Making Sense of Primary School Homework: A feminist study of mothers' constructions of homework support

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A thesis submitted to the University of Nottingham

for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

August 2022

ABSTRACT

Homework is a near-universal practice in UK primary schools (Medwell & Wray, 2019), principally studied from the perspective of what it may add to academic outcomes (H.Cooper et al., 2006; Jerrim et al., 2019; Ozyildirim, 2021). Limited research considers homework as a practice within the home, particularly viewed from the perspective of mothers, who are often the parent most closely involved in its support (Hutchison, 2012; Mandell & Sweet, 2004; Warton, 1998). This thesis uses theories of mothering to understand gendered homework labour from the individual standpoints of eight mothers.

Setting out to explore what shapes mothers' constructions of primary homework and their homework support role, I adopt social science portraiture to interpret data gathered using repeat interviews, video of mother-child homework interactions, and stimulated reflections. I apply a matricentric feminist lens (O'Reilly, 2016, 2019), understanding the participants' experiences as shaped by their social positioning *as mothers*, combined with a Gestalt-informed analysis approach which recognises individual psycho-socio-biographical experiences. The portraits within this thesis highlight maternal homework practices and perspectives, and are important as both diverse, individual narratives and indicative of mothering patterns and wider phenomena, including mothering scripts, the socio-biographical construction of mothers' support and the role of mother-child relationships in shaping homework behaviours. The role of emotions in maternal responses to homework, including devotion, protection, loss, anxiety and guilt, is revealed discursively and through visual data.

The findings locate mothering within homework practices, as well as homework practices within mothering, leading to the development of a new concept in homework research: *motherisation*. This concept highlights the maternal role in homework, the socio-biographical and psycho-social influences on maternal constructions of homework, mothering's embodiment within homework support, and mothers' agency in the development of homework practices. Fundamental to motherisation are mothers' emotional investments and emotion drivers. The act of

agential motherisation makes homework, and homework support, characteristically different to schoolwork.

This thesis argues that homework support is a complex social and relational practice, shaped by mothers and mothering, and enacted as emotion care work. This new interpretation of homework, as a relational dimension of mothering, challenges its dominant framing in policy, practice and research as 'simply' an educational tool, suggesting it can also be understood as a relationally situated and embodied, lived experience for mother homework supporters, over which they have some agency.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis is dedicated to the memory of my own Mum

Patricia Mear (1937-2003)

Thank you to …

… the mothers; so generous with their time, whose stories touched me in ways I did not anticipate.

… my supervisors.

Dr Jane Medwell, for your unwavering belief in me, ability to lift my confidence when I felt doubt and encouragement to take this research in my own direction.

Professor Pat Thomson, for your wise suggestions and helpful critiques, which pushed me to make this thesis better.

… the Economic and Social Research Council and University of Nottingham, School of Education for my funding [Grant No. ES/J500100/1].

… Dr Carmen Mohamed, Dr Gill Johnson, Dr Sarah Amsler and Dr Peter Gates, who, at different points, offered kindness and clarity of thought.

… my friend, Dr Helen Smith, who 'got me into this fine mess' in the first place when, on a wintry walk, you said to me, 'You should do a PhD; I think you'd like it.' You were right.

… my PhD colleagues, now friends: especially Dr Bobby 'Tech Fixer' Whyte, for making me laugh and demonstrating unending positivity; Arj, Brittany, Cassie, Fatma, Haya, Ipek and Zubeyde for the research chats and coffee breaks; Arj, Lou and Maria, for occasional childcare; fellow members of the *PhD and Early Career Researcher Parents* and *Virtual SUAW Parents Edition* online groups for support and company; and Dr Wendy Sall, who I met on day one – we got there!

… my family, especially my children, Maisy and Tom, who have been patient in waiting for Mummy to finish (and counted down the words!); my brother Andy, always my champion and friend; my father, Derek, and mother, Pat, who taught me the importance of education and social justice, brought me up to discuss everything over the tea-table, and nurtured my love of reading.

… and Steve, who rescued me from the odd IT disaster in the production of this thesis. Your wizardry, patience and willingness to help was much appreciated (and all without reading a word!) Mum always said I should marry a computer whiz!

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1 INTRODUCTION

1.1 PRIMARY SCHOOL HOMEWORK: A CORE EDUCATIONAL AND PARENTAL PRACTICE

In the twenty-first century, across the UK, the teacher-directed task of primary school homework has become an often familiar, accepted and expected aspect of the education system (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Medwell & Wray, 2019). Although homework is not statutorily required, and, historically, has played a fluctuating role in the UK education system (Hallam & Rogers, 2018), since the introduction of the National Curriculum in 1988, it has been endorsed by governments and government bodies, both overtly and implicitly, as a tool for raising attainment and offering other advantages (for example, Department for Children Schools and Families, 2007, archived; Hallam & Rogers, 2018). In 2018, while this study's data was being gathered, the Education Secretary described homework as 'a staple of school life, and of home life' (Hinds, 2018), while the Inspection Handbook of the Office for Standards in Education (Ofsted; the body monitoring the quality of educational settings) listed 'challenging homework' as an indicator of high performing schools (Ofsted, 2018, p.53, withdrawn 2019), suggesting homework is an educational essential and indicator of school quality.

No official figures track the number of schools using homework, but sources indicate its prevalence. Between 1995 and 1999 the number of primary schools with a homework policy rose from 25% (Ofsted, 1995) to 90% (Hallam & Rogers, 2018). OECD data suggests 99% of Scottish teachers and 98% of English teachers set maths homework (Falch & Rønning, 2012). Ninety-eight percent of seven-year-olds in the Millennium Cohort Study received homework (Hansen et al., 2010), and formal

homework, beyond reading, has become commonplace in upper primary (Hughes & Greenough, 2002).

Schools emphasise homework conformity. Nearly 80% seek parental and pupil compliance using home-school agreements (Medwell & Wray, 2019). Framed as an instrumental practice which advances school aims and academic functions (Farrell & Danby, 2015; Fitzmaurice et al., 2020), homework is assumed to raise standards (Hughes & Greenough, 2002), and to promote progress through practice and consolidation (Hallam & Rogers, 2018; Ofsted, 1995). Homework is therefore 'normalised' within school culture as part of the educational 'status quo' (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020, p.909), through a strong government-school policy message which currently frames it as a core practice.

Primary homework is also a socially assumed aspect of parental care work. A Department for Children Schools and Families study discovered 84% of Key Stage 1 parents and 73% of Key Stage 2 parents regularly support homework (Peters et al., 2008). The Millennium Cohort data similarly suggests 75% of UK parents support young children's home learning (Hartas, 2011). Parent comments on social networking sites demonstrate that universal primary homework, promoted by governments and ideologically linked to good schools, effective learning and pupil progress, has transferred inside parental responsibility, with moral obligations of compliance (Lehner-Mear, 2021).

Parental responsibility for homework is particularly significant at primary level. Firstly, in practical terms, younger children receive more support (McGregor & Knoll, 2015; Seginer, 2006; Sharp et al., 2001). Secondly, a commonly cited purpose of

primary homework is parental engagement in children's learning (DCSF, 2007, 2008; Ofsted, 1995). Teachers reference parent involvement and parental expectations as the *most* important reasons for setting homework (Medwell & Wray, 2019). The number of parents feeling very or fairly involved in their child's education reached 89% by 2004, with 76% describing their homework help as very important (Moon & Ivins, 2004), making homework an 'inevitable and quite taken-for-granted part' of parenting (Ribbens-McCarthy with Kirkpatrick, 2005, p.69). Homework support is therefore framed as a core parental practice, expected by government, school and society.

Homework is regularly studied, and the extant literature is substantial. Research is generally conducted from the school's perspective, with an intention to ascertain its value as an educational tool (H.Cooper, 2007; Hallam & Rogers, 2018). For example, an abundance of, often quantitative, studies focus on possible associations between homework, or homework's features, and academic results (H.Cooper et al., 2001; Dettmers et al., 2009; Jerrim et al., 2019; Ozyildirim, 2021; Rosário et al., 2015). This is complicated by the intricacy of factors which influence homework. Evidence of homework's academic value, particularly at primary level, is considered complex, tentative or inconclusive at best (Baş et al., 2017; H.Cooper et al., 2006; Goodall, 2020; Hallam & Rogers, 2018), and unproven at worst (H.Cooper, 2007; Hattie, in Montague, 2014; Kohn, 2006).

Hallam and Rogers (2018) claim homework's meaning is easily understood, and Harris Cooper's (1989) definition, 'tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours' is widely used (p.7).

Commonly, definitions are school-centric, framed around school aims and academic outcomes. Goodall (2020) recently described homework as '*school oriented* work to be performed by students outside the classroom, which has a clear, stated aim to support learning' (p.9; my emphasis). Even Fitzmaurice, Flynn and Hanafin (2020), who redefine homework as 'home-school work' occurring at 'the nexus of home and school', do so to stress the teacher role in the process (p.897). Yet, by taking place within homes, homework is also physically and socially oriented towards the family. Despite this, homework is rarely investigated as a lived experience or family practice (Hutchison, 2012).

Current conceptualisations and a traditional approach to homework research also frame it as an independent exercise, in which only the child engages, under teacher direction. Yet, adults control homework (Forsberg, 2007; B.Jackson, 2007) and, as seen, at primary level, the parent often plays a role. A parallel discourse of parental involvement in children's education, aligned with neoliberal ideas about family responsibilities, transforms homework from a lone child's independent activity into a parent-child dyadic practice. Homework practice is therefore formed, not by the task set, but through home-based 'person-environment melding' (Corno, 2000, p.530). Alternative views of homework which highlight its social location within the family and the significance of parent perspectives on how homework is conducted, are, however, limited. Whilst the literature and general discourse implies simple supervision (see Farrell & Danby, 2015; Forsberg, 2007), parental homework support may be diverse, and variously prompted by school demands and external factors. Adopting the term 'homework supporter,' with actions understood as 'homework

support,' encompasses the range of possible parental involvement, thus widening understanding beyond established ideas about parents' supervisory role.

Although UK government and schools promote primary homework as a core approach, it is also contentious. With question marks over its effectiveness and research indicating homework as a source of family stress and tension (Farkas et al., 1999; Hutchison, 2012; Levin et al., 1997), widespread parental compliance and strong cultural approval for homework is puzzling. However, the ascendant pro-homework discourse is accompanied by media and celebrity voices. Anti-homework articles appear in the popular and serious presses, with hard-hitting headlines: 'Homework damages primary age pupils' (Paton, 2014); 'Homework ruins family life' (M.Stephens, 2021). In 2018, a celebrity tweet challenging primary homework was widely circulated (Delaney), prompting other celebrity responses, mainstream media reports, and even a published counterview on the government's website (Hinds, 2018).

Amongst teachers and parents, homework can also be controversial. In a study of homework views in online forums, both mother-to-mother and teacher-to-teacher arguments developed, with strong statements and interpersonal judgement from all sides (Lehner-Mear, 2021). Teacher views about homework's value and purpose appear inconsistent (Lehner-Mear, 2021; Medwell & Wray, 2019). They promote parental support, yet criticise parental participation as not the 'right' involvement (Forsberg, 2007), or deem that parents be restricted to monitoring not educating (Hughes & Greenough, 2002). Furthermore, contradictions surface when teacher intentions are compared to tasks set (Medwell & Wray, 2019). Advocating informal,

real world learning opportunities, yet simultaneously insisting on formal, rote-learning homework (Dixon & Lewis, 2008; Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021), England's teachers, especially, operate within an 'incoherent set of beliefs' (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021, p.770). Some educators fear homework widens educational inequalities (Medwell & Wray, 2019; Sayers et al., 2020), and achievement gaps do occur in classes with homework (Rønning, 2008), yet the practice is adopted even where teachers openly recognise its ineffectiveness (Holte, 2016). Researchers may also be complicit, recommending homework despite finding positive impacts when it is abandoned (Pfeiffer, 2018). Corno (1996) highlights myths which likely bolster homework's usage, including: 'The best teachers give homework'; 'More homework equals better outcomes'; and 'Parents want homework'; these traditions mask that, for primary children, homework can also be 'a tear in the very fiber of their family life' (p.28, 29).

1.2 Parental involvement and the gendered homework supporter

In the UK, parents are positioned as partners in their child's educational development. High levels of involvement are expected, in a range of school-framed practices, including homework. Parental involvement has been discussed in education circles since it was first highlighted in the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for England, 1967). This education review gave focus to the home environment, parental attitudes, and parental participation in explaining variable achievement, concluding that greater parental involvement was necessary. Similar recommendations continue to be made, such as in the 2011 Department for Education report *Review of Best Practice in Parental Engagement* (Goodall &

Vorhaus) and the 2021 Education Endowment Foundation report *Working with Parents to Support Children's Learning* (van Poortvliet et al.).

The powerful post-Plowden parental involvement discourse underpins expectations of parental support, including homework, and encourages research on parental homework input to focus on educational outcomes (see H.Cooper et al., 2000; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Jeynes, 2005; Moroni et al., 2015; Patall et al., 2008; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Whilst offering one kind of detail, engagement's social function, parents' experiences within the process, and factors which shape their role remain obscured.

Parental involvement is itself a problematic idea. It carries classed assumptions (de Carvalho, 2001; Ulé et al., 2015) and school-centric definitions of 'accepted' involvement, which encourage parents to act in teacherly ways (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Edwards & Warin, 1999; Lawson, 2003). In transferring school-informed procedures into the home, it risks altering parent behaviours and family practices (C.Clarke & Comber, 2020; Forsberg, 2007). Indeed, Cairney (2003) calls for researchers to explore *how* school practices shape family lives. Few studies centre on the in-home experiences of those who support homework, rarely investigating beyond the parent 'view' of homework as an educational exercise (M.Holland et al., 2021; Kiewra et al., 2009; McGregor & Knoll, 2015; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021). Issues of colonisation (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Keogh, 1999), schoolification (Petrie, 2005) and home-school boundary, in the homework context, are therefore underexplored.

Both the parental involvement discourse and homework are often presented and discussed in de-gendered ways. Although the literature reveals mothers' extensive educational labour and the mother-as-supplementary-educator is well-established (David et al., 1993; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Hutchison, 2012; Karnad-Jani, 2021; Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998; and others), a gendered dimension is unusual in homework research, across government and school discourses, and in the public framing of parents as partners in their child's educational development. Reay (1998) argues that mothering and maternal school support should be given greater research attention, and critiques government policy for lacking a gendered, classed or raced understanding. Assuming a homogenous, homework-supporting parent means little is known about how homework functions for mother-supporters specifically, how they experience, construct, conduct, or reflect on their role. Recognising primary homework support as maternal labour opens the way to exploring mothers' constructions of homework, homework support and their homework role, and to identifying what shapes this. This attends to homework support as a dimension of mothering which is rarely recognised and poorly understood.

Re-gendering homework practices aligns with key feminist principles and works on mothering (Chodorow, 1978; O'Reilly, 2016; Rich, 1977; Ruddick, 1989), research by established scholars in the field of maternal educational support (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998, 2005a, 2005b), and builds on substantive studies of mothers' family labour, principally Hays's (1996) intensive mothering, and Walkerdine and Lucey's (1989) sensitive mothering, which emphasise mothers' expected, highly invested, sometimes self-sacrificial work in support of children's cognitive development. Work by Lareau (1989, 2003), Reay (1998, 2005a, 2005b) and Gillies

(2006a, 2006b) highlights classed dimensions of family educational support. Various established research lines therefore coalesce around the maternal role in homework support.

1.3 Philosophical position: the feminist principles of this study

Knowledge produced in this study is interpreted from, and in relation to, the gendered position of 'mother' (O'Reilly, 2016, 2019). Although unusual in an Introduction, I elaborate this thesis's feminist framing here, in order that readers understand this as a feminist-influenced work.

Feminist research specifically calls for scholarship which overturns static, dominant positions and exposes the inadequacies of accepted universal 'knowledges' which marginalise women and prevent them from being knowers (Harding, 1987b). It 'bring[s] women in' (DeVault, 1990), challenging hitherto androcentric and partial knowledges (Harding, 1987a; Harding & Hintikka, 2003), recognisable in a degendered view of homework support. Feminist researchers challenge traditional approaches framed around objectivity, universality, replicability and validity (Haraway, 1988; Oakley, 1981, 1998). Following this tradition, I avoid epistemologies, methods and practices seen as 'male-stream,' which reproduce cultural masculinities and femininities and universally-applicable social understandings and silence those who are non-white, non-privileged, non-middle-class, non-Western, non-*women* (Oakley, 1998).

