and inspections were effectively made compulsory in 2000 (in reality in 2002). To survive financially, settings had to conform as children could only receive funding in those that met government expectations. Alongside the reforms, initiatives to increase provision encouraged the private sector to invest heavily in nurseries. Commercial chains set up new premises that offered all-day care, leading to a situation where community provision was often sidelined.

For a time the Sure Start programme guaranteed subsidised places in a range of newly established Children's Centres but the continual reduction in funding, 28% from 2010 to 2013 (Waldegrave, 2013) left many struggling to survive, often doing so only when supported by other charitable organisations. This situation can be problematic for some newcomers to Britain who need Children's Centre services but who still associate our charities with enforced institutionalisation of needy children. The erosion of local pre-schools is problematic for communities as informal self-help initiatives that grew up to serve the local people are replaced by profit-seeking facilities staffed by personnel who may, or may not live nearby.

4. Community benefits of childcare training

A closer examination of the benefits that a trained pre-school workforce brought to local communities draws attention to what is potentially being lost as this transition takes place. The research revealed significant benefits to individuals in terms of confidence, social contacts, accreditation, upskilling, and employability. Like Ingrid, who claims the course helped to "bring myself into perspective and become another person", many students described aspects of self-development, but these are set aside as they are not the main focus of this paper. Nor will this paper explore the evidence for deeper learning when claimed by individual students, beyond reporting Frieda's statement that what matters is "what has really gone into making your brain *think* about how you feel about things rather than just pleasing the examiner". It would be inaccurate, too, to explore community benefits by merely examining the reciprocal connections between the individual and education or education and the workplace as analysis shows that when community benefits are captured through open dialogue, they emanate from a number of areas and differ from student to student. At times,

however, to reveal how factors work together to create direct benefits for local communities, the paper will draw on elements that present as individual attributes.

4.1 Second chances within education

4.1.1 Direct benefits of adult learning

The rhetoric around social justice in Britain talks of excluded minorities (Craig, Burchardt & Gordon, 2008) but acknowledges that the incidence of inequality extends beyond the geographically defined areas of social deprivation. There are people who lack qualification scattered across the country. Because students were eligible for financial support for the childcare diploma it offered an opportunity for further education at a time when many routes into adult education were being closed to reduce public expenditure (Parrott, 2007) When she started the course Irma claims that: “I’d never done anything like this before and at school I just didn’t enjoy it”. She says: “I didn’t even know what an assignment was”. Nor did she realise that computers lightened routine tasks: “when it came to a word count I am manually adding them up”. By the end she knows how to study and is confident she can cope: “if somebody said to me, now, it would be absolutely fine. I’d say ‘Okay, yes, I can do that’ but, before, I’d have said I can’t do that but I *did* it, and that was a good thing for me”.

Irma’s story represents a “second chance” opportunity at its starkest but there are many others who see the diploma as an opportunity to strengthen their level of accreditation. For Heidi the diploma represented job security: “yes, I’ve passed. I can keep my job. I’m happy now”. Hansa, recently arrived in Britain from Asia, already had a degree but sought to improve her English and find a place within her local community, perhaps with a view to becoming a teacher at a later date. She worked a forty-hour week in a local supermarket to support herself and her husband and still found time to come to college one day a week and to carry out the compulsory sessions in a pre-school setting. This shows commitment: “I really wanted to finish and get a qualification but the thing was because I had not time to read books and *enjoy, yes*”.

Hansa’s story was partially one of conversion; someone with an existing qualification adding another to achieve a change of direction. Graduates, Gina and Greta, saw the diploma as giving them vocational knowledge so that they could apply their broader knowledge to their working lives; Fiona used it to meet the entry requirement for a nursing degree, Irene and Ilsa saw that it would make them eligible for teacher training at a later date.

