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Lone Parents: Addressing barriers to participating in post-compulsory education

This paper is presented at the Annual Conference of the Society for Research into Higher Education (SRHE) December 2007.

Location in wider context and policy

The research was part of Equal, a European Social Fund initiative addressing labour market discrimination. Increasing educational participation amongst 'non-traditional' students can be viewed in terms of the philanthropic goal of extending opportunities to individuals, or structurally in terms of the globalised economy's demand for skilled labour (Naidoo & Callender, 2000:227). Decreasing numbers of school leavers necessitate casting the net beyond traditional groups (Gallagher et al, 1993:2; Edwards, 1993:5), implicating responsibility for promoting positive student experiences for non-traditional students targeted by the education system. Lone parents report sacrifices in pursuit of education including debt, placing children in childcare, and loss of family time, support networks and jobs. Mature and working-class students' low completion rates (Yorke, 2001:148) highlight difficulties managing learning with other adult responsibilities. Hands et al observe student parents' particular susceptibility to non-completion (Hands et al, 2007:25). Institutionally, non-completion represents 'wasted' investment. Providing inadequate support also fails vulnerable students, setting them up for failure and exacerbating frequently low self-esteem and confidence (Murphy & Roopchand, 2003:247,256; Greif, 1992:570). The present research illustrated how negative school experiences often result in lengthy educational gaps. Institutions are responsible for ensuring that individuals' self-esteem is not further damaged by failure through inadequate support.

UK lone parent employment lags behind much of Europe (Freud, 2007:16). Given the agenda of returning lone parents to employment (Leitch,2006; Freud, 2007), high childcare costs compared to many European countries (Klett-Davies, 2007:55; Ward, 2005) are significant, meaning that only well-paid (and hence well-qualified) work is viable (Horne & Hardie, 2002:60). Lone parents have the same outgoings as two parent families of housing, bills and childcare, yet one income, problematising the agenda to 'make work pay', and engendering the need for qualifications to secure adequately paid work. The New Deal for Lone Parents generally supports training only to National Vocational Qualification Level 2. Claimants may study at Further Education college on benefits with fees waived, but childcare assistance is uneven, meaning that lone parents frequently accrue debt (Millar & Rowlingson, 2001: 239).

This research reinforces evidence of lone parents' sophisticated cost-benefit evaluations balancing financial provision for children against being with them (Ford, 1996: xii), finding a preference to be with children to be a barrier to lone parents' employment (Bradshaw & Millar, 1991:33). With 58 per cent of British mothers of under-fives in employment (Women and Equality Unit, 2007), reluctance to work may be construed as the perceived idleness of lone parents discussed by Kiernan, Land and Lewis (1998: 278). The UK has the largest gap in Europe and

the US between qualification levels of lone and partnered mothers (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001: 184-186, 237). At degree level, economic activity rates are high, with little to distinguish married from unmarried mothers, and women from men (2001: 257). It became clear that lone parents' role as sole carer requires benefits of work or study to outweigh costs of being apart. But employment at lone parents' low qualification levels command low wages (Millar and Rowlingson, 2001: 28). If benefits seem distant, or costs to family well-being too high, lone parents will not engage with work or learning.

Methodology

Eighteen lone mothers and two lone fathers were interviewed, reflecting the UK lone parent gender balance (One Parent Families, 2007: 3). Participants were aged 16-46, with at least one child under 16, and were currently or recently engaged with education or training, including a broad range of academic and vocational courses. Participants completed lifelines plotting significant events, and findings fed into focus groups for service providers.

Identifying barriers/constraints

Interviews and focus groups identified barriers to educational participation frequently in terms of the big three of lack of money, childcare and time.

[The learning provider] were paying for [my mum] to have the kids. But as soon as they stopped paying, I had to stop doing the work. I think I had about eight weeks worth of training to finish, but I just didn't go back. It is hard. I will say that (F8, age 28, 3 children aged 5-10).