Informed by a feminist disconnect with traditional assumptions of the independent, rational self, I use Mauthner and Doucet's (1998) *relational ontology* to reflect that reality is dynamic, fluid, fluxing and experienced according to social, biographical and

individual differences. Relational ontology suggests individuals are 'selves-in-relation' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.125, after Ruddick 1989), whose realities derive from interdependent, embedded social relations, just as agency and reflexivity are produced dialogically through social contexts and processes (Archer, 2007; Emirbayer & Mische, 1998; D.Holland et al., 1998). Feminism similarly suggests that epistemologies vary by situation, experience and standpoint (Franks, 2002; D.Smith, 1987; Stanley & Wise, 2013). Ontology and epistemology are therefore *both* derived from social and relational contexts. Biographic and psycho-social dimensions mediate and interweave these social processes, with experiences intersected by class, race, gender, sexuality, location, historic positioning etc., casting doubt that a coherent, homogeneous reality or single knowledge is possible. Explaining a phenomenon like homework without consideration of subjective positions is therefore limiting, silencing those without the privilege to ensure *their* reality is made visible. Recognising a broader epistemological base, will therefore add to the extant homework literature by revealing women's experiences within a perspective of multiple possible truths.

Although this thesis is a feminist piece of work, there is no single, universal feminist epistemology (Franks, 2002). Multiple ways of experiencing patriarchal dominance logically mean there are varied knowledges arising from these experiences (Assiter, 1996). Franks (2002) advocates abandoning an 'overarching feminist politic' so that 'the minefield of what it is that it might be to be feminist … becomes less fraught' (p.45). However, within a plurality of epistemologies, produced by a multiplicity of individuals self-defining as feminists, shared principles distinguish feminist work from other methodologies (Crotty, 2009; Franks, 2002; Parry, 2020). The feminist features

shaping this study are: marginalised voices, oppression and social change; subjectivity, situated knowledges and intersectional dimensions; and relationships, reciprocity, and liminal insiderness.

Feminist research is fundamentally concerned with women's othered political, cultural, economic and social positioning (Alcoff, 1988). Being a woman is not oppressive, but 'assumptions and associations attributed to femininity' may be (Hoskin, 2021, p.13). According to Nakano Glenn (1994), unequal power relations surrounding mothering create an 'arena of political struggle' (p.17). Institutions and systems mould women's relationship with mothering, schooling and their child's education (D.Smith, 1987) meaning that, as a distinct group, mothers have particular social experiences, derived from normative scripts and practices, which are central to their involvement with homework. As a critical methodology, feminism highlights oppressions borne of these patriarchal systems, discourses, institutions and social relations, while as praxis, feminism aims to 'increase women's rights, opportunities and choices within any ideology or context' (Paidar, 1995, cited in Franks, 2002, p.40). Since oppressions are variously experienced (Millen, 1997), mothers' *choices* can be recognised as well as their *oppressions*. Indeed, *matricentric feminism,* taken up in this thesis*,* whilst acknowledging oppression, explicitly advocates empowered mothering (O'Reilly, 2016, 2019). Understanding marginalisation and empowerment as dynamic and individualised instead of fixed and generic, does not deny gendered oppressions but enhances discussion of mothers' realities, which can be understood both within, and beyond, patriarchal oppression. In affording exploration of individual mothers' differently realised empowerment, biographical, psycho-social and agential responses to homework can be recognised, producing a broader *and*

more nuanced understanding of both research topic and participant experiences, revealing the decisions made, and benefits found, within individual mothers' practices.

Women's marginalisation is widely discussed. Notably, Dorothy Smith (1987) identifies institutional 'relations of ruling' which claim universal relevance whilst advancing male experience, knowledge and dominance (p.19). In the homework context, these institutions are government, school, family and established research which overlooks mothers' situated experiences. Centring maternal experiences in research designs is key to unlocking hidden knowledge from mothers as the 'expert practitioners of their everyday worlds' (D.Smith, 1987, p.161). Using this kind of *standpoint feminism*, means not generalising from small populations to large, but understanding situated knowledges as indicative of how social structures impact individuals. This 'situated truth' (Paradies, 2018, p.120) develops 'a map of how the social is constructed and coordinated from … various positions' (Griffith, 1998, p.370, elaborating D.Smith, 1987). An interest in situated knowledge and knowers develops from an epistemological stance drawn, not resistant, to the particularities of individual positions.

Initially developed by Hartsock (1983), elaborated by feminists including D.Smith (1987), Harding (1991) and Hill Collins (1989) and, later, critiqued and reframed by Hekman (1997, 1999), standpoint feminism deconstructs principles of universality, underlining the relational dimension of epistemology. Haraway (1988) clarifies that seeking translatable meanings is not wrong in itself, but rejects an omniscient gaze which claims universal relevance through a 'god trick of seeing everything from

nowhere' (p.581). Hiding the researcher's cultural and biographical subjectivities weakens objectivity claims (Harding, 1991) and obfuscates researcher accountability (Mannay, 2010). Researcher neutrality is therefore considered impossible.

Feminist objectivity and standpoint approaches emphasise not just that subjectivities exist, but recognise these as essential to knowledge-building. If knowledges result from the social location and conditions in which they are produced (Stanley & Wise, 2013), then, conversely, individuals' situated experiences produce knowledges (Franks, 2002; D.Smith, 1987). Research authenticity is therefore increased by openly acknowledging subjectivity, being reflexive, and documenting emotional reactions towards participants (Maynard, 2002). The traditional, scientific 'illusion of objectivity' is rejected (Franks, 2002, p.41) and epistemological power is held mutually with participants.

Standpoint research has been subject to challenge, accused of reducing knowledge to the knower's social position, 'reinstat[ing] "who knows" as the authority for "what is known"' and elevating marginalised voices above others (Moore & Muller, 1999, p.193). Standpoint theorists are criticised for implying that a single, knowable women's reality is more accurate than dominant, partial, androcentric knowledge (Stanley & Wise, 2013), therefore replicating the 'privileged knowledge' they discredit by framing women's knowledge as superior (Kokushkin, 2014). Harding (1997) disputes that standpoint theory endorses universal knowledge, women's or men's, arguing it welcomes multiple knowledge positions. Hekman (1997), despite advancing criticisms, acknowledges that standpoint theory remaps epistemology to recognise reality as both socially constructed, and multiple, in a 'new paradigm of

truth' (p.358). '[T]here is no metanarrative, either normative or methodological, to which we can appeal. Nor is there a truth about social totality that is waiting to be discovered' she writes (p.362).

Misrepresenting standpoint feminism by claiming it to be universalising, maintains women's marginalisation in the epistemological status quo by rejecting otherness and non-standard positions (MacLure, 2009). Whilst women's particular position is emphasised, 'contemporary thinking on mothers and motherhood has far surpassed the pitfalls and limits of essentialist thinking' (Kawash, 2011, p.972), with women's experiences recognised as diverse and fractured by dimensions of race, class and location (Hekman, 1999; Paradies, 2018). Indeed, acceptance of multiple knower-positions specifically opens up standpoint theory to *intersectionality* (Kokushkin, 2014).

Crenshaw (1989) first used intersectionality to highlight that a single focus on gender obscures the experiences of the 'multiply-burdened' (p.140). A 'configuration of multiple forms of discriminations' are better understood through a multi-focused lens (Gandarias, 2017, cited in Cabrera et al., 2020, p.309). Recognising mothers as heterogenous requires consideration of how differences in their experiences are shaped not only by gender but 'by many axes that work together and influence each other' (Hill Collins & Bilge, 2016, p.2). Just as standpoint theory challenges a dominant male epistemology (Kokushkin, 2014), an intersectional lens destabilises other privileged knowledge positions (Cabrera et al., 2020). Attending to 'the vast diversity of ways in which women experience and engage in mothering' (Kawash, 2011, p.972), thus extends standpoint theory. In this study, whilst race, geography or

sexuality proffer minimal differences, the intersection of class and gender shapes the mothers' educational interactions. Standpoint research and intersectionality are therefore mutually supportive of my research aims.

Standpoint research has continued relevance. Recent standpoint studies have: revealed the Covid-19 pandemic's impact on women's experiences of employment, health and housing (Viswanath & Mullins, 2020); explored how women professionals construct careers (Karam & Afiouni, 2020); and highlighted the epistemic violence of denying vulnerable groups involvement in research discourses (Pausé, 2020). Contemporary standpoint foci include: alignment with social justice issues (Paradies, 2018); an empirical emphasis on women's experiences, oppression or invisibility, to challenge hegemonic interpretations; and the researcher's location in the same plane of study as the participants (Cabrera et al., 2020). Contemporary advances confirm standpoint's suitability for understanding individual stories as both personal experience and indicative of collective narratives (Karam & Afiouni, 2020), thus enabling exploration of mothers' gendered educational labour.

Obvious challenges arise when accessing meaning from others' perspectives. However, supporting access to situated knowledge are feminist ideas about the centrality of researcher-participant relationships, reciprocal practices and reflexivity. Oakley (1981) condemns research which manipulates participants through objectification: traditions of 'doing' rapport which socialise participants towards 'expert' needs through detached, controlled or hierarchical interactions are considered unethical, and a mutual relationship, founded in 'women interviewing [or researching] women', is espoused, as 'the condition under which people come to

know each other' (p.58). Although criticised, including by some feminists (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002; Letherby, 2004; Riessman, 1987), for assuming that gendered connections neutralise hierarchical research relationships, for homogenising women into a 'sisterhood', and for overstating the parity in her approach, Oakley's ideas remain influential, highlighting the potential advantage, for this project, of my position as mother (see Oakley, 2016, for acknowledgement of flaws in her original argument).

A reciprocal approach is common in mother-focused, feminist studies (see Baldwin, 2021; Frost & Holt, 2014; Griffith & Smith, 1987; O'Brien, 2007). Finch (1993) suggests sharing aspects of oneself is the 'only morally defensible way to conduct research with women' (cited in Baldwin, 2021, p.121). Consequently, because I interview mothers with similar-aged children to my own, I am open about my maternal position from the outset. Exchanging similarities occurs naturally (children's ages; school types) and I reflect on our mutual experience when accounts feel familiar. This 'cultural practice' of conversational exchange enables participants to 'place' and 'know' me, builds relationships, and creates a more relaxed interview (Roberts, 2018, pp.117, 118). Baldwin (2021) discusses the intersection of her maternal story with her participants' stories, noting where experiences merge or diverge, recognising the emotional impact this has on topic, question, and analysis. Feminist research representations are thus sifted through the researcher's emotional and biographical lens: 'their lives are filtered through us and the filtered stories of our lives are present' (Cotterill & Letherby, 1993, p.74).

Reciprocity has recently been redefined as responsiveness to, interest in and responsibility for the participant, rather than friendship (Oakley, 2016). Mothers speak more candidly to a mother-researcher (Frost & Holt, 2014). When parent-researchers 'relate to [participants'] troubles and turmoils', through friendship or role, the researcher position is supplanted and one becomes an 'extreme insider' (Adler & Adler, 1997, p.30). In this thesis, I interview a mother friend, experiencing her humbling candidness, which was perhaps the combined effect of our existing relationship and shared maternal status. Hearing her self-critical reflections was difficult because of our friendship, but certainly established rich data. After a particularly heartfelt passage, it felt respectful to thank her for her candour. According to Oakley's new conceptualisation of reciprocity, I was responsive to, interested in and responsible for this participant.

The interweaving of mother-researcher and mother-participant, through reciprocal practices and insider experiences, is undoubtedly critical to this study's formation, methods and findings. Although critiqued by those focused on traditional neutrality and objectivity, in a feminist study, researcher-researched closeness and reciprocity is not considered invalidating, but instead creates 'a powerful reflexive position used to gain deeper engagement and insight into participants' understanding' (L.Cooper & Rogers, 2015, para 2.1). Thus, a 'rolling reflexivity' (Baldwin, 2021, p.135) weaves through this study's data collection, analysis and conclusions.

Despite feminist propositions, scholars question the insider position. Insider/outsider debates imply simplicity. This false binary 'silences the multifaceted nature of identities, lifestyles and perspectives' (Loughran & Mannay, 2018b, p.8). I am not just

mother-researcher(teacher). My shared-with-participants maternal identity is infused by biographical experiences located in age, class, race, culture and marital position, bringing me closer to some participants and further away from others. This 'multiplex identity', in which hybrid categorisations matter differently across interactions, makes research encounters an 'intersubjective dance' (Narayan, 2013, p.25). An apparent insider, I am, in some circumstances, an outsider. The mothers' heterogeneity, and a strong feminist intent to view each as a holistic individual, means our differences matter as much as our similarities. Indeed, attention to difference may be *particularly* acute for insider-researchers (Ganga & Scott, 2006). Neither gender congruity, nor a common role, necessarily produce the 'rhythmicity' needed for shared meanings, even when gender is a 'haunting presence' (Riessman, 1987, pp.183, 178).

Complicating this further, identities change. Initially straddling three distinct roles (teacher, mother, researcher) as the research progressed, my researcher identity developed, my mother identity came to the fore, and my teacher identity receded, partly due to connections forged with participants and partly because the project's focus altered to foreground maternal perspectives. Therefore, insiderness varies across the research process, not just between interactions. The reflection of one's own experiences brings a constantly shifting 'liminal' position between observer and participant, as the researcher balances experiential world with the construction of scholarly knowledge (Edwards & Ribbens, 1998, p.2).[1]

[1] The continuum of insiderness is variously described, see Cui (2012), Roberts (2018), van den Scott (2018) and others.

Inbuilt power differences trouble feminist intentions to forge mutual relationships, and are widely discussed (Oakley, 2016; Wasserfall, 1997). The researcher is almost always viewed as a 'representative of "authority"' (Griffith & Smith, 1987, p.91). Some mothers disregard our shared maternal position by awarding me 'expert' status, presumably assuming that an educational researcher knows about education: one participant asks about homework's value; another interprets follow-up questions as critiques not queries. A mothering focus may accentuate this problem, because mothering's underpinning morality, alongside social judgement of 'bad' mothers, are a filter through which mothers pass their decisions. As a mother-insider within the discourses researched, participant concern that I may judge their mothering is logical. Whilst reciprocity and an empathetic manner may minimise this, they are unlikely to overcome the powerful moral discourses entirely. Moreover, mothers with negative experiences, or who strongly disagree with homework, prove reluctant to participate. Recruiting a friend from the former subcategory suggests that a shared social network, rather than shared social role, assists in accessing views across the boundaries of a liminal insider status.

Despite the nuanced understanding needed of positionality's affordances and limitations, and positional liminality making perfect congruity impossible, a maternal role *is* valuable, the mothers *do* respond to my reciprocity, and our shared experience *is*, at times, profound. However, the shifting sands of social categorisation within research encounters require reflexivity to understand how relationships, and responses given, are shaped. Exposing my role within the research, acknowledging the research relationship, and articulating my subjectivities, are therefore doubly important. Whilst locating myself within 'the same political plane'

as my participants, 'class, race, culture and gender assumptions, beliefs, and behaviors … must [also] be placed within the frame of the picture that [I] attempt[] to paint' (Harding, 1987b, p.9).

This outline of key feminist features and epistemology shows the reader the lens through which to view this thesis. I subsequently dovetail this feminist stance with my conceptual framing of mothering, to build a specifically matricentric approach.

1.3.1 UNDERSTANDING THE MOTHER AND MOTHERING

This thesis claims and uses the words *mother* and *mothering* throughout. Some feminists argue that adopting the term 'parenting' would free women from gendered work by erasing problematic social assumptions surrounding maternal activities, particularly those rooted in essentialised ideas about mothers as carers (Erasmus, 2012). However, this distorts and even obscures the gendered imbalance in family and school practices. Clarity is therefore required, regarding who *mothers* are and what *mothering* is.

Mother is both an identity and a social role, with associated experiences and practices. Hollway (2006), evidencing this complexity, frames mother as:

> … both a universal identity and one that varies markedly over time, place and situation. It is reducible to neither the natural nor the social but requires an approach that transcends both. It is an identity that is passionately felt and rigorously regulated; still experienced as women's destiny but recently subject to choice. Because becoming a mother involves huge changes that affect women's sense of

> themselves, it is a particularly good example of where bodily, psychological and social processes intersect (p.63)

Hollway's description of mothering as the nexus of the individual, the social, the embodied and the psychological, affords exploration of how the 'passionately felt', and the 'rigorously regulated' combine in the common mothering act of homework support, including how mothers' homework practices are shaped by these interlocking dimensions. In this thesis, Hollway's mothering 'passion' is defined as emotional investment. The corresponding 'regulation' is understood through the lens of moralised social scripts which shape mothers and their practices.