Thus *real* second chances need not be confined to basic skills as is commonly the case in the literature, and at whatever level, benefit local communities in that they enable individual members to improve their own lives and their ability to contribute to the public good. They are turning capability into functioning. An important part of this transformation lies in the way that adult educators treat their students. Many of the students were pleasantly surprised to find the atmosphere at odds with their school experience, commenting that they could come and go as they pleased, that tea and coffee breaks and opportunities to “chat” were encouraged, as were supportive working practices. Arianne, for example, thought that: “I was going to sit there at a desk, be told off for talking, but no, it was great. You could go to the loo [toilet] when you had to, that sort of thing”.

4.1.2 Generational benefits of adult learning

There is evidence within this research that having a parent who studies successfully encourages children to achieve a better education. This can be because the parent feels knowledgeable and is confident to intervene directly in children's studies. Heidi recognised the need for her children to have IT facilities, Evelyn the need for a place to study away from the distraction of television. For Celia new learning was limited to understanding: "it certainly did awaken in me an understanding of why my son struggled so badly through primary school" but she felt that her voice was not strong enough to stand against the combined forces of school practice: "I didn't go and address it with the teachers because it felt pointless but it was not the teachers but the whole system, how the system worked at that particular school". However, for Alex certification meant that: "I can go and check out whatever life throws at me". When her son had problems in school she took action: "because now I know if I push and I push and I push I am going to get somewhere. You have to persevere...". It was her "background knowledge into how the systems work" that enabled her to sort matters out for her son. Enabling even one more child to achieve his goals in life reduces the chances of him becoming unemployed, possibly in trouble with the police, and eventually a drain on the local community.

Although most long-term benefits of success have similar consequences for communities, sometimes the impact of women studying is visible only within the family. Ingrid persuaded her teenage children to help her out when her assignments were due and this role modelled the importance of studying: "they typed up notes for me, they, you know they were really interested in what I was doing". Heena specifies that it is "good for my kids to see me working and studying. It's good for them to see that they can do it." When children see that their parents value education it encourages them to value it too, making it more likely that they will be able to make a positive contribution to their local communities in later life. In terms of the capability approach, they are more likely to turn their capability into useful functionings.

4.2 Social impacts beyond education

4.2.1 Inclusive ethos

Communities benefit when their members support each other. Putnam (2000) clearly demonstrates in *Bowling Alone* how diminishing cultural cohesion leads to a loss of shared values and undermines trust, starting a vicious cycle of further deterioration. He uses a social capital framework in this American study, adding real world examples to extend Bourdieu's original theorisation that value is not confined to monetary exchanges. Putnam's account is a story of social capital lost (Fukuyama, 1999) but my research study, although on a local scale, clearly captured social capital formation among the women and young children at neighbourhood level. Students were aware that they contributed to the community and often saw themselves as altruistic, seeing that as compensation for low levels of remuneration. Evelyn clearly states that 'for me, the reward isn't the pay' and is proud that "I went into work [in school] on Sunday for two hours and didn't get paid for it and I won't get paid for it...they don't need to know but I know that I went in and I've done my best". Frances quite explicitly states that she and her fellow staff "loved children and we wanted to help them and we wanted to help the community and the mothers that perhaps couldn't do that".

Danni was persuaded to take on the job of playgroup leader, as no one else would do it. Her own children were quite young causing her to “lock myself away in the bedroom” in order to achieve the necessary diploma. She clearly knew that she was making sacrifices to carry out the role for she declined to complete a further optional qualification as “to pass the course I would have needed to have given up everything else in my life and I felt that was asking too much”. Her altruism is clearly displayed when she recognises that she is substituting for other parents who “just don't seem to spend five minutes with their children and I find that just very, very sad”. It can also be seen in her comment that “being village-based you know that you're going to see them [the children] for the rest of their primary lives... and you hope that you have done the best for them”.

