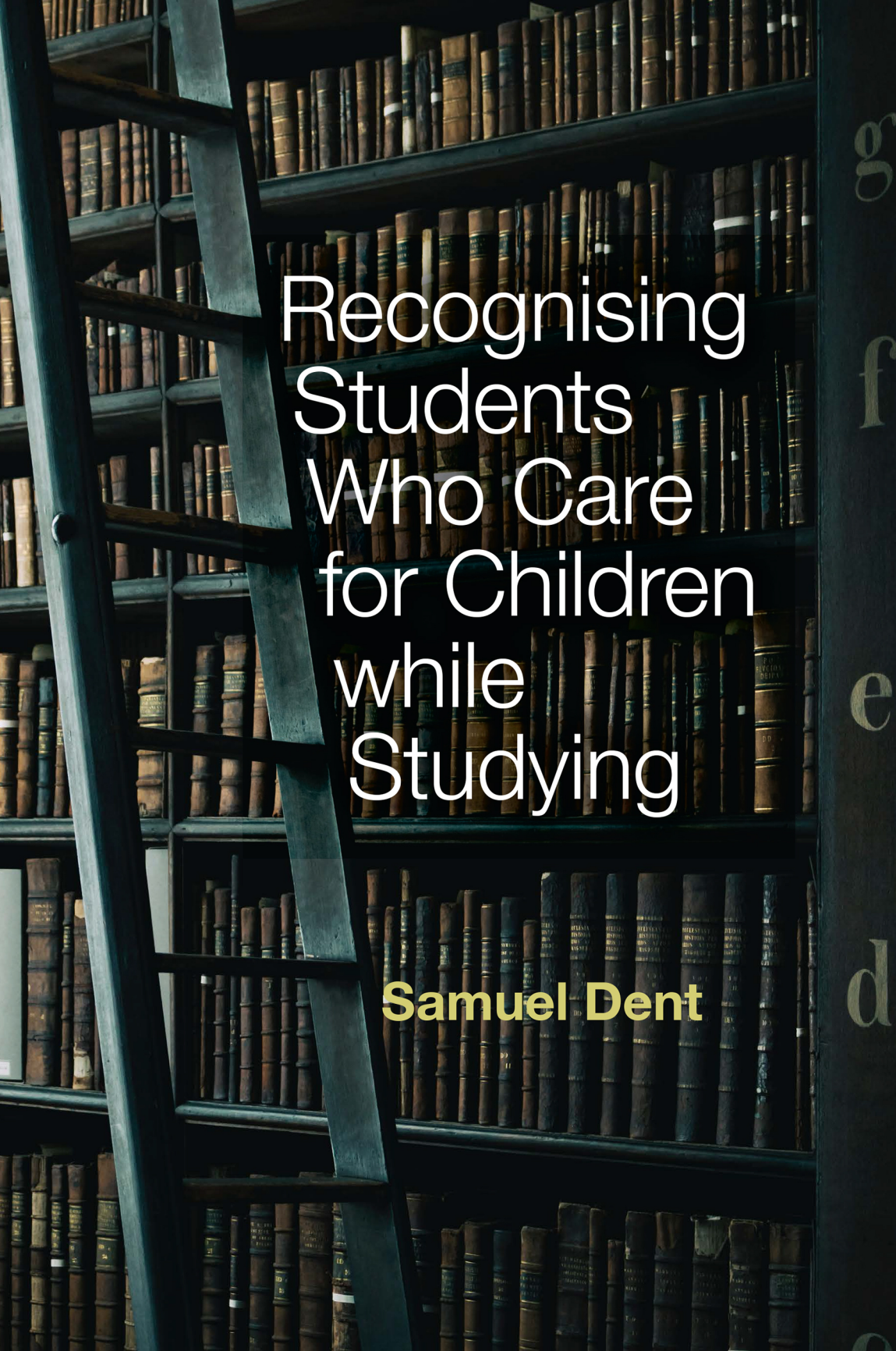
Recognising Students Who Care for Children while Studying
Samuel Dent

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Praise for Recognising Students who Care for Children while Studying

This is a fascinating book that sets out to explore the puzzle of why students caring for children continue to face difficulties within higher education, despite the increasing commitment of institutions to equality and diversity. Drawing on ethnographic data, it presents a nuanced and theoretically-informed account of the experiences of students with caring responsibilities, and an important critique of widening participation and equality policies. It will be of interest to all those working in the higher education sector who are committed to furthering social justice.