Mothers' experiences are different from fathers', socially, psycho-socially and biographically. Mothers are also heterogenous. Appreciating mother as identity *and* experience expands the way in which mothers' practices can be understood, by acknowledging the interaction between apparently fixed social expectations, norms and scripts, and the varied circumstances and biographies of those who become mothers. A feminist approach enables exploration of this apparent tension between mother and mothering as a shared social role and practice, and mother and mothering as a personal identity and individual experience.

1.4 Holistic portraiture and the researcher's place in the discourse

Through a series of interpretive portraits, this thesis highlights the experiences of mothers I met over one year. A key dimension shaping this approach is demonstrated by a quote from Daphne Patai (1988a):

> … ordinary does not mean insignificant. Quite a few of the women whose life stories appear in this book are, in fact, extraordinary human beings. All are significant. … [T]here are no pointless stories. There are only life stories we have not (yet) bothered to consider and whose revelations (including, at times, those of staggering ordinariness) therefore remain hidden from our view (p.1)

The mothers in this thesis are like Patai's participants: hidden from view, ordinary *and* significant. They are generous and articulate, sometimes certain and sometimes unsure. This thesis explores their constructions and practices, in both their 'staggering ordinariness' and their consequent, remarkable significance, revealing a new way to understand homework support's complexities, supplementing current hegemonic ideas of homework as a basic, universal, education tool.

Social science portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) affords in-depth exploration, through individual interpretations which are meaningful in both their local settings and the broader social context. Portraiture supports a feminist approach which, as noted, views individual stories as both highly personal and also indicative of the collective narrative of marginalised groups. As Rodriguez-Dorans and Jacobs (2020) articulate: 'a portrayal of a sole story can be, not only a medium to understand a research phenomenon, but also a valuable research output in itself' (p.619). In this study, I research the mothers as distinct individuals, providing an opportunity to understand how social scripts like mothering and parental involvement operate on individuals, not in isolation, but in concert with their person and personal experiences. Portraiture is thus consistent with my intention to 'tell a

rich, comprehensive, deep story' (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p.26), simultaneously honouring the mothers and producing a new understanding of primary homework support.

Feminist epistemic responsibility suggests I should reflexively occupy 'the same causal plane' as my subjects (Harding, 1992, p.458). I therefore acknowledge my discursive position, integrated into this thesis's discourses as both mother and teacher. Furthermore, prior to this research, and inspiring my focus, for twelve years I led a Further Education programme in which parents (predominantly mothers) from a range of social backgrounds, studied creative, pedagogically-informed ways to support primary children's learning at home. The attendees experienced parental pressures from the current education system, were anxious about their children's futures, and often had fragmented understanding of current educational methods. This made them, by turns, confused by and frustrated with schools. They accepted an idea, gleaned from school requirements and social discourses, that their educational support was important, feeling this as emotional pressure and practical burden. Strongly motivated to help their children, effective educational support was a hidden discourse to which they were both subjected and excluded. Their shared desire to be 'good' mothers, echoes through this thesis.

However, the narrative herein is not only for the mothers who inspired this study or those from whom I gathered data. It also connects to my own story, as mother, teacher, and feminist researcher. Therefore, I offer two personal portraits. In the first, given here, I reflect as teacher and mother, highlighting how my contrasting positional identities within the homework discourse produce different homework

'knowledges' and constructions. In the conclusion, a second portrait demonstrates how biographical experiences (completing this PhD; the Covid pandemic and homeschooling) shape the fluidity of individual perspective. These researcher portraits reflect my methodological choices and positionality, but are also acts of solidarity and reciprocity with the mother-participants.

1.4.1 A SELF-PORTRAIT OF MATERNAL HOMEWORK SUPPORT (I)

I "know" about homework – I've been a primary school teacher. I've noticed the differences for pupils who read regularly at home, and those who take home a reading folder, yet rarely return with it. I've also been challenged by the anxious mother of the most capable child in my class, who wanted reading books changed more quickly.

'The books will be changed today, Mrs X'.

'But I'm trying to teach my child to read – and YOU'RE not helping!'

I "know" about homework. I've been a childcare lecturer, supporting mothers keen to help their children but confused about school expectations, and isolated from participation by teacher jargon and changing methods. I have encouraged their involvement in their child's development through fun, creative activities, whilst updating them about current maths and literacy approaches. I have watched a world of educational participation open up and seen the mothers flourish: enthusiastically describing times tables challenges sketched on the patio with chalk, reading treasure hunt games, and a focus on pattern and shape when baking with their child.

I "know" about homework. I've sat beside my daughter as she practices her spellings and learns her sight words. I've called out times table facts over the tea table and listened to her read at bedtime. I've helped her make an Arctic snowscape, an Egyptian pyramid, the Nativity scene; together researching, discussing, creating and labelling. We've giggled together when she was set the essay: Should children have homework? … And plotted our revenge. Her Dad has rarely been involved: 'The trick is, I married a teacher,' I once overheard him say, 'I don't have to do the homework.' With a capable child, these tasks have been completed relatively easily, with limited stress, aside from finding time in busy schedules. As she has grown, primary homework pressure has increased: more frequent, more in-depth, a swifter turn-around. She has begun to complain: 'Mrs Y wants this done by tomorrow; it's not fair!' Sometimes I have felt she's entirely right: what will it achieve to cram ***this*** *into our day? But I've sat beside her, encouraging and guiding, asking questions, prompting, scaffolding, coaxing. Part mother, part teacher. We have done the tasks.* ***I've*** *done my bit.*

Yet … I "know" about homework. I know that spelling lists don't teach children to be spellers. I know that creating 3D structures under parental guidance may not support curriculum learning. I know that times tables 'learnt' can remain underused. I also know my involvement might stretch the gap between my child and her peers. Yes, I know about homework's contradictions, yet still a little voice in my head says, 'You must do it …'

Where is that voice from? What does it mean? Why do I listen?

1.5 THESIS AIMS AND STRUCTURE

This thesis explores: how parental involvement and mothering discourses build a cultural image of the educationally-supportive, 'good' mother; how mothers respond to moralised social scripts which promote their educational involvement; how mothering is implicated in homework support; what happens as homework blurs the home-school boundary; and whether other socio-biographical and psycho-social dimensions also shape mothers' homework supporter role.

I aim to:

- explore the way mothers construct primary homework and their homework support role;
- understand, holistically, what shapes these constructions;
- observe how mothers' homework constructs are visible in their homework interactions;
- and investigate how mothers understand and reflect on their homework support.

There are eight further chapters.

Chapter 2 reviews what is known about primary homework and its current position within the school system, including: classed parental involvement discourses; parent views and practices; and homework as a source of family tension. It highlights homework support as gendered labour which positions mothers as supplementary educators. This provides the warrant for this thesis and its research questions.

Chapter 3 outlines key concepts: mothering and emotion. It establishes mothering as relational and presents key social scripts which formulate *the good schooling mother*. A frame of emotion care work, gendered and moralised emotion norms, emotional investment, and embodied emotion practice is established through which to view the data.

Chapter 4 summarises the study design and methodological approach. The interview, video and stimulated reflection methods are detailed. The holistic analysis approach, founded in Gestalt and Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2013) free association narrative method, is explained. Important ethical considerations are discussed.

Chapters 5 and 6 present five portraits of participants' constructions of homework and their homework support role. Four portraits attend to the principal emotions defining and shaping each mother's approach, and highlight influencing dimensions. The fifth charts a contrasting perspective. Chapter 7 focuses on the embodied, situated and relational dimensions found in the video observations and stimulated reflections.

Chapters 5-7 underpin my argument in Chapter 8 that a process of *motherisation* occurs, whereby individual responses to homework drive its support and mothering practices shape its enactment. The matricentric feminist ideas of maternal empowerment and agency found in homework's motherisation reveal that, despite its universal, school-focused framing, homework is formulated within the home through existing, relational mothering and shaped by mothers' knowledge, experiences and emotion investments.

Chapter 9 demonstrates how these findings answer my research questions, to whom and in what contexts they are relevant, and indicates potential future research. It underlines this thesis's contribution to knowledge as a new way to understand primary homework, in which the relational contexts of mothering and dyadic homework afford the motherisation of this school-framed exercise.

2 LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter reviews the homework literature, outlining contemporary understanding of homework and homework support, highlighting the limited research into mothers' homework views and experiences, thus justifying the central focus of this thesis: what shapes maternal constructions of homework and their homework support role.

2.1 HOMEWORK'S IMPACT: METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGES AND UNCERTAIN CONCLUSIONS

A great deal of homework research has been undertaken. Much spotlights secondary schools (Galloway et al., 2013; Rudman, 2014), or is US-focused (H.Cooper, 1989; H.Cooper et al., 2006; H.Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Falch & Rønning, 2012), and, as noted, there is an emphasis on identifying homework's relationship with academic outcomes (Jerrim et al., 2019; Ozyildirim, 2021; Pfeiffer, 2018), or exploring functional elements using quantitative methods (Holte, 2016; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), the most common aim being to investigate what 'works' about homework?

Homework's academic effectiveness is unclear. The claim, based on Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) results, that Shanghai and other Chinese provinces perform better academically through being homework heavy, is contested: comparisons made *within* rather than *between* countries suggest no consistently significant relationship between time spent on homework and achievement (Chen & Stevenson, 1989); homework appears *less* impactful in Asian countries than in the US (H.Fan et al., 2017); and pupils in homework-heavy systems also spend longer in class

(Falch & Rønning, 2012). Ozyildirim (2021) suggests that homework's different impacts are rooted in complex cultural beliefs and practices. Jerrim et al. (2019), for example, found Spanish homework rarely raises achievement because it traditionally involves repetitive rote learning which has limited effect. Indicative national differences may therefore derive from systemic differences, cultural differences, or a combination of factors, rather than being specifically homework-related.

Scholars have assessed homework's effect by: comparing time spent with academic outcomes (Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Dettmers et al., 2009; Jerrim et al., 2019), measuring the relationship between homework and exam results (H.Cooper, 2007), evaluating how teacher feedback affects homework quality or pupil motivation (Murillo & Martinez-Garrido, 2013; Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2009; Trautwein et al., 2009), and identifying possible additional benefits such as self-regulation, motivation and higher-order cognition (Bembenutty, 2011; Bempechat, 2004; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011).

Methodological difficulties exist, however (H.Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Hallam, 2006). Time may be an inappropriate measure for deciding homework's benefits (Dettmers et al., 2009; Goodall, 2020; Xu & Corno, 2003). Firstly, time spent may not be quality time (Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). Secondly, increased time may derive from higher motivation and academic ability, or conversely from finding homework more challenging (Loveless, 2010). Even Dettmers et al. (2009), who discovered, by comparing international results, a positive association between time on maths homework and achievement, acknowledged that unobserved factors were not accounted for.

Latterly, academic achievement has been linked to desire to succeed rather than homework application (Valle et al., 2016). Indeed, Flunger et al. (2015) suggest *effort* as a proxy for time spent, although interaction of effort with difficulty level, subject, teacher features, or home support is also relevant. Homework *frequency* could be used in place of *time* (Trautwein, 2007). However, identifying directional impact is difficult: homework frequency may improve results, but improved results may increase frequency of homework engagement. A positive relationship between teacher feedback and homework quality may be explained by the feedback's impact on pupil interest, time engaged, motivation, effort, and completion rates (Núñez et al., 2013), all factors which support academic *performance*, suggesting that improvement may be stimulated by teacher behaviour and the instructor-learner relationship, rather than homework itself.

Inconsistent conclusions around homework's effectiveness may also reflect variability in the social settings in which it is both set and carried out, because schools and homes are not homogeneous. Inglis (2005) argues that much homework research overlooks the micro-systems influencing its operation. Teacher, pupil and family characteristics may shape homework outcomes (Falch & Rønning, 2012). Homework may also appear more impactful if measured against teacher grades rather than standardised assessments, since teacher style and grading likely align (Ozyildirim, 2021). A research emphasis on maths homework, and limited consideration of homework quality or type, means findings cannot be generalised when subjects, or tasks, function differently (Hallam & Rogers, 2018). Some nuanced studies do consider homework quality: extension activities and homework linked to in-class learning appear more beneficial than practice or preparation, for example

(Rosário et al., 2015; Rosário et al., 2018). However, failure to account for influencing factors (school ethos, prior attainment, teacher skills, student characteristics, family environment), mean resulting inferences about homework's effectiveness may be overstated (Falch & Rønning, 2012; Hallam & Rogers, 2018).

Meta-analyses reach conflicting conclusions. Homework's effect ranges from limited, to negligible. Earlier meta-analyses find homework least effective, and potentially ineffective, at primary level (H.Cooper, 1989; H.Cooper et al., 2006); later meta-analyses suggest a small impact on primary learning (Baş et al., 2017; H.Fan et al., 2017; Ozyildirim, 2021). There are variations by country and pupil age, and cultural factors may be important (see Jerrim and colleagues' aforementioned 2019 study of homework-heavy Spain). Reasons for varying conclusions are unclear, though could reflect Baş et al., Fan et al., and Ozyildirim's maths/science focus compared with Cooper's general homework focus. Later analyses also reflect a period of increased parental involvement, which plausibly alters how homework is conducted, although parents' impact on academic outcomes is nuanced (see section 2.4). Even positive effects vary by subject, classroom and testing regime, have marginal impacts (Baş et al., 2017), and remain uncertain due to the methodological difficulties highlighted by all meta-analyses. Overall, homework appears more effective at secondary level, perhaps due to complementary practices (ability classes; more independent learning strategies) (H.Cooper, 2007; H.Cooper & Valentine, 2001; Hallam & Rogers, 2018; Ozyildirim, 2021), although this ignores primary parents' support role.

Claims that primary homework is educationally valuable are therefore precarious, although more primary-focused studies, with fewer methodological issues, and a

broader consideration of factors, would be informative (Sharp et al., 2001). Until then, primary homework's impact is regarded as extremely limited (Baş et al., 2017), with key players unequivocal: Harris Cooper (2007) calls homework's impact at primary level 'trivial' (p.37); John Hattie (Montague, 2014) describes homework's effect as 'around zero'; and The Sutton Trust (2011) concludes that it is 'much less effective' than secondary homework.[2]

Homework is a largely unchallenged practice (Zoul, 2020), with rarely advancing pedagogy and resolutely traditional tasks (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020). Goodall (2020) argues that universal statements about its worth prevent research from influencing practice. Explaining apparently stagnated practices, Corno and Xu (2004) posit that teachers favour homework *outcomes* over homework *processes*: being complete and correct is valued over whether learning has taken place. Grinshtain and Harpaz (2021) agree that to improve homework's use, it should be reframed as 'a tool kit, not a target' (p.251). Homework research can be similarly critiqued for focusing heavily on 'proof' of effectiveness through academic results, rather than considering benefits and risks of procedural elements and how learning is (or is not) taking place.

2.2 Homework's purpose: pro-homework and anti-homework stances

The reviewed literature suggests homework's principal function is to improve academic results. However, there are contrasting ideas about its purpose. Epstein (1988) outlines several functions unrelated to educational progress: personal

[2] The Education Endowment Foundation (2021, formerly The Sutton Trust) more recently reframed this as a 'lower impact' than secondary homework, concluding that, despite limited supporting evidence and relatively few primary-focused studies, as a low-cost intervention, it might be worthwhile.

development (responsibility, perseverance, time management), parent-child relations, public relationships (keeping families informed), even punishment (see also Epstein & Van Voorhis, 2001). Other research agrees that homework improves engagement, attitudes, and independent learning strategies (H.Cooper, 2007; Galloway et al., 2013; Ramdass & Zimmerman, 2011). If homework has effects beyond academic results, its value might increase.

However, advantages come with risks. Holte (2016) uses five indicators of childhood to identify homework as a 'threat' to children. It has been related to pupil stress (Hellsten, 2000, cited in Forsberg, 2007; Galloway et al., 2013), family tensions (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Hughes & Greenough, 2008; Hutchison, 2012; Levin et al., 1997) and negative health impacts (M.Holland et al., 2021). Kohn (2006), ultimately favouring homework abolition, recommends improvements by reducing frequency, individualising tasks, consulting with parents, and swapping grading for discussion.

Bruce Jackson (2007) refutes the oft-voiced claim that developing primary homework habits supports effective secondary homework, insisting this ignores the risks when homework's inoculative practices stress compliance and extrinsic motivators. As pupils age, their homework attitudes become more negative (H.Cooper et al., 2000; Hong et al., 2008), while pressures to set primary homework without well-formulated educational reasons, lead to 'busywork' (Bruce, 2007; B.Jackson, 2007). Jackson concludes that teachers should investigate homework in their own contexts, to identify valid tasks for *their* pupils.