Daisy derives personal satisfaction from working with children, claiming: “I love them like my own really” and found that a return to study “was the highlight of the week really”. However, she too, recognises what she gives up, describing her “worst Sunday” as one in which she was “locked in the bedroom doing an assignment and *all* my family were downstairs”. Bethany sees her playgroup as playing an important role in attracting children outside her village into the local school to maintain its numbers and reputation. She talks of “being successful for the benefit of the school of which I'm governor”, revealing an additional, and completely voluntary, role that she takes seriously. There is plentiful evidence that the diploma students contributed to an inclusive ethos in their local communities.

4.2.2 Broadening outlook

An inclusive ethos relies on personal attitudes that are tolerant and collaborative and the study provides evidence that many students shed underpinning prejudices as a result of the diploma course. At a practical level, simply experiencing adult education – regular involvement in a class that catered for mature and younger students, and that welcomed students whatever their ethnicity or ability – paid dividends. Some classes tended to be inclusive from the outset, with others it was necessary to work quite hard to prevent cliques forming and to smooth over fundamental disagreements. Denise, one of the more nervous students, describes her class as “altogether” but claims that they also “went into, like, groups” and believes that even if I had shaken them up “we would have all quietly have wiggled our way back to where we wanted to sit”. However, she also believes that “it worked” and that she became more confident and “enjoyed going in for a laugh in the end”.

That students were prepared to discuss this situation during individual interviews suggests that they felt secure in their relationship with me, and indicated that they felt that they had moved on in their thinking during the course. The talk was generally of “others” who used to irritate them rather than of ongoing irritation. One student (of several), who found mixing in a class quite difficult, claimed that she “found working with women horrendous, studying with women is slightly better”. However, she did eventually realise that she could only change her own behaviour not that of the others and explained how through watching someone who sought a lot of attention, she learned to curb her own “urge to tell your own little story”.

My strategy of asking the more able to support others played a role in the integration process and Deirdre specifically talks of going to visit another student for help. “I'd go round and say, ‘I can't do it’. She'd say ‘yes you can. Sit yourself down and I'll read it through’. As soon as she read it through I'd think ‘yes I do understand’ but some of the words...!”. Others choose

to work in pairs that were more evenly balanced. Arianne, for instance used to go to Alice's house weekly to "do it between us".

More importantly for community cohesion, there is evidence that growing tolerance spread beyond their direct work with children. Several students (Celia, Evelyn, Emily, Frieda, Heidi) talk of becoming more confident in addressing parents, others of being more aware of how to do that appropriately (Avril, Beryl, Cindy, Heena, Irma) and Ingrid very noticeably embraces cultural diversity. This is clearly spelled out:

"... you sort of explained to us about the different cultures and then I would go back to the group and think "Oh that's why they do that and this is why they do that" because I know now why they do that. Instead of looking at their habits as being "strange" or not right you look at their habit and think but this is part of their culture, this is why they do this, and I am now in the knowledge so I know this instead of looking at them as being totally – a bit...weird."

She feels "less judgemental" and "a lot nicer person for it" and really enjoyed inviting people to celebrate the Hindu festival, Holi, in her setting. Most importantly she now talks to people outside of her immediate circle whereas: "I would probably have just passed them by in the street before". Given her role in a community pre-school this must have significant consequences for the way it operated and the hidden messages conveyed to parents and children and to other staff. Avril too believes the course "teaches you not to be judgemental" and Beryl claims that simply working with children "broadens your mind" as you see a wide range of family practices. Bethany believes that she "is growing with the children". Arianne demonstrates a "broader" outlook when she allows a grandmother with no English language skills to sit in on sessions. Grandma's initial attendance was to help the grandchild settle but when this was achieved she told her working daughter that she was lonely at home. Slowly she began to undertake small tasks unasked – like washing up – so may progress to greater involvement. Certainly the group offered an opportunity to observe English life and hear the language spoken in a friendly environment. As the building was sufficiently large to cater for additional people her presence was not a problem for the pre-school.