Nearly three quarters of interviewees discussed not wanting to place children in childcare,

I've realised that's what I want to do. It works because it works around the children. I don't want this childcare, I don't want my children with anybody else... because I just don't. We've been through too much and I just want my children with me (F2, age 40, 2 children aged 9 and 12).

Further financial barriers were course fees, travel costs, course equipment and college lunches, and lack of home PC, phone or internet connection. Like the secondary literature, participants identified debt and fear of debt as deterrents to learning (Taylor, 2007:40; Horne and Hardie, 2002: 69; Naidoo & Callender, 2000:241).

A third of participants cited health-related barriers, validating One Parent Families' findings that twice as many lone parents as partnered parents report poor health, over a quarter suffering

prolonged illness or disability (2007:14). Service providers highlighted the constraints for lone parents caring for children with disabilities, reinforcing One Parent Families' finding of lone parents' disproportionate responsibility for children with disabilities (2007:14).

Further barriers included age, lack of entry level qualifications, and lack of geographical mobility and ability to travel, emphasised by service users, providers and existing evidence (Yorke & Longden, 2004:106; Reay, 2003:307). Participants' emphasised that reliance on council accommodation constrains geographical mobility, and hence access to work, training, education and other community services.

The research reinforced evidence of lack of course information (Dearing, 1997; Wisker, 1996:31), support (Taylor, 2007:41; Carlisle, 2005:347-348; Wisker, 1996:7-8; Gallagher et al, 1993:59; Edwards, 1993; Hyatt and Parry, 1990: 33) and unsupportive course coordinators (Bonnet & Meredith-Lobay, 2004:29; Gallagher et al, 1996: 251).

Addressing barriers/constraints

The motivation to move beyond identifying barriers, toward addressing solutions, informed central questions:

- How do lone parents access education and training?
- What supportive individuals and organisations assist them?
- What makes learning possible?
- What would make it easier?

Mansour's conceptualisation of lone parents' employment access as *managing constraints* rather than *overcoming barriers*, as while barriers are permanently overcome, constraints are continually renegotiated (2005:21), also applies to learning. If childcare is a barrier, it can be overcome through provision. In fact, childcare is a constraint that must be constantly renegotiated, including rebooking, cost, travel, children's reluctance to attend, illness, school holidays and inset days, and providing for older children. Institutional frameworks must acknowledge such ongoing constraints (see Christie et al, 2005:23; Polakow et al, 2004:149-170; Scott et al, 2003:9; Horne & Hardie, 2002:69; Wisker, 1996: 31; Gallagher et al, 1993:31).

Implications

There are resource allocation implications of lone parents' routes into learning and training, sources of support, and factors aiding learning. Responses on these themes broadly divided into finances, childcare, information, flexibility of learning, pastoral support, and institutional change. The overwhelming theme was that learning becomes easier as children grow older. This may be construed as tacitly symptomatic of lacking institutional support, that lone parents can only manage without as children grow older.

The key factors facilitating learning were course fee and childcare assistance. Lone parents also wanted more financial incentive to retrain, and more work-based training, relating learning investments to employment outcomes. The government acknowledge the need for increasing lone parents' incentive to learn and work (PRI, 2007:8), commentators highlighting the importance of linking learning to employment-outcomes for learners with family responsibilities (Jackson, 2004, 14).

Additional financial resources facilitating learning included a garden or safe space for children to play outside locally, alleviating overcrowding and facilitating parents' study. Also cited were home or community centre computer and internet access, assistance purchasing course equipment, and travel assistance.

Alongside formal childcare, childcare assistance from family facilitated lone parents' learning.

THS: Would you be able to do the Learn Direct course and would you have been able to do the evening course at the Whitehawk Inn if you didn't have family to help with childcare and internet?

M2: There's no way I could have done the evening course at all. There wouldn't be any one to help (age 26, one child aged 3).

This suggests that informal networks plug gaps in formal provision, with negative implications for lone parents lacking such networks.

Findings around lack of information reinforce Scott et al's findings (2003:31).