Homework's contentious nature prompts a burgeoning anti-homework literature, underpinned by a shift from the functional research thus-far described, towards an

interest in homework as a human experience. Kralovec and Buell (2000) and Kohn (2006) lead an alternative discourse which views homework as problematic for children and families. Citing homework's limited academic value, they question its use, outlining an imbalance between academic gain and individual loss. However, Buyukalan and Altinay (2018) suggest teachers *believe* homework contributes to achievement. This achievement focus, also present in the literature, overlooks homework's broader contextual effects. This argument underpins this thesis, which explores how homework is understood, experienced and practiced as a social exercise, rather than a purely academic task.

Commonly positioned as home-school communication (C.Clarke, 2012; Tam & Chan, 2016; Van Voorhis, 2004), both governments (DCSF, 2007; Hinds, 2018) and teachers (Epstein, 1988; Medwell & Wray, 2019; Peterson et al., 2011) reference homework's role in advancing parental involvement, developing parent-child relations, and meeting parent expectations. Ninety-seven percent of Medwell and Wray's (2019) surveyed teachers believed homework created parent-school partnership, 75% said parents sought homework, and, when ranking homework's purposes, parental involvement came top. Despite this, parents are simultaneously positioned as problematic (Solomon et al., 2002), while a disconnect exists between teacher views and parental experiences (see section 2.5.3). If homework neither raises standards, nor supports meaningful home-school partnership, then it might be dismissed as ineffective, even pointless.

2.3 HOMEWORK AND THE NEOLIBERAL SCHOOL SYSTEM: CHANGING THE HOME-SCHOOL RELATIONSHIP

Establishing that primary homework has limited efficacy and significant surrounding contention, prompts consideration of why it is so embedded in the UK education system. This requires attention to homework's location within the current, dominant educational ideology.

Over the early twenty-first century, education's position in the dominant political ideology has shifted, as nations strive to compete in the globalised knowledge economy. Indicators like PISA, which ranks countries by their 15-year-olds' academic levels, are used to compare education systems, with the findings shaping educational policy. This generates pressure to emulate top-ranked Singapore and China who have homework-heavy education systems. However, critics argue PISA focuses on education's link to economic outputs, is based on assumed universal competencies, does not consider longitudinal factors in educational development, and ignores cultural differences within countries' educational approaches (Eivers, 2010; Goldstein, 2004; Serder & Ideland, 2015). Furthermore, Korea and Finland rank amongst the top countries yet set the least homework (M.Holland et al., 2021).

Responding to this escalation of education's role in global competitiveness, the UK education system has intensified individualism and competition. Ideas have shifted from notions of 'good' to 'effective' education (Biesta, 2009). Goodall (2021) suggests education is now framed by a utilitarian argument: its purpose is to produce future citizens who support the state's needs. Pupils must be socialised to agreed norms of economic independence, competing with peers in an individualised society. This is accompanied by intensified measurement of both pupils and schools:

statutory exams and National Curriculum tests have increased and a 'culture of test preparation' consumes teaching time (Sturman, 2003, p.261; also Braconier, 2012).

Transforming UK education repositions parents as consumers, and schools as service providers (Ball, 2003; McNamara et al., 2000). In this market environment, amid league table pressures, Ofsted grading and attempts to attract parent-customers, schools strive to meet prescribed performance goals (Davies & Bansel, 2007), therefore adopting additional practices to climb ahead of their rivals (Lehner-Mear, 2021). Homework's assumed, if misunderstood, connection with academic achievement, and promotion by government and Ofsted, renders it a tool to support a school's standing. Disquiet about the UK's PISA ranking encourages schools to emphasise homework for countering diminishing standards (Hutchison, 2011). Striving to *prove* high academic standards to parents, homework becomes a visible representation of a school's quality (MacBeath & Turner, 1990), signalling their excellence to the outside world. Thus, homework develops a local, 'political function', as much as an educational or national one (Van Voorhis, 2004, p.208).

With league tables, even at primary level, integrating individual and school success, achievement for the individual drives how schools operate and how children and families experience education. Pupils compete as an outcome of neoliberal government's desire to compete internationally, thus maintaining dominant interests, although this competition is presented as natural human behaviour and the social (and biographical) experiences of individuals are overlooked (Ball, 1993). This may cause particular challenges for working-class pupils, since independent modes of being are a middle-class cultural practice, compared to working-class

families' more interdependent connectedness (Goudeau et al., 2021). Emphasising proscribed skills and qualifications makes some pupils winners while others fail. Deeming failure personal rather than structural, responsibilises parents (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Goodall, 2021).

Previously, the state loomed large in national education systems, as provider and protector, with responsibility shared between national and local government, and teachers positioned as experts. In a complex reframing of school and home, parents now occupy a more significant, though contradictory, position. Their duties in the school system have increased (C.Clarke, 2012; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 2005a), through a downward 'strategy of responsibilisation' (Crozier, 2000, p.6) which transfers accountability from government, to school, to teacher and eventually to parent. At the time of data-gathering, the Education Minister definitively emphasised parents' educational responsibility, writing 'Homework is a staple of school life, and of home life. Parents know this' (Hinds, 2018). Re-locating educational responsibility also shifts problem-solving for social issues onto families (Kinser, 2012), in the process leaving those least able to materially resolve them in greatest need. This politicises parenting itself (Fretwell et al., 2018), identifying it as the crux of society's problems (Dermott, 2012; Gillies, 2008), pathologising parents as irresponsible and at fault (Crozier, 2000; Solomon et al., 2002) and reassigning economic difficulties as personal moral failures (Griffith & Smith, 2005).

Alongside increased responsibility, the education market gives an *illusion* of choice. In reality, parents' involvement in the system is partial and largely school-controlled. They have little accompanying power over how schools operate and their choices are

restricted by systemic structures (McQueen, 2014). However, a discourse of parental choice unsettles teacher-experts' power, even if only theoretically. Teachers respond by managing parental input through a false partnership, which 'exerts control on the individual' to act in particular ways, by underlining parental 'responsibility, involvement and commitment' (Crozier, 1998, p.125). Parents' assigned tasks (homework compliance and oversight) are managerial not educative, supportive but passive (Crozier, 1998; Farrell & Danby, 2015; Griffith & Smith, 2005). They are simultaneously challenged and constrained.

As an example of neoliberal governance, homework systems persuade, incite (Hyndman, 2014) and nudge parental compliance (Fretwell et al., 2018). Expected parental actions introduce behaviour surveillance (Crozier, 1998). Ideals of responsibility, individualism and aspiration even produce parent-to-parent governance, as individuals jostle for moral superiority through their educative actions (Davies & Bansel, 2007). Involved parenting practices are therefore a 'rational response' to ideological, systemic and social emphasis on competitive, educational achievement (Doepke & Zilibotti, 2021, p.8).

2.3.1 Breaking the boundary: the home as classroom

Increasing parental responsibility for children's educational success destabilises the boundary between home and school. Lawrence-Lightfoot (1977) warned that home and school should remain demarcated. A neat, historical division between public and private spheres is unsettled by modern education systems, because responsibility for education encourages parental acceptance of school-designed activities into the home. This is particularly pertinent to homework, a school-instigated and oriented

activity, which takes place outside it. Traditional, binary representations of school and home simplify a sophisticated relationship: a 'highly variable, and frequently shifting interdependence' (Sharistanian, 1987, cited in David et al., 1993, p.21), which produces a 'complex, mainly cyclical, interplay of social forces, with the school buffering and in turns buffeted by the other elements' (Midwinter, in Widlake & MacLeod, 1984, p.i). Assumptions of partnership, and mutual activities like homework, lead to this nexus becoming fluid as the parental role alters. Rather than schools and homes being 'dynamically interactive spheres which both influence, and are influenced by each other' (Reay, 1998, p.64), schools 'colonise' families, with practices moving in a one-way direction into the home (Edwards & Warin, 1999; Keogh, 1999). Thus, home and family are exploited to the education system's needs (Reay, 1998). Blurring home-school separation allows the educationally 'expert' institution to demand parental involvement, but only in practices the school deems appropriate. Externally held power therefore extends into the home.

Government policy positions the home as a classroom (Vincent, 2000). Petrie (2005) describes 'schoolification', wherein institutional pedagogic practices shape families' daily experiences, such as by encouraging 'school readiness' tasks.[3] With homework introduced as early as age four, this universal UK activity is another schoolification process. Despite serving no domestic or leisure function, homework enters homes legitimately, demanding parent-child attention (Hughes & Greenough, 2008). Indeed, as a 'transplant model', transferring practices to parents (Crozier & Davies, 2007, p.300, after Dale, 1996), homework's 'dominant role' is 'in bringing the school into

[3] Note that schoolification may be culturally specific. Swedish teachers, for example, view home and school practices as separate (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021).

the home context' (Farrell & Danby, 2015, p.264). As 'an assignment to the parents', homework institutionalises family lives (Forsberg, 2007, p.210). Homework tools (reading records, worksheets) 'materialize' the family-school link, 'incarnating school values [and] … invit[ing] parents and children to align with school culture' (Caronia & Colla, 2021, p.26). In advancing school pedagogies into the home, homework 'blurs boundaries between care and education' (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009, p.1592), socialising parents into educational practices. Increasingly, parents adopt cognitive activities for their children (Schaub, 2015). Parent-child reading, for example, changes reading from a leisure to an educational activity (C.Clarke & Comber, 2020). In accepting the task, adopting the support role, and developing a homework environment, the home is turned into a school 'annex', making parents 'agent[s] of the school' (Farrell and Danby, 2015, p.265). By 'reconstitut[ing] home as a pedagogical site where the power of the institution of schooling circulates regularly', homework shapes family life and the experiences of family members (C.Clarke, 2012, p.ii), altering the parent-child relationship according to institutional practices (Lange & Meaney, 2011) and reinforcing educational values like individualism and competition. Focus is often on how home impacts education, yet schools shape homes (Cairney, 2003).

According to Westlund (2004, untranslated PhD thesis, cited in Forsberg, 2007), blurring the home-school boundary causes stress. Intra-familial relationships are distorted when schools, in Foucauldian terms, discipline families to their educational processes (C.Clarke, 2021). The use of homework diaries, for example, surveils families (Zabrowski & Breidenstein, 2011). Homework is a 'directive' not an

'invitation' (Hyndman, 2014, p.208), resulting in private family activities becoming publicly visible (Vincent, 2017).

The extension of school into the notionally private sphere of the family is central in defining homework. It raises significant questions about who controls children's out-of-school lives, and how families experience and negotiate this. Whilst schools instigate homework, families respond to the boundary-crossing and schoolification processes, variously accepting or rejecting these (see Lehner-Mear, 2021). Questions of power and control are fundamental, invoking discourses about: education, what it is and where it takes place; the family, what their educative role is; childhood, how it is experienced and who might shape it; and parenting, what normative behaviours parents acquiesce to and why. Homework practices expose contradictions around these issues, raising questions about how they are conceptualised, experienced and negotiated by individuals.

2.4 The discourse of parental involvement as partnership

As noted, government discourses stress parental involvement in homework. A historic and ongoing emphasis on home-school relations and parental participation underpins this. Parent involvement discourses must therefore be considered.

A large body of literature considers parental involvement (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Driessen, 2021), recognising both direct and indirect effects (Keller et al., 2021). Recent meta-analyses suggest it affects academic achievement, regardless of location or school level, though the effect size is moderate (Ates, 2021; Kim, 2022). However, the literature also indicates negative and null effects (Driessen, 2021). For every positive, a negative effect is identifiable: parental involvement may improve

progress, except where a parent's approach contradicts the teacher's (H.Cooper et al., 2000). Variety in parental involvement typologies make conclusions on its impact challenging (Driessen, 2021).

However, whilst parental involvement *may* have a positive impact, its effect on homework remains contentious (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014). Jeynes (2005), comparing involvement types, suggests homework support is the only practice with no statistically significant impact on achievement. Kim's (2022) second-order meta-analysis revealed limited evidence of homework help's benefits over fifty years of research. The involvement discourse is sometimes critiqued on the grounds that *active* participation has no grand benefits, with parental *interest* (Hallgarten, 2000), or parental *trust* in teachers (Lerkkanen & Pakarinen, 2022) appearing more critical. Parental impact through homework support may therefore be on proximal elements such as attitude to learning, positivity, persistence, and self-belief, rather than on academic development, because the latter is influenced by factors outside parental control (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Warm, sensitive and interested parental involvement may produce better engaged children (Else-Quest et al., 2008; Lowe & Dotterer, 2013), while controlling or instructive behaviours generate negative outcomes (Silinskas et al., 2012), or dependency (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021). The significance of more abstract ideas is supported by meta-analyses, with high expectations (Driessen, 2021; Jeynes, 2018) and academic socialisation (Kim, 2020) suggested as key features of effective involvement. A supportive home environment, then, might be more effective than specific processes promoted by schools and governments. The principle of parental involvement has been used to frame homework as essential, both explicitly in policy, and implicitly in classroom practice

(Forsberg, 2007). Yet this apparently concrete example of 'involvement' may only tacitly support learning *through* ephemeral notions like parent attitudes, home environment or academic socialisation.

Encouraging parental participation has benefits and costs. When involvement increases in one area, time pressures decrease it in others (Robinson et al., 2020). This may be particularly significant in dual worker families, lone adult families, or where limited income focuses parental time and energy elsewhere. Insufficient research focuses on involvement *processes* over involvement *outcomes* (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017) and studies rarely distinguish parental involvement by the motivating stimulus: some parents are consistently involved, some never at all, a third, reactionary group responds to low achievement, poor behaviour, or teacher request (Driessen, 2021). Engagement's impact may therefore vary according to situational factors. Research is particularly limited in relation to homework interactions as a social practice, on which this thesis concentrates.

At primary level, parental involvement is widely advocated. Home environment is routinely identified as impacting children's early development and achievement into primary and even secondary education (Froiland et al., 2012). In the *Effective Provision of Pre-School Education* project, the home environment was found to be more significant for developmental outcomes than parental education, income or occupation. The researchers concluded that 'What parents do is more important than who parents are' (Sylva et al., 2004, p.1). Parental promotion of early literacy skills has 'enduring, pervasive and direct' outcomes (Desforges with Abouchaar, 2003, p.35), and continues to be significant in later reading development (Sénéchal &

Lefevre, 2002). Recognising this, policymakers state: 'The involvement of the family in the learning process and the links between home and school are vital to the success we are seeking in raising standards' (Secretary of State for Education, David Blunket, 1998, cited in Hallgarten, 2000). Parental involvement thus becomes 'a flag we all salute whenever and wherever it is hoisted' (Merttens & Vass, 1993, p.2).

Parental participation has been emphasised since the Plowden Report (Central Advisory Council for England, 1967) encouraged schools to involve parents in their child's education, previously the preserve of the professional educator. Plowden initiated parental responsibilities, although the degree and type of their participation is still debated. Fifty years later, parental involvement remains ambiguously defined (W.Fan & Williams, 2010; Fox & Olsen, 2014; Nye et al., 2006), referred to without clarity by governments and schools.

Epstein (1992, 2018) uses 'overlapping spheres of influence' to illustrate how parental activities and school processes interact. In this theory, teacher practices and parent involvement occur in tandem, in a partnership underpinned by 'complementary roles' (Beveridge, 2004, p.3). According to Epstein and Salinas (2004) and the OECD's 'starting strong' agenda (Farrell & Danby, 2015), early partnership should include home-school communication and collaboration. Later educational success is influenced by 'establish[ing] patterns and relationships that encourage or discourage parents' (Epstein, 1992, p.17).

This raises the question how far, and in what ways, home and school practices integrate. Schools can act as a 'clamp' on family relationships, with the teacher recognising, but leading, parents' educator role, or a 'wedge', inhibiting successful

parent-child interactions (Long, 1986). Epstein (2018; also Jeynes, 2018) points out that teachers are not routinely taught to work effectively with parents. Yet, the Department for Education continues to promote positive parent-teacher relationships and improved school-home communications, as 'mechanisms' for encouraging parental engagement (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011, p.16).