As former students move on to new jobs, or their children progress through the system, the inclusive ethos that we strove to develop on the course maybe goes with them, following certain students into schools, into hospitals, into local authority work and into different nurseries and pre-schools.

4.2.3 Knowledge resource

In a society where mobility means that many new parents lack nearby familial support, pre-school staff who have qualified, play an important role as a knowledge source for other parents. Semi-voluntary, semi-professional, often living in the communities in which they work, they are available to give non-threatening advice to parents and this role is frequently mentioned within the interviews. Emily mentions parents who "wanted to know what was normal at what age" and Gina is asked to work specifically with teenage mothers experiencing difficulty so finds the "childcare side of it" essential to her work. Fiona demonstrates the retention of considerable theory and claims to have used her knowledge to help her fellow nursing students grasp the principles that were poorly taught on their course. Here knowledge is crossing into a different community of learners. Ilsa shares her new

knowledge within the family. Her “sister-in-law is struggling with her youngest at the moment ... ‘and I can advise her’... whereas if I hadn't done child development I shouldn't have been saying that”.

We should remember, too, that this supportive role developed out of the women’s greater insights into children and their needs and many felt that this benefited their personal parenting skills. Cindy talks of now knowing “how to understand children”; Holly says: “If I learn all this I can transfer it to my children, my children shouldn't go amiss” even as she plans career progression within childcare. There is evidence in the interviews of significant learning taking place: Ingrid says “you then taught us to sort of look behind the behaviour”; Daisy claims that “some things you learn and you are not quite the same afterwards”; Heidi believes “if you tie it all together there is no reason why you should ever have a child every crying...”; and Imogen, one of the younger and childless students, begins to really understand children: “I see them as people who need to be treated well and given respect and love mainly – and cuddles”.

The community benefits whenever children are treated with compassion and insight, whoever the parents are, and even when the new knowledge is accessed after the familial need has passed. Children are very adaptable and parents have many opportunities to put matters right as they learn better ways to show they care, and the retrospective anguish reinforces the new learning. So when Celia talks of “saying out LOUD ‘I wish I'd known that when C[xxx] was two years old’, why doesn't anyone tell us these things?” society still benefits. She can see that the new knowledge has been “the most useful, specifically because I have been working with mums and two-year-olds ...saying: ‘that’s okay, that’s normal, don’t worry’.”

4.2.4 Active contribution

Just through being members of the community, through their roles as parents, and as workers, all the students were directly contributing to society. Overall, there is evidence that most of the students were running pre-schools on minimum rates of pay and working far longer hours than they were paid for. Even those working in schools, like Evelyn, were doing far more than they were expected to do, according to their contracts. Some were seeking to further their experience to support personal career development but many were simply continuing to do whatever they could to be helpful and to support the children in their care, raising questions about where working with “fuzzy boundaries” crosses into exploitation. Heena makes this problem apparent when she complains that willingness sets up new expectations. “Why we take on all that extra work is because we are asked to do it *slowly* and it builds up, that’s what I found, it builds up, builds up, builds up until it's too much”. In contrast, Irene has walked away from a leader’s job as the voluntary committee challenged her judgement, and is turning down offers of new full-time posts. She thinks that “what is expected of volunteer parents is too much” and does not intend to go down that route again, preferring instead to undertake some advisory work for a local private nursery.

For some students, however, it is possible to claim that the diploma course enabled them to stand up for values they believe to be important. Despite not being a “joining-committee-erunning- things-type person really”, Avril went on to become an adult education tutor and spends a great deal of energy trying to shape the future of the Early Years profession in appropriate ways. She is vocal in favouring external taught courses over in-house training as this perpetuates local practice rather than enabling change. She is also concerned about

competence-based National Vocation Qualifications as the assessment for these is a tick-box exercise and “doesn’t mean they [students] can do it, or understand it, or have gained anything from it whatsoever”. Beryl took a job in a school but stands up to practice that permits school ideas to come “right the way down to the nursery”. Her Headteacher, unaware of the needs of young children, imposes success criteria incomprehensible to them on all classes – paperwork, and parental consultations, management strategies (like formal absence reporting) and curriculum behaviours (set literacy and numeracy policies, zoned activity planning to share scarce resources) – that are inappropriate.

