Pragmatism and practice: the challenge of delivering and researching adult learning in a shifting climate

Olivia Garvey and Lindsey Fraser, University of Leeds, England

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This paper contemplates the challenges of adult learning in the UK in the context of an ongoing focus on education and progression for 14-19 year-olds, often to the detriment of funding for second-chance learning opportunities. In a shrinking field, practitioners have had to find ever more innovative and covert ways of delivering activity with adults. Within these limitations it has become insufficient to highlight the value of adult learning for its own sake; the secondary impact on their children must also be emphasised. At the University of Leeds, this has given rise to a research project which examines how parental learning influences young people’s aspirations and attainment.

A history of pragmatism

Adult educators working in community settings have a history of pragmatism; endeavouring to uphold principles of social purpose and community development whilst working within the context of organisational and policy constraints. Continually we are dealing with ‘tension between what we are required to do and what we would wish to do’ (Coare and Johnston 2003, 219). The widening participation to higher education policy has provided a lifeline for outreach activity and a funding stream which could be utilised to support work in deprived communities. Although initial widening participation special funding was directed at adults from underrepresented groups, the focus soon changed to targeting the 14-19 year old cohort. University adult educators have argued long and hard with the funders regarding a) the unfairness of adults not being encouraged to engage in widening participation initiatives for their own sakes and b) the obvious connections between attainment and achievement of young people, their family life and how adult education contributes constructively to this.

Work with parents in deprived communities has been well documented in adult education discourse. One example is the Education Priority Area Project run by Eric Midwinter in the late 1960s which aimed to target pupil underachievement in areas of deprivation, identifying concerns in the inequalities between young people’s attainment in inner city Liverpool and elsewhere. The original funding proposal stated; ‘Social environment and particularly levels of parental interest and support are major elements in the determination of pupil attainment’ (Davis 1987, 239). John Davis in his case study of the subsequent Liverpool Parent Support Programme (PSP) initiated in 1979 identifies the importance of negotiated adult education in its delivery:
It affords the basis for developing the individual’s confidence and in the fact that the education system has something to offer that they value, and it provides a vehicle to develop the necessary relationships for effective work on the parents’ skills in parenting and as educators of their children. (Davis 1987, 255)

In contrast, current work with parents and family learning is narrowly focused on basic skills, parenting skills and child behaviour. Despite the wealth of evidence from Liverpool and similar projects, it would appear that lessons have not been learned. Education policy continues to repeat itself without any reference to documented good practice.

Learning families and social mobility
Despite much anecdotal evidence, there is a lack of national research investigating whether a link exists between adult learning and young people’s aspirations and attainment. An initial literature search has identified a number of empirical studies which suggest a correlation between parental education and highest qualification, and their children’s school attainment (Holmlund, Lindahl and Plug, 2008). Research by Feinstein et al (2004) has highlighted the importance of parents’ education in terms of the opportunities which children can access:

The intergenerational transmission of educational success is a key element in equality of opportunity. There are substantial benefits of education that accrue to individuals and society in terms of what education enables parents to pass on to their children. (Feinstein et al 2004, v)

It is well documented that children from poorer families leave school with far lower levels of attainment (Goodman and Greg, 2010) and that parents’ aspirations for their children are linked to the attainment and aspirations of the children themselves:

Evidence indicates that parents’ aspirations influence children’s educational achievement above and beyond their socio-economic background. (Morrison Gutman and Akerman 2008, 15)

A number of reports have surfaced in recent years that highlight the importance of family background on young people’s ambitions. ‘Unleashing Aspirations’, a report from the Panel on Fair Access to the Professions asserts that top professions, such as medicine and law, remain a ‘closed shop’ to the majority of families in this country. The report describes how family wealth and private education are still key to well-paid professions and builds on the evidence that Britain is becoming a society of increasing inequalities. The findings of such reports suggest that widening participation activity has failed to stem the tide of growing inequality. Mary Stuart defends the initiatives and suggests that more time is needed to measure their success. However she does admit to gaps in widening participation activity and the need for a ‘more holistic approach to these issues which recognises that families are part of the solution, rather than what is creating the deficiency’ and therefore the need to work with parents and communities, ‘rather than just focusing on schooling’ (Stuart 2009,10).
It follows then that opportunities for parents to pursue education and participate in aspiration-raising activity could potentially have a positive impact on the aspirations of their children. This hypothesis is explored in our study of the intergenerational impacts of adult learning and widening participation outlined below.

**Methodology**

This qualitative, exploratory study aims to address the gap in existing research and identify areas of interest for a larger-scale investigation. The research explores parent learners’ experiences through semi-structured interviews and aims to develop a body of case studies as a resource for future analyses. The basis for the study has stemmed from evidence gathered through the work of the Realise Project; aspiration-raising activity with adults run by the University of Leeds which was originally funded by Aimhigher West Yorkshire. The study adopts an action research approach, rooted in ongoing work with adult learners in Leeds and a high proportion of research participants were identified at campus events or through Lifelong Learning Centre courses at the University.