2.4.1 Disempowered parents, false partnership and creating the 'ideal' parent

Although framed as partnership, scholars identify myriad examples of the imbalance in home-school relationships: parental engagement is directed through home-school contracts (Edwards & Alldred, 2000a), yet parents' role is overlooked in the National Curriculum (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021); parents are kept out of decision-making (Beveridge, 2004), yet educational reforms are imposed on parents (Remillard & Jackson, 2006); parental involvement projects take school into the home, but evade parental influence over schools (David, 1993); homework lies within structural decisions about teaching not within parental engagement intentions (Kralovec & Buell, 2000); parents' homework skills are ignored (MacBeath, 2000, cited in Solomon et al., 2002), while teachers assert educational power over families (McNaughton, 1995, cited in Solomon et al., 2002); and subcontracting educational responsibilities harms families with academically struggling children (Dudley-Marling, 2001). Educational policy even defines parental obligations and participation in contentious ways (David et al., 1993; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009), such as applying fines or imprisonment for low attendance. This all suggests that whilst parents must *support* education, academic development is still viewed as the preserve of 'experts'. Parent involvement is a school-centric notion, focusing schools' power over practices

within their orbit. Hallgarten (2000) recommends a shift from this 'command and control' approach to one of 'relational power' (p.2).

Thus, the term 'parental involvement' is contested. Whilst parents' influence on their children's educational outcomes is generally acknowledged and frequently cited, how that might operate or be achieved, and who controls this engagement, is nuanced and debated. Hallgarten (2000), for example, views homework as a coercive practice, which institutionalises parents' behaviour, rather than respectfully harnessing their engagement. Parents, told their involvement is important, feel restricted to practices defined by schools (Dixon & Lewis, 2008). A one-way, instructional process (Edwards & Warin, 1999) makes parents into 'pedagogicalized … surrogate teachers' (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009, p.1592) using professionally-defined, normative expectations. A 'discourse of parental involvement assumes that teachers must teach parents' (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p.181), which Dixon and Lewis (2008) describe as 'authoritarian' (p.47). Teachers expect forms of support that are both explicit actions (homework involvement; a number-rich home environment) and implicit practices (good role modelling; positive attitudes) (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021). Yet when teachers attempt to engage parents, they are unclear what the parent role should entail, have a limited view of what counts as educational support, are quick to criticise (Farkas et al., 1999; Forsberg, 2007; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Xu & Yuan, 2003) and advocate practices that are in tension: vacillating between informal or real-world learning activities, and formal, rote learning (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021). Teachers claiming collaboration alternately position parents as 'first educators' and stigmatise them as lacking (Sims-Schouten, 2016), even framing them as outside the system (Goodall, 2018). Parental involvement practices therefore

disempower parents by demanding a 'matrix of mobilisations and demobilisations' of the family (McNamara et al., 2000, p.473), leaving the parent role 'ill-defined' and 'misunderstood' (Solomon et al., 2002, p.603).

Researchers highlight the potential for parental disempowerment when schools lead the partnership process. Jay et al. (2018) describe how parents find school-centred expectations (such as formal homework) challenging, believing they lack knowledge and receive insufficient guidance, but feel more positive about parent-centred practices which allow them to encourage positive attitudes, learn alongside their child, and engage in everyday educational activities. Similarly, Lawson's (2003) participants recognised school involvement expectations, yet felt greater concern for meeting material needs and securing their children's futures (p.91).

In attempting to overcome a perceived lack, parents are moulded into teacher substitutes. Accordingly, the involved parent adopts formal, teacherly ways, rather than activating their parental disposition, skills, or advantages (Hughes & Greenough, 1997, cited in Edwards & Warin, 1999; MacBeath & Turner, 1990; MacBeath 2000, cited in Solomon et al., 2002). This involvement model produces teacher dominance, with parents taught to support curriculum coverage, focus on performance, and operate as teacher adjuncts; natural home-school distinctions are manipulated and parents adopt school values (de Carvalho, 2004; Dixon & Lewis, 2008; Edwards & Warin, 1999). The skills that involved parents demonstrate are therefore 'expert' defined (Goodall, 2021).

This approach is disempowering. It also assumes particular notions about families, parents, and homes, and how they *ought to* interact with their child's education.

However, homes and families are not homogeneous. Classed (and raced) differences shape how parents interact with school, experience their child's schooling, or conceptualise their educational role (Griffith & Smith, 2005; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Reay, 1998; Vincent, 2017). Yet parental involvement models are not class neutral and contain culturally-bound conceptualisations of 'good' parenting.

Definitions of good parenting align with middle-class practices (de Carvalho, 2001). Expected actions therefore mirror activities prevalent in middle-class homes, reflecting middle-class notions of achievement, ignoring barriers and inequalities which impact less advantaged families (Lareau, 1987; Ulé et al., 2015), and resulting in the idea that low-income parents need organising and teaching by experts (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Lightfoot, 2004; H.V.Smith, 2022). Families which buy educational experiences and opportunities are considered involved, with those who cannot seen as in need of direction (Vincent, 2000). Some parents engage in a pedagogic habitus and school-style literacy practices from early childhood, while others must negotiate expectations when their child begins school (C.Clarke, 2021; Hutchison, 2011). In one US study, disadvantaged parents who accepted the homework support role were denied mandatory textbooks, restricting their ability to help their children; these parents lacked the pedagogic knowledge required, but were also impeded from accessing it (K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005).

Helen Smith (2022) documents how professionals' involvement pedagogies vary by parents' classed location, meaning working- and middle-class parents are encouraged to engage differently. Griffith and Smith (2005) agree that professionals'

communication with parents even alters: *instructing* working-class families and *interacting* with middle-class families. In Calarco's (2020) study, teachers selectively enforced homework rules, appeasing privileged parents while holding working-class families to policy expectations. A parent involvement discourse founded in middle-class practices replicates class advantage for children whose families share the dominant cultural capitals, while divorcing other groups from positive home-school relationships (Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Reay, 1998). Involvement therefore equates to knowledge of educational discourses and associated expectations, to social networks, cultural capitals, lifestyles and parenting approaches which vary between classed positions (Crozier, 2000; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Wilson & Worsley, 2021). '[H]ome learning aligned to the school curriculum is not a general or natural family practice but part of the lifestyle of the schooled social classes' (de Carvalho, 2001, p.117). Emphasis on particular, visible involvement leaves those considered uninvolved, or involved in un-recognised ways, stranded in a hinterland of 'failed' parenting, erecting barriers to genuine involvement by all families, as non-dominant modes of parenting become labelled dysfunctional.

Deficit parenting discourses are powerful. Parents are defined by the economic features of the local area (Griffith & Smith, 2005) or according to their formal qualifications (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Parent-teacher interactions are framed by shared teacher beliefs about particular social groups (A.Brown, 1993), derived from post-Plowden ideas that socio-economic deprivation and parenting styles hold some pupils back (Edwards & David, 1997). Already referenced neoliberal promotion of individual responsibility (section 2.3) dampens teacher appreciation that structural differences impede individual outcomes (Goodall, 2021). Government engagement

interventions, drawing on reviews of poverty, reinforce deficit ideas by targeting 'disadvantaged' parents (Goodall & Vorhaus, 2011, p.17). This 'new name to an old game' replicates 1950s discourses, illusorily dividing parents between those who are supportive, and those who are not (Lightfoot, 2004, p.92).

When teachers expect a particular type of visible, school-situated parent interaction, different ways of supporting a child's education go unseen. Working-class parents' 'silence' or non-action are viewed as disinterest (Schnee & Bose, 2010; Vincent & Martin, 2002). Although marginalised mothers perform 'intense emotional care' for their children (O'Brien, 2007), compensating for disadvantage and marginalisation (Gillies, 2006b), this is rarely acknowledged as complementary education work, because teachers observe 'involvement' using a school-centric lens, focused on narrow ideas about formal learning (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022). Parental involvement, a ubiquitous expectation for the reasons discussed, therefore does more than replicate middle-class preoccupations with academic performance and project a middle-class parenting model (de Carvalho, 2001; Ulé et al., 2015). Ultimately, it treats families inequitably. Family-school relations are already sites of imbalanced power. The dominant parent involvement discourse means some parents are rendered yet more powerless. As a school-designed practice, based on classed assumptions of good parents, homework is embedded in a problematic discourse.

2.4.2 Involvement to engagement: school-centric to parent-centric

Having revealed the powered relations, classed implications, and focus on school demands within parent involvement, scholars have moved to redefine the conversation and promote more equitable home-school relationships, advocating

'parental engagement' as an alternative conceptualisation. A 'parentcentric [sic]' framework would avoid privileging schools' view of 'what counts' as educational support (K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005, pp.67, 53), instead recognising parental practices which support, foster and structure learning in various contexts, thereby encompassing invisible and informal parent support. This 'strengths-based' lens acknowledges parental and community practices and capitals (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022, p.10; also Jacobs & Daniels, 2020). Its advocates frame parents as agential, driving and negotiating participation and making decisions as experts on their child, in a continuum of relational agency, from restricted, school-directed parental involvement to empowered parental engagement (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Keller et al., 2021). Others highlight the importance of parent-practitioner relationships when family practices differ from dominant discourses (Barton et al., 2004). Operating as cultural workers (after Friere, 2005), teachers might adapt homework practices, using language, activities and relationships, to create family-school partnership with non-dominant groups (Baxter & Nolan, 2022). Furthermore, eliminating parental determinism and deficit from the discourse exposes the socio-economic factors shaping engagement (Fretwell, 2021).

However, despite shifts in the academic discourse, parental engagement remains connected to the idea of parents' participating *with schooling* rather than *with learning* (Goodall, 2013). Established explanations within the parental participation literature are school-centric, from the 'culture of poverty' idea (working-class culture values education less); through the 'institutional discrimination' argument (schools do not make working-class families welcome); to the 'institutional differentiation' model (teachers can improve parental engagement) (Lareau, 1987). Each explains

parental participation from the perspective of what schools want. Even a recent Participatory Action Research project which shifted teacher focus from parent involvement (emphasising school learning), to parent participation (recognising informal and community learning), still centred teachers as leaders (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Baxter & Nolan, 2022). However, parent-focused studies can elicit new themes (K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005). This thesis explores how parents engage with learning within the confines of a school-*imposed* activity, exploring how they experience and negotiate it, thus offering a parent-centric understanding of how homework operates.

Acknowledging this debate, this thesis recognises that engagement may occur in hidden, non-school-centric, but individual and *active* ways, distinct from the more *reactive* and compliant mode associated with traditional, school-directed parental involvement, recognising parental 'behavioural intensity' and 'emotional quality' as also potentially relevant (Reeve et al., 2004). This nuanced view of engagement, and its emotional dimensions, matches the conceptual framework I outline in Chapter 3. Conceptualising engagement as active affords analysis and interpretation linked to parental agency within school-restricted homework practices. I therefore adopt scholars' recommended parent-centric focus, despite current participation practices, like homework, appearing wedded to teacher-direction. I am cautious of whether practices have shifted towards parental engagement, suggesting that what 'engagement' looks and feels like for the parent remains unclear. Reay (1998) demanded that research consider schools and homes as 'dynamically interactive spheres which both influence, and are influenced by each other' (p.64). Although

recognising parents' limited ability to change school practices formally, this parent-centric study may unveil elements of agency within their participation.

2.5 Parents and homework

A branch of homework research considers the social aspects or specific contexts homework takes place in and asks what different actors in the process think of homework. As outlined already, teachers often attribute homework to parental expectations (Fitzmaurice et al., 2020; Medwell & Wray, 2019). Beyond teacher assumptions, I consider what else is known about parent views.

2.5.1 Parent views and parent responsibility

Some researchers ask parents for their homework views (McGregor & Knoll, 2015). This literature gives a partial view of parent homework perspectives. Partial, because parental involvement discourses and the good parent model (section 2.4), in combination with neoliberal responsibilisation and an individualised, competitive school system (section 2.3), mean these views must be understood within the context which produces them. Parents giving homework views talk in clichés (Peterson et al., 2011), aligning their responses with current discourses (Forsberg, 2007), suggesting their perspective is socially modified and culturally-specific. UK parents might be expected to demonstrate supportive views, and accept personal responsibility, because of homework's current positioning as a core educational and parental practice (section 1.1). However, identifying parent views may also signal influencing factors shaping their constructions and practices.

Parents 'orient to homework as their prime responsibility' (Farrell & Danby, 2015, p.261), viewing it as a 'family duty' which invokes both child and parent

accountability (Forsberg, 2007, p.214). Homework responsibility is seen as a natural obligation (Lehner-Mear, 2021), and unavoidable part of parenting young children (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Over half of Solomon et al.'s (2002) parent interviewees described secondary homework help as within their parenting identity, feeling emotionally committed to it through parent-child connection.

Parents view homework as important emblematically, as a way to identify a school's quality, to discern their child's progress and to stay connected with school (Corno & Xu, 2004; Fox, 2016; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021; Xu & Yuan, 2003). A 'veneer of cordiality' between parents and teachers (Farkas et al., 1999) reveals a line of 'no assertiveness', beyond which parents do not question professional practices (Hallgarten, 2000). They tend to comply with school requests, meaning formal literacy is emphasised over other communication modes (Dixon & Lewis, 2008) and teachers' rights to set homework go unquestioned (Forsberg, 2007, 2009). Whilst negative comments usually reflect heavy homework loads (Kukk et al., 2015), public questioning of homework's validity is interpreted as a challenge to teacher professionalism, breaches normative parental support and raises strong criticism from other parents (Lehner-Mear, 2021).

Pro-homework beliefs generally align with teacher attitudes (Xu & Yuan, 2003), although positivity is lower for parents of younger pupils (Cameron & Bartel, 2008; Hughes & Greenough, 2002; Warton, 1998). Ninety-eight percent of Irish parents believe homework has value (J.Jackson & Harbison, 2014). In the US, 61% of parents rate homework *quantity* good or excellent, compared to 9% rating it poor; for *quality* the rates are 67% and 5% respectively (Loveless, 2014). Parents attribute many

advantages and purposes to homework (M.Holland et al., 2021; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Xu & Yuan, 2003), not all of which are academic (Cunha et al., 2015; Warton, 1998). Homework is favoured for being an educational activity, and education is considered important (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995; Levin et al., 1997), especially for struggling children (Dudley-Marling, 2003). Supplementary homework is even used to remedy supposed school deficiencies when parent-teacher pedagogic beliefs differ (de Abreu & Cline, 2005; Wadham et al., 2020).

Homework is perceived as a joint teacher-parent effort (Forsberg, 2009; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Levin et al., 1997). An assumed school-home division of labour leads parents to accept an apparently important overseeing and supplementary position (Lareau, 1989), although some parents remain confused about homework processes and their intended role (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021). Reading homework, and an associated parental support role, are almost universally endorsed, although considered so fundamental they are not always viewed as 'homework'; maths tasks, contrastingly, are considered homework, and are supported because 'homework is a pragmatic necessity' (Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021, p.14). Some parents call for more homework (Fox, 2016; Hughes & Greenough, 2002; Xu & Yuan, 2003).

Such perspectives mean that even when parents are ambivalent about homework's advantages, they still believe it should be set and completed (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021). Half of Warton's (1998) Year 2 mothers disagreed with homework yet still consistently supported it, framing it as preparation for secondary school. McGregor and Knoll's (2015) and Hughes and Greenough's (2002) primary parents all voiced uncertain or ambiguous viewpoints,

whilst simultaneously assisting their child. Contradictory perspectives were prevalent amongst homework views shared on social networking sites (Lehner-Mear, 2021).

Claiming parents *want* homework misunderstands what drives pro-homework statements (Corno, 1996). Parents' real ambition, Corno argues, is school success, and homework is bound to shared beliefs about how success is achieved. As demonstrated, homework, embedded as a core educational and parental practice, is promoted by contemporary UK governments and schools. This likely influences parents' assumptions about homework's critical role in learning, *and* their own role in achieving homework success, despite research which challenges these conclusions. A 'climate of pressure to succeed' (Solomon et al., 2002, p.620) and 'a sense of urgency that what happen[s] in the present … influence[s] their child's chance at a successful life' (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015, p.79), makes homework a significant activity. The neoliberal school values already discussed, which responsibilise parents, are thus implicated in parent homework views.

Generalised statements about parent views assume homogeneity in both parents and the homework practices they experience. Yet homework is characterised by school and family 'diversity and heterogeneity' (Hughes & Greenough, 2002, p.9). This means parent sentiments must be understood within their situated experience. Thus, parent agreement with homework is a tentative statement, and localised studies may offer valuable supplementary explanation. Underexplored in the literature is how *individual* parents *make sense of* and *construct* homework. This project contributes by investigating parent perspectives in-depth, going beyond surface 'views' to reveal the dimensions *shaping* beliefs and practices.

