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'More Than Just Saving the Government Care Costs': Re-Presenting Student Carers' Narratives in the UK

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Research Domain: Student experiences (SE)

Abstract:

There are over five million unpaid carers in the UK, and it is estimated that around 3% of this population are students. Yet, research with student carers is scant, with studies focusing mainly on the challenges posed by combining caring with studying full-time. This participatory study bridges this knowledge gap by providing evidence of the experiences of student carers through biographic and photography-based methods. By using the conceptual tools of intersectionality and transitions as analytical lenses, it shows that student carers' narratives display fluid, involuntary and sometimes painful life transitions, all brought together by caring vis-à-vis the university experience. Furthermore, caring intersects with manifold social divisions in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social class and disability. The paper concludes with three policy recommendations derived from the findings.

Paper: Care and student carers in the UK context

In the UK, the rights of carers were recognised for the first time in the law, alongside provisions for those they care for, through the Care Act 2014. The UK's Department of Health and Social Care considers that a carer is 'anyone who spends time looking after or helping a friend, family member or neighbour who, because of their health and care needs, would find it difficult to cope without this help regardless of age or whether they identify as a carer' (2018, p.7). This piece of legislation promotes the wellbeing of carers, including 'participation in work, education, training or recreation'. However, as a matter of statutory policy, Carer's Allowance recipients 'must not be in full-time education' (Powell et al., 2020, p. 5).

Regarding care in higher education, the National Union of Students (2013) estimates that student carers account for between 3% and 6% of the student population in the UK, while the Family Resources Survey found that they constituted around 3% of the total of carers in 2017/18

(Department for Work and Pensions, 2019). Despite these estimates, research involving participants in their dual role as students and carers is scant, with the few pieces of academic research that involve student carers mainly focusing on the negative impact of caring on their studies. This, coupled with the aforementioned policy context, means that care continues to have a minor role of care in the widening participation policy agenda, which was noted by Alsop et al. more than a decade ago (2008, p. 623).

Theoretical underpinnings

Intersectionality

This research uses intersectionality (Collins & Bilge, 2016) as an analytical lens to acknowledge the interlocking layers of disadvantage and oppression that shape human experiences, in this case the experience of caring while simultaneously studying full-time at university.

Transitions

The conceptual tool of transitions (Gale & Parker, 2014) is used here as non-linear, flexible and fluid series of movements through life, with opportunities for meaning-making, identity-positioning and the generation of coherent (if fragmented) narratives in seeking life pathways in continuous renegotiation.

Research methods

This project is a participatory study, drawing on Paulo Freire's (1974/2007) work on education for critical consciousness, whereby the full engagement of research participants and work *with* them is pursued. Institutional ethical approval was obtained and, recognising the 'hard to reach' nature of the student carer population, a purposive sampling strategy sought to maximise heterogeneity in terms of gender, young/mature, cross-faculty, beneficiaries and non-beneficiaries of an institutional bursary. Seven students from a large university in Southwest England were included in the wider study; all gave their informed consent to take part in the study. Here we focus on two of these participants, using their narratives as case studies to maximise contrast in terms of intersectionality and transitions.

Data collection followed a threefold procedure:

- a) *Photodiaries over a month.*
- b) *Photo-elicited biographical narrative interviews.*
- c) *Participatory workshop.*

Drawing on biographic methods (Holley & Oliver, 2011), we adopt a narrative reconstruction approach that takes interviews and photographic accounts as a coherent unit of analysis, aiming to show how narratives are produced in context (Squire et al., 2014).

Discussion of findings

Student carers' narratives display fluid, involuntary and sometimes painful life transitions, all brought together by caring vis-à-vis the university experience. Caring intersects with manifold social divisions

in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, social class and disability. The fluid transitions between education and care show simultaneity, with liminal spaces filled by ambiguity about the present and uncertainty about the future, both of which depend on the relationship and needs of those student carers care for. Mirroring research into caring, these narratives demonstrate that entering into care is non-linear (McGarry, 2008, p.83, cited in Milne & Larkin, 2015, p.8; Hamilton & Cass, 2017). This study contributes student carers narratives as they evince their increasingly transitioning in and out of caring responsibilities, from home-based to distance caring, from resigned responsibility to undesired duties, with the different demands of caring and university studies evolving in parallel.

Three policy recommendations have emerged from this research. First, due to the multi-layered and fluid nature of caring, the intersection between different social divisions and the dual responsibilities of simultaneously being a student and a carer should be acknowledged. Second, it is necessary but not sufficient to offer the opportunity of self-identification at the point of application for a university place. Third, tailored support for student carers is needed as a matter of policy, not only driven by individual university contributions and criteria.

Note: This paper is derived verbatim, with minor adjustments, from Priego-Hernández, J., & Holley, D. (2021). 'More than just saving the government care costs': re-presenting student carers' narratives in the United Kingdom. In N. Harrison & G. Atherton (Eds.), *Marginalised Communities in Higher Education: Disadvantage, Mobility and Indigeneity* (pp. 48-63). Routledge.

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