The target group for this study is parents from areas of socio-economic deprivation in Leeds and Wakefield whose highest qualification is a GCSE or equivalent. All the parents interviewed left school with few or no qualifications and the vast majority grew up in areas of socio-economic disadvantage. The sample was predominantly from communities where there was no history or tradition of Higher Education and only one adult interviewed had a parent who had been to university.

In the first stage of the study, questionnaires were completed by approximately 300 adult learners. 32 eligible parents were identified and 14 interviewed, comprised of 11 women and 3 men, aged between 36 and 55. 7 young people were also interviewed; 3 female and 4 male aged between 14-19 and an interview also took place with 1 ‘key influencer’; a Head of Year in Inner City School. A second phase of the study is underway and interviews are taking place with a further 15 parents, 10 young people and 6 key influencers in order to expand and corroborate the findings to date. In this phase, the target age range of young people has been expanded from 14-19 to 11-19 in order to examine the impact of parental learning on younger children’s schooling over a longer period.

The research asks the following questions:

- What is the impact of parents’ learning on their children’s attainment and aspirations?
- Are there any changes in parents’ aspirations for their children which stem from taking part in widening participation activity?
- Does this have any impact on young people’s aspirations for themselves?

At this interim stage, the key findings of the study fall into four main areas.

**Interim findings**

1. *Adults who have good educational experiences at any age want more, for themselves and their children.*

The overwhelming majority of parents interviewed spoke very positively about their experience of returning to education, despite the fact that many started with low
confidence due to negative school experiences and a lack of formal qualifications. Many women who had stayed at home to raise children viewed their classes and college work as an opportunity for themselves as individuals, rather than solely as caregivers, and often described it as ‘a bit of me time now’. However, once they had reclaimed that time and begun to make progress in their studies, many reported a renewed sense of confidence in their abilities and wanted to continue:

When she [the FE tutor] told us we had got distinctions I thought ‘I’m not that thick, I got a distinction. It’s paid off... I could see myself studying more. It has pushed me to want to do a bit more which is good, and I think it’s just a building block. It’s like a child learning, they grow in confidence, they achieve and then they want to do more. And it don’t matter how old you get, it’s that same feeling.

(Barbara)

A number of adults interviewed remarked on the way in which their return to study has encouraged their children to value their own education and to pursue this further than they might otherwise have done:

I think the real valuable lesson that they learnt from me studying is that if they don’t do well at their GCSEs if they have to do something else, it doesn’t mean the end… there’s always options… If they make the wrong choices or if they make choices that aren’t going to withstand their entire life then they can always go and do something about it. They can always change their life.

(Jeanette)

Parents frequently reported a growing confidence in their own intelligence through studying and reflected on how this gave them the assurance to encourage their child to aim higher:

It’s actually pushed me to push her with her work….The skills that I’ve learnt have helped me with my own children on a night which has been great.

(Barbara)

The majority of parents interviewed remarked that they were more inclined to encourage their child towards higher education as a result of their own studies. This effect was even more pronounced for parents who had visited the university and found out more about the opportunities available in HE as part of an aspiration-raising event.

2. Parental impact is determined by a range of factors
The extent to which a parent’s learning affects their child seems to be shaped by the child’s age when the parent re-enters education. Overall, the impact was more pronounced on children who were at the younger end of the target age range when their mother or father started a college course. This finding corresponds with related research which shows that parental influence declines as children get older (Masche, 2010). In one example, 14-year-old Rachel had experienced a number of positive benefits as her mother progressed through different FE courses. These included; supporting each other with homework, deeper discussions about school and college
subjects and her mother’s studies opening up areas to her outside of the school curriculum, meaning that she was ahead of her peers in many respects.

However, in some families the parent’s return to education and subsequent desire for more for their children has not resulted in the kind of impacts that they hoped for. In one case, Barbara, a mother of five children ranging in age from 5 to 19, had gained confidence from her own experience of adult learning and was now keen for her 16-year-old son Sam to stay on at school to study A-levels in sixth form. She hoped that he would consider university as an option rather than leaving school straight after his GCSEs to take up a joinery course. Despite his mother’s encouragement to stay on at school, it would appear that his father had the greater influence as Sam eventually decided to pursue joinery on his father’s advice. In this case, the traditional gender roles of this large family may have played a part in shaping the son's decision, demonstrating the variability of parental impact and the external factors which can affect this.

Other factors which seem to affect the outcome include the position of the young person in the family (i.e. whether they are an only, eldest, middle or youngest child); whether it is a one or two parent household; and the culture of expectations in the family and wider community. The decisions taken by brothers and sisters regarding whether to remain in education at the age of 16 seem to be significant and young people appear to be particularly influenced by older siblings who are NEET\(^1\) and are possibly more likely to fall into this group themselves in the future as a result.