2.5.2 PARENT PRACTICES

Despite largely supporting homework, parent heterogeneity means studies find differences in their homework practices. Some parents take a functional approach, focused on children's lesser responsibility, or time management skills, tending to simple checking, monitoring (Forsberg, 2007), or devising processes which aid completion (Walker et al., 2004). Such task-focused parents structure their involvement towards 'deliver[ing] results' (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021, p.249).[4] Struggling children receive more involvement (Hoglund et al., 2015), including monitoring, nagging (Dudley-Marling, 2003), or prolonged periods focused on getting homework 'done' (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). Busy parents sometimes take over the task (Baranovich et al., 2019). Contrastingly, some parents, valuing 'productive struggle', avoid overt support (Vazquez et al., 2020).

A more child-centred approach related to the established parent-child relationship engenders sustained help, availability and support (MacBeath & Turner, 1990). Assistance behaviours include answering questions, breaking tasks into manageable parts, scaffolding work, or modelling strategies (Walker et al., 2004, provide a detailed breakdown of parent approaches). Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) identify child-centred behaviours based on emotion, such as praise or reward, which reflect knowledge of the child or learning process, and may match child-rearing practices. Even monitoring behaviours, they suggest, can include ascertaining understanding.

A substantial literature explores types of parental involvement in education, indicating multiple differences motivated by complex factors (Wingard & Forsberg,

[4] A possible echo of teacher focus on outcome over process (Corno and Xu, 2004).

2009). Models which predict involvement types suggest social context and interpersonal relationships are key (C.Green et al., 2007). Involvement types have been linked to parent and child characteristics (Giallo et al., 2013), established family behaviours (McDermott et al., 1984), child's age (Sharp et al., 2001), child expectations or engagement in school (Dotterer & Wehrspann, 2016; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009), parents' social networks (Sheldon, 2002), and parent perceptions of their role (Corno, 1996; C.Green et al., 2007). If self-perception influences actions, then parents' own experiences of homework become significant (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Psycho-social or biographical factors may, therefore, shape homework support.

Li and Hamlin (2019) suggest that homework help is a complex phenomenon with interacting dimensions. Homework support behaviours are variously categorised into: autonomy support, direct involvement, distraction elimination, and interference (H.Cooper et al., 2000); autonomy support, direct involvement and structural provisions (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989); dependent help-giving, autonomic help-giving and avoidance of help-giving (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021); or establishing homework structures, aiming to teach, and developing learning strategies (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). Lorenz and Wild (2007, cited in Hallam & Rogers, 2018) also highlight parental emotional involvement, a dimension of this thesis. Thus, parental support behaviours are variously defined.

Consequences from parents' homework support appear contradictory (Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021), with different behaviours having different effects. Monitoring is negatively associated with achievement (Patall et al., 2008), or at best

has insignificant impact at primary level (Jeynes, 2005). Actions focused on academic performance appear less beneficial than those which develop autonomy (Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021). Positive outcomes from autonomy development include self-regulation (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989), improved focus (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017), and positive homework emotions (Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2022). These factors then benefit reading progress (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017), mastery skill acquisition (Goodall, 2020; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021) and homework completion (Valdés-Cuervo et al., 2022). Thus, parents whose homework behaviours encourage independence may advance their children's skills more. However, autonomy is promoted less with younger primary pupils (Safont-Mottay et al., 2009).

Frequent assistance is associated with negative outcomes (Moroni et al., 2015), although direct involvement *can* be beneficial, if demonstrating interest in, or knowledge about the homework, or supporting more actively, though *active* is distinguished here from *controlling*, which is associated with lower performance (Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Direct involvement with primary homework is associated with school achievement, although structural provision (rules; guidelines) appears less helpful (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). However, Núñez et al. (2021) recently found high parental involvement, whether supportive *or* controlling, resulted in better motivation and cognitive engagement. Grinshtain and Harpaz (2021) argue that parental help-giving is a continuum from dependency-producing to autonomy-producing behaviours. As a 'double-edged sword' (Trautwein & Lüdtke, 2009, p.25), with 'multifaceted impact[s]' (Tam & Chan, 2009, p.84), some homework support is therefore likely to be beneficial and some detrimental.

Parents are motivated for their child's success (Corno, 1996; Farkas et al., 1999; MacBeath & Turner, 1990). However, unique understanding of their child tempers parents' support behaviours, despite often describing their involvement using school-framed ideas about performance (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995). Constant comparison against perceived educational requirements leads to contradiction in the parent support role. They must balance autonomy-producing practices previously identified as helpful, with judgements of their child against given standards. This may prompt the controlled monitoring implicated as problematic. This contradictory position is sustained by ideas about parental responsibility.

Studies suggest parents believe their homework role is important to their child's success (D.Clark, 2020; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001), willingly engage with complex subjects (Darragh & Franke, 2021), and become involved when they think teachers 'invite' and 'value' this (Walker et al., 2004, p.1). Teacher encouragement may even overcome socio-economic differences in engagement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001). However, if educators are selective in encouraging participation, or, as previously noted, promote different types of involvement, inequalities result (H.V.Smith, 2022). Furthermore, C.Green et al. (2007) note that teacher invitations increase *home* involvement, not *school* involvement. Indeed, engagement *with learning itself*, rather than with school practices, is the critical factor (Goodall, 2020), meaning reading together is more effective than participation in home-school partnership programmes (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; Jeynes, 2005). This is intriguing in the homework context, since homework affords parental engagement *with learning*, whilst being a school-led activity. This suggests focusing on the type of support arising within the homework context may be enlightening.

Parents appear mostly satisfied with their level of educational participation (D.Clark, 2020; Kiewra et al., 2009). Clark posits this is partly because parents accept their central role, and they might prefer success to be achieved without their involvement. Indeed, when teaching quality rises, parental involvement also increases, suggesting parents believe home-school inputs are mutually supportive (Carneiro et al., 2022). Grinshtain and Harpaz (2021) speculate that parents are motivated by both extrinsic and intrinsic factors (teacher demands; desire to be good parents). Complex parental justifications connect to both knowledge of their child and parental involvement expectations, and are not a simplistic belief in homework as academically effective. Parent views have been described as 'internally contradictory': more involved than their own parents were, but still fearing their support is insufficient; striving for high achievement, yet simultaneously concerned about homework stress (Farkas et al., 1999, p.27).

Despite a focus on parental support, research rarely considers *how* parents make sense of homework and homework expectations, how they construct their responses, and what shapes their decisions and practices. Schnee and Bose (2010) discovered parental agency in the type of support adopted, both regarding explicit actions, and in their approach to child independence versus parental responsibility. Differences may be cultural: whilst US and Italian parents both monitor homework, Italian parents, prioritising childhood freedom, permit greater autonomy (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015); in Shanghai, parental support for out-of-school learning reflects both class and culture (Zhang, 2020). These cases suggest that local examinations of parental homework support are important.

Few studies use video to investigate situated homework support. Exceptions include Baranovich et al. (2019), Caronia & Colla (2021), Doctoroff and Arnold (2017), Else-Quest et al. (2008), Forsberg (2007), Hughes and Greenough (2008), Hutchison (2012), Kremer-Sadlik and Fatigante (2015) and Wingard and Forsberg (2009). Several captured homework interactions within broader family behaviour studies, or used secondary data, and not all were qualitatively-analysed. Despite homework's framing as a substantive educational tool and core parental responsibility, in filmed homework encounters Wingard and Forsberg (2009) found parents conducted homework alongside other chores: support was not a 'pedagogical practice', but just one more task within busy family schedules (p.1592). This prompts consideration of what shapes parental homework interactions, both broadly and 'in the moment'. Prior focus on interview and survey studies and limited qualitative video research, means much remains to be understood about homework interactions, their prompts, and the parental behaviours situated therein.

2.5.3 HOMEWORK CONFLICT

That parents broadly agree with homework, and actively support it, does not make their engagement straightforward. Homework responsibility causes difficulties for lone parents or where both work fulltime. Despite apparent desire for homework, and even calls for more homework, challenges arise from parents' own time pressures and responsibilities (Farkas et al., 1999; Xu & Yuan, 2003). A quarter of parents surveyed by both Kiewra et al. (2009) and Holland et al. (2021) believed homework negatively impacts families; between a quarter and a third of mothers discussing homework on social networking sites agreed (Lehner-Mear, 2021). Declining family time was also a key theme in Cameron and Bartel's (2008) study.

More unusual than studies of homework's functionality are those exploring it as a lived experience. The characterisation of primary homework in this thesis acknowledges the family's support role. The relationship within which homework takes place is thus important. This framing recognises the potential for tension between *school-directed* homework, and *family-enacted* homework. Notable in the literature considering homework's social context is its prevalence as a source of stress and friction. Homework is reported as a 'significant arena for conflict' (Goodall, 2020, p.3), the 'vortex where teacher complaints and parental pressures seem to converge' (Farkas et al., 1999, p.32), and a daily 'nightmare', particularly for disadvantaged families (Symeou, 2009, p.82). Primary level homework is regularly documented as stressful or negative (Hughes & Greenough, 2008; Hutchison, 2012; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Levin et al., 1997) and an Ofsted-commissioned review recognised homework as a cause of family conflict (Sharp et al., 2001). In the US, 50% of parents say homework causes arguments involving yelling or tears, and 49% have walked away from stressful homework interactions (Farkas et al., 1999). Considering homework engages 98% of UK children (Falch & Rønning, 2012; Hansen et al., 2010), these proportions are considerable.

As positive parent-child relationships are 'protective factors' against academic pressures (Liao et al., 2021, p.1162), homework practices which result in negative family interactions are troubling. Strain occurs when parents fail to explain homework's purpose, position their child as inadequate, direct and control with rules not negotiations (Carmichael & MacDonald, 2016; Forsberg, 2007; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995), or correct and constrain primary-aged children (Safont-Mottay et al., 2009). Lange and Meaney (2011) suggest homework confounds family interactions

by mimicking a teacher-pupil relationship. They also identify conflict when procedural homework limits children's agency, or when tasks make them both mediator (explaining to parents) and medium (in need of help). Furthermore, ambiguous expectations produce three-way, parent-child-teacher tensions (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021).

Homework stress escalates when homework quantity increases or when parental self-belief declines (Gouyan, described in Safont-Mottay et al., 2009; Pressman et al., 2015). If parent and child lose confidence in their shared ability to tackle homework, negative interactions follow (Goodall & Johnston-Wilder, 2015). Tensions heighten further when older primary children begin to doubt homework's value just as, conversely, their parents become more committed (Safont-Mottay et al., 2009). Parental disenfranchisement from homework processes inhibits their desire to be 'good' (Solomon et al., 2002). Costs to the parent-child relationship and parents' sense of efficacy, might therefore outweigh educational benefits. Non-specialist parents, having only their personal school experience to draw on, can be left distressed if their support fails (Lange & Meaney, 2011) while parents of struggling pupils feel penalised because their children do not 'fit' (Dudley-Marling, 2003). Parents describe extreme experiences: fights, arguments, damaged or broken parent-child relationships (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Lehner-Mear, 2021), and tensions which transfer to other family members (Symeou, 2009). As the home context affords a range of resistance mechanisms rarely demonstrated at school (shouting, crying, walking away; Lange & Meaney, 2011), encounters can be highly challenging.

Explanations vary for the stress homework triggers: blurring the home-school boundary, a key aspect of how homework operates (section 2.3.1), may cause strain (Westlund, 2004, cited in Forsberg, 2007); homework may unsettle established family micro-systems (Inglis, 2005); or, in psychologically-taxing parents, reserves of emotional labour are required which are held differently between families (Hutchison, 2012; Xu & Yuan, 1998). Walker et al. (2004) suggest teachers should help parents develop skills to support children's emotional responses to homework. However, parents already use both emotion-focused and problem-focused strategies to manage homework stress (McGregor & Knoll, 2015).

Homework policy and standard homework debates assume a zero effect on its protagonists' relationships (Solomon et al., 2002), rarely considering the emotional costs highlighted. In importing school struggles into the home, homework creates 'dysfunctional identities' within some families (Dudley-Marling, 2003, p.3), raising questions about why parents continue to negotiate stressful and damaging homework, particularly given its debatable educational benefit.

The parent-child homework interaction and relationship dynamics within this practice are under-researched (Solomon et al., 2002). Although parent-focused studies adopt qualitative approaches more than research into homework's effectiveness does, many studies are thematically-analysed interviews or surveys of parent 'views' with limited attention to how the support role is constructed and experienced. A more holistic appreciation of parent experiences is needed, to accompany the few observational studies which examine parent practices.

2.6 MOTHERS AS SUPPLEMENTARY EDUCATORS AND MATERNAL HOMEWORK LABOUR

Current educational practices and dominant parenting discourses blur the family-school boundary. However, creating an idealised 'good parent', obscures that educational support in families frequently relies specifically on maternal labour, thereby de-gendering a highly gendered set of practices. Good parenting commonly entails *good mothering*.

Although parental involvement policies imply both maternal and paternal participation (Dudley-Marling, 2001), significant maternal involvement with schools and children's education is widely established (David et al., 1997; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998; D.Smith, 1987). Conceptualisations of mothering (discussed further in Chapter 3) reinforce a mothers-as-educators discourse with normative practices. Mothers consistently undertake educational expectations because this discourse 'seep[s] into their lives as they engage with schooling' (Karnad-Jani, 2021, p.170; see also Hutchison 2012).

Schools promote an idealised family: mothers are positioned as 'at home' teachers with assumed pedagogic knowledge (C.Clarke, 2021, p.12; Dudley-Marling, 2003), and parents appear to share this ideal (Farkas et al., 1999). Mothering ideologies assume mothers' willingness to forefront educational development (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989), judge mothers who do not (Prout, 1988), and create mothering as a pedagogic encounter. A gendered family-school relationship leaves mothers playing the main role.

> Within a majority of families there was a clear division of labour in which children's schooling was seen as primarily the mother's responsibility. … Intense daily work with children was very much the province of the mother (Reay, 2005b, p.26)

In Reay's study (above), she contrasts fathers' occasional, 'at a distance' help, with mothers' 'finger on the pulse' of school expectations (p.26). Elsewhere, fathers' educational work is described as 'marginal' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.98) or 'peripheral' (Lareau, 1989, p.85): supportive but not participatory. Lareau suggests middle-class mothers even organise and monitor fathers' involvement.

Women's 'second shift' in the home is widely referenced (Hochschild & Machung, 2012). Fathers perform significantly less family labour than mothers (A.Gregory & Milner, 2008; O'Brien, 2005), even in dual earner households (Selfinger, 2021) and even when the mother is principal or sole earner (Raley et al., 2012). Recent figures suggest fathers do 37% of family childcare hours, spending 60% of the time on childcare that mothers do (Ellingsæter et al., 2021). Mothers are assumed to have greater childcare skills, such as listening and patience (Buscatto, 2011). They demonstrate explicitly pedagogic and child-centred aims, while fathers frame their more 'passive' childrearing as 'natural' (Forsberg, 2009, p.37). Even when fathers describe themselves as 'involved', they do far less educational work, explaining their lower participation through a breadwinner discourse or by constructing mothers as educational gatekeepers (Gottzén, 2010). In Pancsofar et al.'s (2019) study, fathers presented their employment as a form of indirect educational support, justifying their imbalanced participation using mothers' greater expertise, and framing schools

as more welcoming of maternal involvement. Mothers' greater input is also referenced in child interviews, where participants from both two-parent and lone parent families indicate preference for maternal support (Edwards & Alldred, 2000b). With fathers still deferring to mothers as the parent with overall responsibility, involved fatherhood remains a cultural 'ideal', not a confirmed practice (Gottzén, 2010).

In contrast, mothers engage in 'complementary educational work', an array of practical tasks which uphold how schools function (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.65; Reay, 1998): ensuring rested children, ready to learn, arrive on time; or organising afterschool childcare. Mothers are more likely to have both daily teacher contact (Karnad-Jani, 2021; Reay, 2005b) and the first after-school interaction with the child (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009), though pandemic era increases in home-working may change this. Mothers extend basic educational work, by complementing and supplementing school provision, in an 'educational project' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.77) which burdens their after-work lives and engulfs their mothering in 'invisible labour' (Hutchison, 2012, p.195; Reay, 1998). This 'fourth shift' does more than intensify mothers' domestic second shift: it modifies maternal practices (Ulrich, 1989, cited in David, 1993) and contributes to schoolification.