A few students take on additional voluntary roles but the incidence of this was less than I expected and maybe reflects the unbounded expectations of their main roles. Very busy people balancing family, study and workplace needs have little time left for other activities and certainly not those that impinge on family time at week ends and in the evenings. Bethany and Ingrid serve as parent governors, Celia runs a Sunday school class, and Irene helps with the local Rainbows groups (but mainly as her daughter attends). Any energy left over is focused on maintaining their integrated lives rather than engaging in further voluntary work. Fiona sums up this attitude when she states: “I’ve done my bit of free stuff and now’s my turn to get paid”.

4.3 Economic impact

Any activity that helps women to be gainfully employed makes an economic contribution to society. That they are working willingly in the communities in which they live bring benefit to those communities, as professional and personal ties work together to create social capital.

4.3.1 Return to work

Community childcare work is renowned for its flexibility and convenience. It is work that fits in with the school day and with school holidays so enables many women to return to work part-time without incurring travel costs. The low rates of pay reflect the market situation. There is a continual supply of new mothers with children reaching pre-school age and many want a gentle re-introduction to the workplace. Pre-school leader Arianne states that: “All of these girls, do this job because it goes well with their children”. The course enabled the women to achieve a qualification that allowed them to manage a setting, therefore opening doors for future advancement (but since the research was carried out the requirement is slowly being raised).

For some students the diploma represented a horizontal progression. Several graduate entrants sought out the diploma to provide them with a vocational qualification, seeing their original degrees as insufficiently focused for work. Amy described her undergraduate study as “absolutely brilliant” but admitted that at the end of it: “I wasn’t quite sure what I wanted to do”. She is very clear that she wanted “to be at home with the children” and, on starting to work, to have the flexibility to avoid that “can’t come into work today because someone is ill”. Gina knew that she would like to work with children after graduating and, exceptionally, sought out the diploma as “there were a lot of things that I needed to know about”. Greta, enrolled on the diploma as the local pre-school asked her to, but was “quite keen to learn more” not seeing her history degree as sufficient: “I didn’t know what to do with a degree”.

4.3.2 Upskilling

Many of the students were able to articulate the consequences of studying for the diploma and at the outset I stated that the personal benefits in terms of confidence were significant.

Some particularly mentioned how studying updated their skill set, making them eligible to return to the workplace. One of the older graduates, Amy, found commonplace jargon new to her. She had already completed a word-processing course before coming onto the diploma but still felt insecure when people talked about “orientation”, “presentation skills” and “teamwork”; ideas that had not been important when she graduated. She felt that the diploma “bump-started you back into studying” and gave her the opportunity to rehearse these new skills. Felicity, too, felt that learning to do a good presentation contributed significantly to her gaining her advisory job but attributed most of the learning to the foundation degree that built upon her diploma.

Barbara talked about getting help with her grammar and spellings, and Avril, the most organised *Accumulator*, set out to acquire every skill she could by joining most of the courses available to her, before pouring all this knowledge back into the community as an adult education tutor. Aileen, who had returned to study to gain her own GCSE (level 2) qualification in Maths and English, similarly chose to share her new knowledge with others, and set out to help children struggling to acquire numeracy and literacy skills in a school setting. She is very concerned that in current society: “there are a few people around still that still can't read and write” pointing out that when they have these skills “we can educate them more”. All the students agreed that they learned useful knowledge and most can list specific instances of the skills they acquired or improved as a result of the diploma.