Professor Rachel Brooks, Professor of Sociology, University of Surrey

Students who care for children exist in a dichotomy, being both ubiquitous within the HE landscape but equally, often side-lined in educational policy and discourse. Samuel Dent's timely publication refocuses attention on this growing population and invites the reader to explore the highly complex and emotional 'work' necessitated by being both student and carer. Drawing on rich narratives from both undergraduate and postgraduate learners, this book foregrounds the 'lived experience' of caring for children whilst studying and is essential reading for those passionate about the student experience including researchers, equity practitioners, student support staff and university teachers

Professor Sarah O'Shea, Director, National Centre for Student Equity in Higher Education, Curtin University, Australia

Samuel Dent's monograph is a rare and precious contribution to the study of a much under-researched group: student parents. The book provides a much-needed analysis of how students with parenting responsibilities navigate the 'care-free' academic cultures which have excluded them for too long. The book is likely to appeal to researchers and practitioners concerned with widening participation and equity.

Marie-Pierre Moreau, Professor of Education, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

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Recognising Students who Care for Children while Studying

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

For Chantal, Gareth and Julia

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About the Author

Dr Samuel Dent PFHEA is currently interim Academic Development Manager at Nottingham Trent University in the Centre for Academic Development and Quality. Here he leads the Educational Research & Evaluation Team, which he established in 2018; The Trent Institute for Learning & Teaching; and the Educational Development Team. He holds a PhD from Sheffield Hallam University, upon which this book is based, and was named the 2016 emerging researcher by the Forum on Access and Continuing Education for his initial findings. Since then, he has received numerous awards and shaped practice in higher education (HE) in the United Kingdom and Ireland, including being cited in the Office for Students regulatory framework. In 2020, he was recognised as a Principal Fellow of the Higher Education Academy for his contribution to the HE sector, and his reputation for weaving together research and practice on HE inequalities.

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Preface

Penny Jane Burke

As a scholar affected by accessing higher education while caring for children, this book speaks to me personally, professionally and theoretically. Indeed, my passionate commitment to women's access to higher education which set me on my journey as an academic was formed largely through my experiences of struggle as a 'mature, non-traditional' student, which is how I identified my social location at the time (in relation to wider policy discourses). These experiences are constructed through memory of the complex timescapes that I navigated as shaded by a sense of unworthiness; I did not see myself as a 'proper' university student. Recollections of the sense of shame in arriving to seminars late are powerful threads in my journey, having spent the morning rushing to drop children off to school and then having to leave lectures early in the haste to pick children up. My memories of being a university student are of fleetingness, never feeling quite grounded, always a sense of temporality shaping my subjective disconnection to space and feeling out of place. Dislocation and disorientation are major affective themes that colour the experiences of being a university student.

This did, however, connect me to those I identified with – other 'mature, non-traditional' students, most of whom came to university via an Access to Higher Education pathway and most of whom cared for children while studying. In this strong sense of identification, I formed the basis of my life project, dedicated to advocating for students experiencing a sense of dislocation and marginalisation, framed by the increasingly explicit deficit-oriented equity and widening participation policy agendas emerging in the United Kingdom and Australia where the body of my empirical work is located. Over time, and through the privilege of undertaking a doctoral degree, I began to critique my own assumptions about such strongly framed identifications and about the problematic narratives of 'empowerment' through access to higher education, drawing on post/structural perspectives of difference and power. I began to question the homogenising assumptions at play that constructed personal identifications and institutionalised categorisations. I became increasingly interested in the ways the politics of difference shaped inequalities, particularly in the ways neoliberalised and marketised notions of 'diversity' subjected individuals to technologies of subjectification. Discourses of time management skills, for example, regulated processes of assimilation to the hegemonic time structures of the university despite the symbolic forms of violence this generated in which differences had

to be appropriately managed, concealed and controlled. For students who care for children while studying (CCS students) this might mean managing time in ways that fit in with dominant, embodied subjectivities and rhythms, including being on campus 'on time' and timing births 'appropriately'. Indeed, I managed to give birth to my son within the appropriate time frame – two days after final exams – perhaps one of the first indicators of my 'success' as a 'mature, non-traditional student'.