David et al. (1997) identify a maternal preoccupation with regular, school-oriented decision-making. This 'mental energy' for daily educative tasks is similar across social classes (Reay, 2005b, p.26), and sees mothers organising themselves in response to teacher requirements (Karnad-Jani, 2021). These are the institutional 'relations of ruling' Dorothy Smith (1987) describes, which produce 'local practices of translocally

organized social relations' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.34), in this case standardising mothering through family-school relationships. In advancing activities like homework, schools localise wider social relations within individual practices, mediating mothers' behaviours according to normative expectations without affording them influence over educational processes (Karnad-Jani, 2021). A strong moral and social imperative to engage with children's education restricts mothers' resistance (Ribbens-McCarthy with Kirkpatrick, 2005). '[T]o flout *good mothering* expectations is to behave unnaturally, selfishly, even damagingly towards your child' (Lehner-Mear, 2021, p.288). Thus, mothers mobilise according to school demands through the imbalanced home-school relationship previously outlined (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1977). The mother-as-supplementary-educator is underpinned by relations of ruling that go beyond local contexts. Small-scale studies are therefore both locally significant *and* reveal how dominant discourses impact individuals.

The previously discussed individualisation of education within government and school discourses, creates homework as a lone, self-disciplined endeavour. Mothers' supplementary labour is therefore masked (Hutchison, 2006, 2012). However, homework as mothers' work is variously indicated: maternal support has increased in the twenty-first century (Mandell & Sweet, 2004); substantially more mothers help with homework 'often' while more fathers 'almost never' help (Rønning, 2008; see also Turtulla & Lopar, 2022); mothers support homework whether the child lives with one or both parents (Edwards & Alldred, 2000a; Head, 2020), assuming homework as their principal responsibility (Warton, 1998); and 95% of mothers assist young children's homework (Safont-Mottay et al., 2009, citing Gouyan's 2004 figures). Homework's impact on families therefore rests substantially on maternal time and

labour. However, as hidden homework workers, mothers' experiences are under-researched.

Although little is known about *how* mothers support homework, some studies consider their impact. Maternal involvement correlates with achievement, teacher-rated competence and positive behaviour more than paternal involvement does (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). A reciprocal relationship exists between mothers' autonomy-promoting or supportive behaviours and both their child's persistence levels (Viljaranta et al., 2018) and their achievement (Doctoroff & Arnold, 2017; Tunkkari et al., 2021), although responsiveness to children's progress means when difficulties or poor effort are perceived, mothers adopt more intrusive or controlling behaviours (Tunkkari et al., 2022). Yet, even intrusive maternal support may increase achievement over time (Pomerantz & Eaton, 2001). Mothers demonstrate observation and diagnosis of need during homework encounters, although time pressures limit their support (Baranovich et al., 2019), while their positivity shapes homework outcomes (Else-Quest et al., 2008). Nuances in support type may explain contradictions with studies which find no academic impact for maternal input (Levin et al., 1997) or those claiming slower academic development when mothers over-support (Silinskas et al., 2015; the meaning of this is unclear: does increased support restrict progress, or is already limited progress simply not resolved by increased support?). Despite varied conclusions, maternal support appears particular and this warrants further investigation.

2.6.1 MATERNAL VIEWS AND EXPERIENCES

Although homework specifically impacts them, mothers lack homework power, being 'outside-the-circle' of educational policy-making (Karnad-Jani, 2021, p.170). Knowledge about their perspectives is correspondingly limited. Online homework discussions suggest various maternal reactions to homework's encroachment into family life. Some mothers permit homework across the home-school boundary, acquiescing to its pressures whatever their fundamental view, while others resist it (see *figure 1* in Lehner-Mear, 2021, p.295). There may be various provocations to mothers' engagement. Hutchison (2012) suggests mothers position homework as 'a joint performance …. a measure both of [their] effectiveness and of their love for their children' (p.203-4). Homework is also valued as a way to engage with children productively, an opportunity to follow school progress, or as family time (Fox, 2016). These ideas demonstrate homework's social role and worth to mothers, beyond its educational purpose.

Yet mothers also believe their support has academic value (Levin et al., 1997). In a Department for Education and Skills survey, 80% of mothers thought their help was beneficial (Moon & Ivins, 2004). They increase involvement when their child struggles (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Levin et al., 1997; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021), are more likely than fathers to respond to *need* than performance (Silinskas et al., 2012), and switch between new and traditional methods, according to their child's ability (McMullen & de Abreu, 2011). Mothers' decision-making, to support reading more than maths, has been used to infer they believe this homework is more important (Chen & Stevenson, 1989). However, due to their higher overall input, they also assist maths more than fathers (Deringöl, 2022).

Hutchison (2012) reveals that to support homework, emotional capital, manifest as composure, is needed alongside pedagogic knowledge. Without this, homework becomes ineffective and infused with emotional strain (see also Levin et al., 1997). Bartley and Ingram (2018) suggest fathers demonstrate greater emotional calm when supporting maths (note: these findings were elicited through survey not observation, so may be shaped by how mothers and fathers reflect on, or describe, their emotions), although where both parents willingly assist with maths, positive strategies are mutually demonstrated. In the limited research highlighting maternal experiences, conflict stories are common, denting the pleasure mothers describe from time with their children (Dudley-Marling, 2001; Else-Quest et al., 2008; Lehner-Mear, 2021). A 'vicious circle' of rising tensions means mother and child jointly suffer, challenging mothers' aforementioned belief that their support is beneficial (Levin et al., 1997, p.224).

Mothers suffer more from homework stress than fathers, even if both parents conduct support (Dudley-Marling, 2001), particularly if they have younger children (Ulich 1989, cited in Ribbens, 1993). Feeling 'permeated by anxiety', they still insist homework is necessary (Hutchison, 2012, p.210). Dudley-Marling (2001) describes long-lasting negative impacts including loss of sleep and friction which affects all family members, although mothers worry most about their mother-child relationship, attributing homework difficulties to personal failure and demonstrating self-derision for irresolvable problems. Maternal homework emotions may even impact children's educational development (Else-Quest et al., 2008). Homework support therefore has both emotional benefits and costs to mothers, the balance of

which varies (Levin et al., 1997). Mothers' homework emotions matter. In Chapter 3, I outline emotion as a significant concept for this thesis.

Although little is known about what shapes mothers' experiences, responses and actions, their role *is* different to fathers'. 'What clearly set mothers apart from fathers …' wrote Dudley-Marling (2001), 'was that the mothers I interviewed often felt personally responsible for their children's struggles at school' (p.191). This is not *only* because mothers undertake more educational support than fathers, but because they also accept more management of this care (Gimenez-Nadal & Sevilla, 2016). Homework responsibility is thus a gendered practice. Many mothers maintain 'an ideology of good mothering which expects maternal support for homework' (Lehner-Mear, 2021, p.285). This strands mothers within cultural assumptions about ideal mothering (see Chapter 3), against which they are judged (Dudley-Marling, 2001). The homework 'arena' therefore 'intensifies gendered assumptions regarding mothers' responsibilities for their children's education … activat[ing] a range of insecurities regarding their own identities as mothers' (Hutchison, 2012, p.210). Ignoring this, limits understanding of homework's impact on families.

Homework entraps mothers. Many 'accept' this role, yet what informs their decisions and behaviours remains unclear. According to Solomon et al. (2002), 'homework help is an amalgam of different beliefs, concerns and values' (p.202). Further investigation is needed which highlights gender, because 'mothers do not absorb the meanings of their work and roles unreflexively, but are active in creating, constructing and responding to the meanings constructed by the social conditions in which they live' (David et al., 1993, pp.209-210). Herein lies the kernel of this thesis.

Apparently essential, socially expected, and widespread homework support is constructed through mothers' experiences, social conditions and knowledges. What shapes this and the effect different constructions have on mothers' consequent behaviours, remains unclear.

2.7 Classed homework labour

Gendered homework labour may also be classed. Class itself is gendered, with descriptions of less privileged families focusing on 'uncaring, ignorant mothers' (Gillies, 2006b, p.282), while public, policy and school discourses often position uninvolved parents as apathetic and personally at fault (Vincent & Martin, 2002). Ndebele's (2018) educators, for example, acknowledged parents' educational support, but claimed lower SES families engaged less. Likewise, Griffith and Smith (2005) found teachers in working-class communities perceived a lack of parental interest, did not actively engage parents, and adjusted their expectations downwards to match assumed lower ambition.

Yet, although higher educated mothers and upper-middle-class families may conduct a wider range of developmentally-enhancing activities (Gimenez-Nadal & Sevilla, 2016; Sheldon, 2002), and maternal education remains strongly related to literacy and language development (Hartas, 2011), economic advantage, not cultural differences, differentiates participative childcare (Ellingsæter et al., 2021). Low primary maths achievement, for example, is significantly explained by socio-economic restrictions which limit time and monetary investments in activities and resources (Uddin, 2022). As demonstrated, school involvement expectations widen class differences by orienting towards dual earner, middle-class, and capital rich

families (C.Clarke, 2021; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 1987, 1989; Reay, 1998), with middle-class parenting behaviours aligning both with school culture and with specific educational activities. Having 'learned the ideological practices co-ordinating home-school relations' (D.Smith, 1987, p.172), middle-class mothers pursue family-school *interconnectedness*, in contrast to working-class mothers' family-school *separation* (Lareau, 1989). Indeed, the middle-class family's organisation 'creates the conditions under which women's work is made available to support their children's schooling' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.98) in ways which may not be possible in working-class homes.

Class advantage is promoted using intellectual, emotional, social, material and time-related capitals (Hutchison, 2012). Middle-class families use this involvement to advance their child ahead of others (Landeros, 2011; Reay, 2005a; Zhang, 2020). Ball (2003) ties this to moralised parenting: the middle-class 'represent and perform themselves as moral subjects … [K]ey class resources are brought into play and issues of identity, responsibility and aspiration are up front' (p.3). By advancing educational aspiration, and embracing school-promoted activities like homework, middle-class mothers demonstrate their respectable identity, because educational success is key (Reay, 2000). Each additional level of a mother's own educational success increases her aspiration for her offspring (Sosu, 2014), thus explaining middle-class mothers' competitive educational involvement (Landeros, 2011).

However, though better prepared to engage with school expectations (Golden & Erdreich, 2014), by emphasising their educational role, middle-class mothers risk compromising their children's wellbeing (Reay, 2000) and increasing their own strain,

with higher-educated mothers reporting greater stress and fatigue and lower wellbeing during educational support (Gimenez-Nadal & Sevilla, 2016). Boundary encroachment and colonisation practices may impact middle-class more than working-class mothers, where a clearer home-school distinction is retained. Furthermore, although middle-class mothers invest time and resources, capital advantages do not always secure homework success. Hutchison (2012) observed that some middle-class mothers were 'unable to mobilise the extensive emotional capital in concert with the pedagogical support necessary' (p.203). However, she also highlighted the significant impact homework has on working-class mothers, who may need to overcome past experiences in order to develop effective support. Classed *experiences* of the education system are thereby differentiated.

However, the idea of classed differences in parental *support* is contested. Reay (2005b) describes the mental energy all mothers give to education work. Adoption of generic learning and development tasks is similar across classes (Ellingsæter et al., 2021), as is use of early literacy activities (rhymes, stories, the alphabet; Hartas, 2011), while educative engagement with young children increased in *all* classes across a recent ten-year period in the US (Schaub, 2015). Although Lareau (1989, 2003) argued that classed distinctions in mothers' conceptualisations of their role made middle-class mothers more educationally active while working-class mothers assumed school 'experts' would develop their child academically, post-Lareau, studies indicate working-class mothers' engagement may not be less educative, but simply less visible. Disadvantaged, sometimes lone-parenting, black mothers are highly active in creating opportunities for their child's educational progress: using community networks, seeking out informal opportunities, and celebrating

educational successes (Akere-Azeez, 2022; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005, Jacobs & Daniels, 2020). These mothers value schooling, socialise their children towards academic effort and promote education from the early years to university level, by highlighting problems from their own scholastic shortcomings and making sacrifices for education. Similarly, working-class mothers in France hold firm beliefs about good schooling and academic aspiration, acknowledge their role in success, and engage with homework (Poullaouec, 2021).

Working-class mothers are not less involved, but may feel less comfortable in a specialist educational role (Reay, 1998). Contrasting class behaviours may therefore reflect mothers targeting support where their labour can make a difference, which might be outside school processes: advocacy for individual problems, emotional support for low esteem, providing external rather than in-school learning opportunities, and overseeing homework (Gillies, 2006b; Griffith & Smith, 2005; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005). Adopting less school-centric practices means support goes unacknowledged; parents are assumed to be uninvolved and labelled 'hard to reach'. Their engagement, often being informal (K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005), 'bypass[es] the system' (Gillies, 2006b, p.287) and is thus hidden.

Gillies (2006b) suggests that contrasting educational support reflects different forms of capital: working-class mothers demonstrate commitment by investing in a reward for effort, whereas middle-class mothers use cultural capital to advance progress. Furthermore, working-class mothers must negotiate homework expectations which middle-class mothers easily adopt (C.Clarke, 2021; Poullaouec, 2021). They may be inhibited by gaps in educational knowledge, unclear explanations, lower confidence

(Poullaouec, 2021), and contrasting resources and experiences, which differently mould their practices. However, working-class parents still feel 'involved'. They care about schooling, make deep emotional investments (Gillies, 2006b) and value educational family time (Fox, 2016). Working-class mothers' input is substantial and homework shapes mothers' daily work in *all* classes. Dominant parent involvement discourses and professional assumptions about deficit parenting practices therefore erroneously imply that only middle-class families support educational development, while the classed good parent ideology previously outlined ensures schools more easily recognise middle-class involvement. Mothers have the biggest role in their child's educational trajectory, but this intense work is *not* particular to the middle-class (C.Clarke, 2021). There may be differences in parents' *direct involvement* with schools, but minimal distinction in families' *interest in*, and *support for*, their child's education. Using parent-centric terminology, they are *engaged* even if not *involved*. Thus, it is not interest, willingness, or intensity which marks classed homework support differences, but restricted capitals, individual uncertainty and varied approaches (C.Clarke, 2021; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013).

An observation by Galloway et al. (2013) may explain the apparent discrepancy between the maternal education labour found *across* classes, and the continued advantage arising from middle-class mothers' support: 'In these competitive school climates, learning has become a secondary goal. … [H]ard work and the stress it creates are accepted as necessary to obtain the credentials needed to succeed in a competitive climate' (p.491). Middle-class engagement is tailored to advancement in a competitive system, typified by middle-class mothers' emphasis on getting ahead (Landeros, 2011), whilst their working-class counterparts guard against falling behind

(Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013). Assertive middle-class mothers 'invest' their capitals to 'yield social profits' (Lareau, 1989, p.10). They stand on a 'glass floor', maintaining their offspring's position using various strategies (Hutchings, 2021, p.137), contributing to the system's 'engine of inequality' (Hyndman, 2014, p.208; Reay, 1998, 2005a).

Educational support is 'complex and multidimensional', with class, socio-economic status and context shaping the strategies adopted (Jacobs & Daniels, 2020, p.162). Homework support is therefore likely to be classed, as well as gendered. A study of maternal homework support must therefore be alert to classed experiences.

2.8 Concluding the literature, defining the research questions

I have outlined how homework has been studied previously, demonstrating an emphasis on 'what works' academically, and limited consideration of the social and gendered aspects of homework as a lived family experience. I have connected homework's prominence to neoliberal educational philosophy which has shifted responsibility from state to parent and normalised its practice in a highly competitive system. A weakened home-school boundary and school colonisation encourages parents to adopt pedagogic practices under the powered, school-controlled, and poorly defined ideology of 'parental involvement,' through which they are made *more* responsible and simultaneously *less* agential.

I have highlighted how past research and public discourse lack a gendered dimension, in which mothers' homework support is recognised and researched. I have outlined how a mothers-as-supplementary-educators discourse invokes maternal homework labour, producing stress and tension, amid limited appreciation

of how mothers feel about homework support, how they experience it and how they make support decisions. Emphasising an under-researched area, with little mother-focused or observational data, I have suggested that what shapes mothers' involvement in their children's primary homework is yet to be fully understood. Having acknowledged studies of mothers' general involvement with schools and schooling and the potential for classed differences, I propose a specific focus on mothers' homework views and experiences. This thesis therefore explores the following question:

> What shapes constructions of homework and the homework support role, for mothers with primary-aged children?

This will be investigated using the following sub-questions:

1. What are mothers' constructions of primary homework and their role within this practice?
2. What shapes mothers' constructions of primary homework and their role within this practice?
3. How is this visible in their activity around their child's homework?
4. How do mothers make sense of their activity, role and experiences of supporting primary homework?

I next elaborate key concepts underpinning this research: mothering, mothering scripts, and emotion.