3. **The more WP interventions parents receive and the higher the level of education they reach, the greater the benefits for children.**

The research has observed a marked difference between the aspirations of parents who have been engaged in aspiration-raising activity and other adult learners. For those who have not received information on Higher Education or attended campus events, there is a distinct ‘missing link’ between current learning and their opportunities for progression. Students who had participated in these activities overall showed a far more articulated sense of their own progression and hopes for their children’s futures. The experience of attending the university for a study day had clearly got parents thinking about the opportunities open to their children if they stayed on at school.

Another significant factor is how far the parent pursues their education, and in particular whether they progress to higher education. In the case of those adults who had started a degree or were taking an Access or similar preparatory course, a clear impact on the young person’s aspirations could be observed. This was exemplified by Amanda, who had progressed from community education through the Realise Project and on to a degree. She said of her 11 year-old son:

> There’s not an ounce of doubt in his mind that he’ll go to uni, it’s always, ‘when I go to uni’…the subject he wants to study keeps changing but what never changes is that, ‘when I go to uni’ – it’s an automatic progression.

(Amanda)

\(^1\) Not in Education, Employment or Training.
Among those adults who had attended aspiration-raising events at the university, a common theme of cumulative impact emerged. The Realise Project at the University of Leeds delivers a programme of outreach visits and campus study-days over the course of the academic year and many adult learners attend multiple events. A common message communicated both through the research interviews and student evaluations of these activities is that initially, the majority of adult learners are disinclined to consider progression to higher education as a realistic option. However, through repeated visits to the campus and involvement in these activities, the perception that university is ‘not for them’ begins to change and the physical environment of the academy becomes normalised.

4. Agency: Whose job is it anyway?

The research to date has identified a huge variance in parents’ sense of agency in relation to their child’s education and future prospects. Whilst some parents clearly saw it as their responsibility to steer them, others were reluctant to intervene, leaving it up to the school and the child them self to decide their path. Parents’ confidence with negotiating the school system and post-16 opportunities was a significant factor and this was affected by their own level of education and career. Hannah has completed a range of Further Education courses during her 14 years employed within a Children’s Centre and is now working towards a Foundation Degree:

I think the reason she [daughter] enjoys it is because she’s had it instilled in her that education is important….. She hasn’t got an option of walking away from education…. … so she’s knows she’s gonna stay.

(Hannah)

In contrast, Lorraine, in her second year of adult education, expressed hopes that her five children would ‘do well’, but tended to define this more in terms of material security and family rather than educational success. She has tried to help her children with their education where she can, particularly whilst they are at primary school, but has less involvement and encourages them to be independent when they reach secondary school. When asked if she felt her own learning had any positive impacts on that of her children, she replied:

I hope they can do it if they see me doing it, but it’s up to them. I’ve never been a pushy parent.

(Lorraine)

In a related case study, Maryam has high aspirations for her 3 children. However, whilst she tries hard to encourage them to study and aim high, her own limited education and knowledge of the school system means that she feels ill-equipped to guide and support them. The constraints of her own situation in turn obstruct the opportunities open to her children; living in an inner-city area with a poor choice of schools and insufficient resources to choose a school farther away, poorly informed about alternative options and both parents themselves having a low level of education and social capital to make an informed choice.

The tricky concept of ‘pushy parents’ is viewed as a negative by some and a necessity by others. This variance in parents’ sense of agency in their children’s
education and future has an impact on young people’s aspirations, as those who are not encouraged towards further study are less likely to pursue it as an option.

Conclusion
The research to date has uncovered a range of positive benefits for children as a result of their parents’ return to education. These include:

- Parents and young people studying together;
- Young people’s understanding grows as they share their skills and knowledge with their parents;
- Parents better able to understand homework and support their child’s learning;
- Young people’s awareness of learning opportunities grows.

Considering the range of benefits identified, the research recommends that parents be recognised as potential learners in their own right, as well as for their role in their children’s education. Parents’ access to information about routes into further study is essential if these mutual benefits are to be maximised.

Given the wealth of recent evidence-based reports highlighting the importance of family background to young people’s aspirations, we think that this qualitative research is timely and does indeed demonstrate a link between adults learning for themselves and their children’s achievements (which was also evident 30 years ago in the Liverpool project). A more robust longitudinal study is required to interrogate the hypothesis further.

Pragmatism may have been the catalyst for this research but it does not detract from its value in illuminating the link between parental learning and young people’s educational attainment. Moreover, we continue a well-trodden adult education tradition of rebranding and reconfiguring our delivery to survive in increasingly difficult times.

References

Stuart, M (2009) ‘Imagining a different life’ *Adults Learning*, 21, 3, 8-11

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