The politics of difference at play across the timescapes of higher education are thus central to the complex ways that inequalities are formed, sustained and reinforced through widening participation policy and practice, despite the discourse of fair access, equity and diversity. This is both subtle and explicit. In its subtle forms, difference is regulated via agendas of 'inclusion' that require the student to simply fit in to the dominant frameworks and cultures of the mainstream institution (Archer, 2003). Policies of equity and widening participation have given rise to hegemonic discourses of 'inclusion', yet without close analyses of the power dynamics that can make 'inclusive practices' exclusive. Discourses of 'inclusion' often work as a form of symbolic violence through the ultimate requirement that the person must fit in to the dominant framework, or be excluded, either through self-exclusion or through institutional exclusion and through practices of standardisation to ensure the regulation, management and control of difference. The discourse of 'inclusion' coerces those seen as 'excluded' to conform to the conventions, expectations and values of hegemonic discourses and practices and to participate in a process of individual 'transformation' into normalised personhoods. Inclusion plays out in ways that are experienced as personal failure, shame and simply not being the 'right' kind of person in higher education spaces. Thus, inclusion often perpetuates problematic values, assumptions and perspectives, placing responsibility on those individuals who are identified as at risk of exclusion through their individual lack (e.g. of time management skills), perpetuating the harmful effects of deficit imaginaries on the bodies of those constructed through difference.

Thus, one of the most pressing concerns of developing widening participation policy and practice that is appropriately sensitive to the politics of difference is to generate contextualised understanding of how difference plays out in the lived, embodied experiences of students. This book takes on this concern by contributing to nuanced, sensitive and socially justice framed research that focuses on the particular, but always heterogeneous, experiences of CCS students. In making an argument for recognising and making visible the struggles of CCS students, Samuel Dent builds on work in the field (Hook, 2018; Moreau, 2016; Moreau & Kerner, 2015) to disrupt the problematic universalistic, individualising and deficit discourses of meeting the needs of 'all' students.

Situating his research in the context of student-facing support services, Dent attends to the puzzle of the persistent homogenising of students associated with equity and widening participation. This homogenising of students did not speak to his experiences of being on the 'front lines of deeply distressed students' and in particular the cases involving CCS students which were the 'most harrowing' for him to respond to. The autobiography of the question (Miller, 1995) is identified

through exploration of his professional experiences in which the perception of higher education as an inclusive space was continually being challenged by the particular experiences of CCS students. In keeping with this approach, I briefly explore my positionality in relation to the themes of this book, drawing from Miller's (1997) autobiography of the question, a concept I have found to be significant and compelling in shaping my commitment to reflexivity and praxis (e.g. Burke, 2002, 2012) and as a pedagogical tool in re/shaping research and teaching (Burke & Gyamera, 2020).