As the women were working in community pre-schools, these childcare institutions benefited from their upskilling. There are multiple narratives of students making changes to raise quality in their settings. Sometimes these centred around bringing existing practice up to an appropriate level as in the case of Celia, who found that her manager saved money by reducing the number of purification tablets in the bottle steriliser to below adequate levels. Others were able to initiate new ideas in their settings. Arianne, too, took on Leader of her setting knowing that it needed a management committee that supported its charitable status. She had the confidence to do this as: “I knew what had to happen, I knew what I had to do to legally make it work”. She rejoices that: “the whole thing changed really with me going to college”. Felicity and Frieda jointly took on management of their community setting on the retirement of a senior member of staff. Coming on the diploma together they felt that “if we were going to be learning how to run a playgroup it made sense that we were learning it together” and saw all their studying as “for the benefit of the future of the group”. Danni was not only able to make improvements in her setting but also to support her local community primary school. Her setting was temporarily relocated onto the school site and the Headteacher, impressed with what he saw in the pre-school, sent his newly qualified reception class teacher into the pre-school: “just to see what we do and to see how we operate”, as she was “really struggling” to control the behaviour of some children.

4.3.3 Career progression or change

Time has lapsed since I carried out the initial interviews and progression onto a foundation (two-year) degree has become commonplace. Many of the 150 students in the population

have since enrolled for higher-level study. At the time of the interviews, the foundation degree was still a new initiative but, from this smaller sample, Danni had started undergraduate study and Felicity had just completed the award. She had moved rapidly into a higher-level career (as Early Years business advisor), and several students (Aileen, Beryl, Ingrid and Evelyn) had found jobs as teaching assistants in schools. Some students were planning progressions within education, while a few moved into parallel sectors where their “caring” skills were equally valued. Using the diploma as evidence of recent study and of achievement, Amy took up a post as hospital play specialist while Fiona enrolled on a nursing degree, the diploma enabling her to meet the threshold requirements for this. Thus, in Sen’s terms, the diploma was a functioning in itself but it also opened up new capabilities for students to convert into further functionings. Exceptionally, Diane moved into a job that more closely aligned with her previous environmental work but was still “working with community groups” so found the diploma provided useful transferable skills. Of the 33 interviewed, only Irma had decided to move away from work that directly benefited the community. She decided to return to running her own business, but there were clearly stated personal reasons to take her away from the Early Years sector.

5. Conclusion

This paper has used narrative evidence to show how enrolment on the diploma course together with the accompanying work within childcare settings significantly contributed to community cohesion. It should be remembered that the focus has been on the effects of coming on the course; a discussion of the benefits to local communities of having a more educated female population, the intergenerational consequences of mothers being better qualified, and the ways in which the qualified students contributed to change within local community settings by challenging poor practice and bringing this up-to-date.

In its entirety, the research found significant additional benefits, but it lies outside the scope of the current paper to do more than mention the horizontal social capital consequences of students forming new friendships or the vertical links when a succession of staff members enrol sequentially on the diploma course, enabling the management team to develop a shared outlook. Nor does this paper truly reflect the more personal and familial elements that help to weave the public threads together. These are addressed elsewhere (see Wright, 2011).

This research captured Early Years practice at a time of significant change. Hodges (2000) “silent revolution” in the Early Years saw a significant expansion of the sector and an imposition of professional standards that brought the traditional practice of “drifting” into childcare work and then choosing to qualify, into question. However, with the change of government in the UK in 2010, the pace of change slowed down, arguably before the revolution was complete. We are yet to see how well the community pre-school sits alongside the private nursery chains and children’s centres, established when public funding was more readily available. Nor can we tell whether newly established groups will function as community centres providing nuclei for social cohesion like those that grew out of the neighbourhoods they served; set up, staffed and managed by local residents and catering collectively for the children living nearby. However, the findings of this study suggest that care should be taken to protect initiatives that work and that grew up to serve the needs of local people as the benefits may exceed those that are immediately apparent within narratives of ‘raising standards’ and extending ‘cost-effective childcare’.

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