Lack of awareness of what is on offer, especially in Brighton, for single parents. I know now that because of experience and because I get older and I meet more people. I didn't know about the Whitehawk Inn and all those other training centres around Brighton which have courses designed around childcare and do pay for childcare as well. It's only now that I'm aware of that (F9, age 41, one child aged 8).

Like the secondary literature (Scott et al, 2003:10), service users and providers emphasised need for well-informed advice for lone parents including course availability and greater cooperation

between agencies. A key theme was that advisory agencies must be friendly, approachable and reliable.

we were talking in particular about the lack of childcare pretty much everywhere, but also in statutory organisations like the Jobcentre and how difficult that can be for people bringing their children into that environment and how alienating that can be (Service provider focus group).

Alongside childcare to cover learning requirements, participants emphasised need for course timetabling to suit parents' needs, primarily through fitting in with the school day (see Scott et al, 2003:9). Considering the challenges juggling learning with family responsibilities, calls for increased flexibility seem justified. Like secondary commentators, interviewees recommended flexible deadlines acknowledging family responsibilities (Christie et al, 2005:23; Gallagher et al 1993:31). Further recommendations included increasing open learning, (Wisker, 1996: 31), recording lectures and changing library borrowing rules (Christie et al, 2005:23). Wisker's recommendation for increased open learning addresses the problems with geographical mobility, travel and childcare reported by participants. Jenkins and Symons identify the constraint of lone parents' employment (2001: 124), even more relevant to learning, not being compensated by income. Wisker documents student parents' difficulties disrupting daily lives to travel to places of learning, suggesting more course provision (up to degree level) in local colleges and school halls (1996:4).

Interviewees expressed desire for access to counselling through course provision (see Wisker, 1996:7-8; Hyatt and Parry, 1990: 33, Edwards, 1993). This seems appropriate given, for example, primary and secondary evidence that lone parents have frequently experienced violent relationships, being over three times as likely as other women to do so (One parent families, 2007: 7).

Participants' responses suggest a need for deep-seated change, reinforcing Wisker's call for extensive changes in institutional cultures beyond curriculum and support services if student parents are to effectively combine family with learning (Wisker, 1996:6, 29).

Conclusion

Given the agenda of utilising training and learning to return lone parents to work, it would be beneficial to longitudinally examine effects of learning engagement upon subsequent employment, self-esteem and children's lives. The findings demonstrate that despite problems accessing and sustaining learning and training, the benefits render engagement worthwhile, in terms of employability self-esteem, quality of life and children's prospects. The latter is especially

relevant given evidence of inter-generational benefits of lone parents' engagement with learning (Shaw & Woolhead, 2006:178; Duckworth, 2005:240-241, 255; Eccles, 2005: 192-193; Jackson, 2004:57; Woodley & Wilson, 2002: 338; Scott et al, 1996:234; Edwards, 1993:101,59, 119-121).

I want my daughter to be able to look at her dad as a good role model and influence. I don't want to be stuck as a single parent, on benefits and being satisfied by that. I want her to see me being ambitious and hope that it rubs off on her (M2, age 26, one child aged 3).

Evidence suggests that lone parents want to engage with learning and training for a range of intertwined intrinsic (for example, self-esteem) and instrumental (for example, income related) motivations. However, interviews demonstrated sole carers' potentially conflicting responsibilities to care and provide for children render them resistant to compulsion, decisions to engage being overwhelmingly associated with children's ages. Lone parents' strong motivation, and their suggestions for increased support, suggest the appropriateness of offering the carrot of increased support over the stick of compulsion.

Further, as it is the demands of a post-manufacturing economy driving widening educational participation, it is this same transition that has led to *zwei drittel gessellschaft* (Klett-Davies,2007:), with employment for only two-thirds of society. In this context, while providing support for those wishing to learn, train and work, it seems equitable to sanction individuals engaged in the task of raising children alone autonomy to self-determine the timing, extent and circumstances of their participation.

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