I have argued extensively that widening participation is profoundly misframed in ways that perpetuate persistent *multidimensional inequalities* (e.g. Burke 2012, 2020). Understanding widening participation through a *monodimensional* lens is poorly placed to tackle the deep-seated, socially embedded and often insidious nature of inequalities that are woven through the fabric of contested histories of higher education. We only need to focus on the struggles for access of different social groups over time, including of women, Black and Ethnic Minority Groups, First Nation Peoples and working-class communities to begin to bring into focus that universities have been social sites in which the experiences, perspectives and values of an over-represented social group (e.g. White, able-bodied, middle-class and male) has influenced, shaped and largely determined the underpinning structures and cultures of higher education timescapes. However, this is not to say that higher education as a social institution is homogeneous or even that a single university has one shared culture or institutional habitus. Indeed, the politics of difference shape the contested discourses of higher education institutions and who is seen as having the right to participate and on what terms (Burke, 2012). In my reframing of equity and widening participation, I have brought together feminist post/structuralist perspectives (e.g. Fraser, 1997, 2003; Lather, 1991; Weedon, 1997) with a Freirean-inspired (Freire, 1972) praxis-based pedagogical methodology (Burke, Crozier, & Misiaszek, 2017; Burke & Lumb, 2018) to argue for the necessity of reconceptualising widening participation through ethically oriented, deeply reflexive timescapes (Adam, 1998) that open up possibilities for reimagining our subjectivities and practices (Burke, 2020).

As part of this, I have drawn on the work of Jane Miller (1995, in Burke, 2002, p. 5) to argue for the importance of critical reflexivity as part of our praxis. This requires the continual reflection on our own location in the complex web of power and the ways our personal sensibilities are always formed in relation to wider discourses and histories. The autobiography of the question requires the researcher/practitioner to historicise the questions she addresses and to thus situate her work in wider contexts. Thus, in my earlier work:

> I insert the slash in 'auto/biography' to represent the ways that the story of 'the self' is always a social story and always interacts and interconnects with the story of others. (Birch, 1998; Burke, 2002, p. 7; Stanley, 1992)

Interestingly, and this supports Dent's argument that the experience of caring for children while studying is often invisible, I have not explicitly identified as

a CCS student in previous constructions of myself as a 'mature, non-traditional' student. Dent's focus on CCS invited me to reconsider a key aspect of my own experiences of accessing education. Although, I have written about the impact of being a mother in relation to developing an understanding of gendered inequalities in higher education, this has not explicitly been identified through the category of CCS. Yet the experience of CCS was certainly significant throughout my auto/biography, from my Access to Higher Education course right through to my PhD. The struggles of student parents have been analysed by other researchers, including in the Australian context by Genine Hook (2018), who takes a feminist poststructuralist analysis of the experiences of postgraduate students who largely work to hide their status as sole parents for fear of the potential pathologising effects of being exposed as caring for children while studying.

Indeed, one of the conundrums of categorisations which are so vital to make visible structural and cultural inequalities is to homogenise and misrecognise students through the lens of those very categorisations. The construction of categorisation is inevitably entangled in the processes of subjectification, in which the student is subjected to the often derogatory discourses of the categorisation. Thus, while it is important to redistribute resources and opportunities to groups of students who share similar experiences and systemic disadvantages, it is simultaneously imperative to ensure that a process of misrecognition is not produced through such redistributive efforts that necessarily require some form of categorisation. This often presents a significant dilemma for policy and practice and is one that requires *praxis* – that is, keeping critical reflection/action and critical action/reflection in conversation, enabling the equity and widening participation practitioner (and other key educators, researchers and influencers significant to students' educational access and participation) to exercise deep reflexivity. This requires iterative processes of interrogation of complex relations of power including of our self-location(s) and positionings in the complex politics of difference and inequality.

By bringing Fraser's (1997, 2003) multidimensional framework to bear in his analysis, Dent is able to present an appropriately nuanced analysis of the rich accounts of the students participating in his research. This ensures the representation of their heterogeneous experiences and the recognition of their personhoods as legitimate participants in higher education. Dent simultaneously demonstrates the imperative of redistributing high-quality opportunities and resources to CCS students against monodimensional misframings that homogenise 'all' students. This book enables the reader to 'see' the particular struggles and multidimensional inequalities faced by CCS students that are otherwise systematically invisibilised by homogenising discourses of equity and widening participation. This is an important contribution that enables us to grapple with the ongoing tensions between redistributive and recognitive forms of justice that must simultaneously be held together through praxis-oriented approaches. The doing of 'equity' work requires the continual reflection on what the project of higher education is, and who it is seen to be for and as part of this, whose values and experiences are seen to matter and with what effects for widening participation.

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