3 CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

I have argued that, alongside traditional approaches to homework research, knowledge of mothers' engagement in homework support is critical to a fuller understanding of this practice. In this chapter, I focus on concepts underpinning this. I conceptualise mothering, distinguishing it from motherhood, situating it relationally and outlining how social constructions of mothers produce moralised *scripts of mothering* which shape social expectations of maternal involvement in schooling. Next, I theorise emotion, using emotion care work, emotion norms and practices, and embodiment. These tools will support my interpretations and the understanding I develop of mothers' responses to their homework role.

3.1 MOTHERING, MOTHERHOOD AND MOTHERWORK

In Chapter 1, I claimed the term mothering in order to highlight the gendered imbalance in homework support practices. However, mothering and associated language must be conceptualised.[5]

'Mother' is simultaneously a social category (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010), a public and private role (Letherby, 1994), and an individual experience and nuanced identity. Key writers agree that to understand mothers' experiences, mother*ing* must be distinguished from mother*hood* (Letherby, 1994; O'Reilly, 2012; Rich, 1977; Ruddick, 1989). Mothering is a personal experience whilst motherhood is a social construct with accompanying expectations (Suwada, 2021). In 1989, Ruddick wrote that 'the

[5] Youdell (2010) discusses Butler's argument that gendered terms like mother and father performatively produce the categories they name through an '*illusion* of genders' *prior* existence' (p.135). A small-scale, detailed investigation will reveal how assumed differences attached to these gendered labels, like 'mothers are more caring,' are enacted in homework's standardised practices.

ideology of mother*hood* is oppressive to women' because it defines maternal labours as all-consuming, self-sacrificial, and, through complete focus on children's needs, eliminates mothers' own identities (p.29, original emphasis). Despite social conceptualisations of motherhood at times oppressing or marginalising women, Ruddick claimed they may also experience joy from their role, with 'fiercely passionate love that is not destroyed by the ambivalence and anger it [may also] include[]' (p.29). She called for a recognition of mothering which might override motherhood as maternal victimisation, 'an egregiously inaccurate account of many women's experience and … itself oppressive to mothers' (p.29). Rich (1977) describes two meanings, 'one superimposed on the other: the *potential relationship* of any woman to her powers of reproduction and to children; and the *institution*, which aims at ensuring that that potential – and all women – shall remain under male control' (p.13, original emphasis). Motherhood is, therefore, 'the culmination of social structures and meanings that create conditions under which women are expected to parent' and which 'shape the circumstance of women's lives' (F.Green, 2012, p.24).

Articulating motherhood as 'penal servitude', Rich (1977) stresses that '*It need not be'* (p.14, original emphasis). In other words, mother*ing* has the potential to be a positive experience, whereas broader structures which claim mother*hood* for their own ends, oppress mothers. Rich's writing is explicitly 'not an attack on the family or on mothering; *except as defined and restricted under patriarchy'* (p.14, original emphasis). Positive dimensions of mothering, distinct from motherhood, should therefore be recognised. This leads to a distinction in terms: mothering, located in

interpersonal family relationships, and motherhood, which prescribes mothering behaviours.

More recently, O'Reilly (2012) argues that 'motherhood remains stuck in this oppressive and disempowering space because it is founded in gender essentialism, a gender ideology that establishes a naturalized opposition between public and private sphere' (p.63). An essentialist interpretation views motherhood as 'natural, universal, and unchanging' and linked to reproduction (Nakano Glenn, 1994, p.3). Maternal practices are often framed biologically, suggesting caring responsibilities are suited to mothers and their bodies (Suwada, 2021). Ideologies of women's natural propensity to care, socially devalue mothers' work, confining them to the private sphere (O'Reilly, 2014). It is the centring of motherhood within a privatised, devalued sphere, directed by wider social institutions, which restricts maternal experiences, rather than *being a mother* which does so. Although acknowledging O'Reilly's insistence that a gender essentialist view is problematic for *imposing* practices on mothers, I also recognise that mothers themselves may understand their role and choices differently (see section 4.2 for elaboration that feminist research must also recognise mothers who experience an 'internal call'). For this reason, mothers' own perspectives are critical. A distinction between motherhood as patriarchal and oppressive and mothering as relational and potentially empowering (O'Reilly, 2012; Ruddick, 1980) leads to matricentric feminism, which explicitly recognises mothers' potential empowerment through mothering (see Chapter 4).

Mother*ing* and mother*work* are also distinct (Erasmus, 2012; O'Reilly, 2012). The term motherwork recognises the responsibilities and labours assigned to mothers by

patriarchal motherhood. Motherwork is repressive due to 'powerless responsibility': a lack of accompanying power to influence this work and practices derived from it (O'Reilly, 2012, after Rich, 1976). This leaves mothers trapped, burdened and depleted. Chapter 2 showed mothers imprisoned within gendered homework involvement practices yet 'outside-the-circle' of policymaking (Karnad-Jani, 2021, p.170). A restrictive maternal sphere leaves mothers dictated to by ever-encroaching, external systems, which surveil and judge the private sphere and its practices, through, for example, homework processes.

A distinction between the oppressions of motherhood / motherwork and the potential gains from mothering allows consideration of how participants experience and talk about their role, avoiding a false frame of absolute patriarchal social oppression and limited agency, instead recognising the potential for empowerment. This theorisation recognises diverse mothering experiences, affording exploration of how mothering practices and decisions are shaped through various dimensions, including socio-biographical and psycho-social elements.

3.1.1 Relational mothering

Suissa (2006) contends that terms like parenting and mothering reduce an existential experience into a series of practical tasks. The maternal role is associated with reproduction and childrearing duties: caring, nurturing, emotional support and family organisation (Reid Boyd & Letherby, 2014), all of which are relational activities. Mothering is therefore centred around relationships, particularly with children. It should therefore be recognised not as activity, but as relation. This echoes Rich's (1977) first, less problematic, meaning of motherhood: the relationship of a woman

to reproduction and childrearing. The mother-child relationship is therefore acknowledged as significant, even by those who highlight problems with the institution of motherhood. Rich does not criticise mothering itself, and therefore not this relationship either. Recall, also, that Ruddick (1989) describes mothers' 'fiercely passionate love' for their children (p.29), arguing that maternal practices 'begin in love' (Ruddick, 1980, p.344). With mother*ing* a relational activity, it is meaningful in the lives of individuals who identify as mothers. This is possible both despite, and outside, the more problematic institution of patriarchal motherhood.

However, Nakano Glenn (1994), acknowledging the idea of a 'special' relationship as seductive and recognising the centrality of a nurturing relationship to definitions of mothering, reminds us that mothers' actions occur in response to historical and cultural situations, countering assumptions of an essential biological predisposition and raising the possibility of agency. This alters the framing of the mother's 'special' relationship away from birth-giving, to a broader definition which recognises relational experiences as *formed through mothering*, and therefore experienced by anyone who self-identifies in the maternal role.[6] In the context of practices expecting maternal involvement, relationally-framed participation is 'a significant social experience centred on emotion, moral identity and *a particularistic relationship with*

[6] I acknowledge current, public debates around gender as either a social construct or a biological truth. Proponents of the biological argument adopt absolute, binary categories. Proponents of gender identity argue that it is shaped according to social, cultural, political and individual factors. A recent backlash against varied gender identities means my focus on mothers as a distinct group, and use of the term 'mother,' not the gender-neutral, or gender-encompassing term 'parents,' could be misinterpreted as support for biological essentialism. I therefore clarify that although exploring a gendered practice and experience, which must be highlighted for the way it positions women, this study does not allocate gender labels based on birth-assigned sex. All participants were understood as mothers through their personal identification. That gender and gendered practices are current in social debate, underlines the relevance of a study focused on the experiences of those self-identifying through the gendered label 'mother'.

child(ren)' (Duncan, 2005, pp.65-66, my emphasis). Thus, the intimacy of mother-child relationships shapes mothers' lives through 'social experiences centred on childrearing' (Ribbens McCarthy & Edwards, 2002, p.199).

Chodorow (1978) goes further, drawing on psychoanalytic theories to demonstrate that mothers' assumed natural skills are instead produced by the relational way girls are raised. She states:

> Because women themselves are raised by women, they grow up with the relational capacities and needs, and psychological definition of self-in-relationship, which commit them to mothering (Chodorow, 1978, p.209)

Mothering is therefore learned and embedded within gendered personalities, producing mother-individuals who define themselves in relation to others. This 'self-in-relationship' shapes mothering emotions, behaviours and practices (Though note Chodorow has been criticised for conflating motherhood with female identity, Miller, 2005; and for implying a binary between women's connectedness and men's separation, Hollway, 2006). Ruddick (1980) similarly highlights *maternal thinking* as a common dimension of motherwork, which is not instinctive, but learned through mothering.

A key dimension of mothering is 'being there' for others (de Marneffe, 2019). This is not, as appears, a purely temporal or physical state: 'it is continual. It is more than physical. It engenders a sense of *emotional* presence' (Reid Boyd & Letherby, 2014, n.p., my emphasis). Mothering is a constant domain, relationally tied to others and bound to emotional responses. This conceptualisation underpins my thesis.

Experiences of mothering are not universal. Mothering is a negotiation between mothers and their support systems, is socially shaped and relationally moulded (Henderson et al., 2010). Furthermore, mothering's relational composition thrusts individual factors to the fore, affording consideration of how individuals navigate their role in situated ways, drawing on psycho-social-biographical experiences and interpersonal relationships. Recent scholarship highlights 'the particularity and specificity of motherhood while at the same time rejecting any notion of a fixed or essential aspect of maternal experience' (Kawash, 2011, p.972). I frame this study similarly.

A relational focus risks inadvertently concealing aspects of mothers' subjective experiences, known as 'the "hidden mother" phenomenon', by directing attention towards the child (Lintott & Sander-Staudt, 2012, p.2; Vissing, 2014). Framing women through their relationship with children is also critiqued for encouraging an essentialist view of mothers as carers, reinforcing the narrative many feminists seek to disrupt, that women's identities arise from domestic relationships (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; Letherby, 1994; Nakano Glenn, 1994). These criticisms are valid, since my focus *is* on a mother-child relational activity. However, reflexivity can be used to keep mothers' perspectives in focus methodologically and analytically. Furthermore, following Rich, Ruddick and Chodorow, relationships *are* central to mothering. To divorce relations, the emotions which derive from these, and the maternal experience of relations, from a mother-focused study, would decontextualise results from their situated meaning. Thus, relational mothering is an essential concept.

3.2 MORAL SCRIPTS OF MOTHERING

Mothering experiences are informed by the social, cultural and institutional contexts in which they occur, which create accepted models of practice. These social constructs generate 'identity labels' which 'carry cultural meaning and guide social action' (Smith-Lovin, 2007, p.110), allocating particular responsibilities and behaviours with each social position. These culturally embedded labels shape role relationships (like mother and child) and are hard to change or resist. As 'reference point[s]' (Suwada, 2021, p.19) they produce 'current orthodoxies [with] powerful effects in defining women's roles as mothers by giving specific content to their desires, aspirations and daily work and by occluding alternative options' (Urwin, 1985, p.166). Social constructs therefore 'create a world in common for those who participate' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.34).

Maternal experiences are shaped according to moralised 'scripts' of mothering: sets of culturally organised ideas, rules or practices (Luschen, 1998, p.392; Willard, 1988, in Miller, 2005). Social scripts are powerful. They impact how individuals think, speak and behave and both group insiders and outsiders follow them (Goddard & Wierzbicka, 2004). Miller (2005) describes 'dominant and powerful discourses' of mothering and motherhood which 'shape the 'ontological narratives' … that we produce' (p.3). These scripts, she says, influence the 'moral contexts which underpin contemporary motherhood' and therefore 'powerfully shape[] our experiences as women' (pp.6, 3), categorising mothers with binary labels based in their assumed moral character: good, bad, single. They are the bedrock of good mothering and moralised motherwork. Yet, similar to parent involvement discourses, dominant

mothering scripts reflect white, middle-class beliefs, practices and capitals (Luschen, 1998).

Thus, '[m]others operate under the gaze of society – a society that has adopted clear characterizations of the 'good mother'' (Sutherland, 2010, p.311). Born from a social construct of moralised mothering, the good mother image is 'formidable … placing pressure on women to conform to particular standards and ideals' (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, pp.1-2). Scholars routinely conclude that mothers' current ideological positioning as 'good' creates impossible standards (Douglas & Michaels, 2004; O'Reilly, 2012), locking mothers into 'a kind of prison' (Sutherland, 2010, p.313), restricting how they experience mothering and understand their own mothering decisions, constraining their maternal subjectivities (Vissing, 2014) and shaping the meaning mothering holds.

Furthermore, moral constructions of motherhood and fatherhood are different. Traditionally, fathers are permitted to be individualistically motivated as long as they are economically responsible (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2003), whereas self-interested mothers are viewed as neglectful (Meyer, 2018). Such moral characterisations of gendered domestic inequalities persist (Suwada, 2021), with mothers' caring and nurturing seen as paramount. A cultural ideal, the 'symbiotic unity of mother and child', implies motherwork arises from perfect dyadic harmony: the moralised ideal of fulfilling mother-child interactions pressurises maternal compliance, regardless of negative experiences, and maternal ambivalence or negativity is pathologised as 'shameful', unmotherly or bad (Vissing, 2014, p.108). Resistance to such strong moral narratives is difficult. Chodorow and Contratto

(1992, cited in Vissing, 2014) describe a fine distinction between the ideal mother and moral judgement. This delicate counterbalance means problems (including educational difficulties) are explained as a consequence of mothering (Vissing, 2014).

The good mother script is not just held discursively, but is also institutionalised within social encounters and practices, and mothers in all walks of life are judged against this ideal (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010). Not only the mother group, but social groups beyond this, influence what is acceptable for mothers in support of children's development. Practices by government, schools, health services and media all shape mothering constructs, promoting, legitimising and normalising hegemonic scripts, using, powerful, socially-sanctioned 'authoritative knowledge' (Miller, 2005, p.29). A rise in experts (on health, education, child development) vertically transmit knowledge to receiving individuals who have little autonomy. Consequently, the range of 'prescriptions' to mothers has increased (Urwin, 1985, p.164). Institutions, experts and acquaintances all remind mothers of expectations bound to their 'good' position (F.Green, 2012). They are directed towards activities mothers 'should' be involved in, then surveilled and judged for their compliance. Scrutiny is therefore part of mothers' experience of good mothering. Homework 'expertise' is claimed by governments, educational writers, scholars and school staff, while homework processes are institutionally controlled. With good mothering behaviours regulated through 'normalisation' (Urwin, 1985), teachers draw on and reproduce the good mother construct to encourage and normalise homework support as a core parenting practice (Lehner-Mear, 2021).

However, social surveillance and regulation against the mothering ideal is not only through expert influence, or patriarchal institutions and ways of living. Mothers themselves engage with the pressure to be ideal, both conforming and self-regulating. They 'take on the aspirations, norms and desires that are being articulated by wider political forces … [This] is the power of the good mother: mothers want to be good' (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, pp.6-7). For example, mothers activate significant energy in rising to school expectations. Desiring to be good, however, is an influenced practice. Whilst mothers adopt the work involved in meeting expectations, this is promoted by the underpinning moral dimension. Moral context is key to mothers' sense of responsibility and their choices when enacting their mothering (Miller, 2005), because the good mothering myth assigns them 'responsibility for the conditions of motherhood' rather than rooting this within wider systems (Johnston & Swanson, 2003, p.23).

Self-awareness and censorship, wherein mothers and mother communities police themselves, operates like a panopticon, or 'manopticon' of mothering (Wong, 2012). Through self-monitoring, mothers adapt their behaviours to moralised scripts in order to be recognised as good, not deviant (F.Green, 2012). Automatic and omnipotent self-monitoring means mothers experience good mothering pressure as an internal not external influence, thus making invisible powerful structural and social forces (Henderson et al., 2010). Bowlby and Day (2018) claim UK mothers, in particular, desire social approval for their mothering actions, while Henderson et al. (2010) suggest middle-class mothers self-surveil more, although earlier discussion of the hidden educational labour working-class mothers undertake (section 2.7), and forthcoming discussion of their emotion care work (section 3.3.3), prompts

hesitation regarding class-based claims about good mothers' self-managed educational labour. Normative motherhood is the standard for *all* maternal judgement, despite not representing all mothers' lived realities (O'Reilly, 2014), with *social expectations* overlooking *material restrictions* (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998). Moral mothering scripts centralise doing right by children, thus framing homework support as a maternal responsibility, directed by institutional expectations and social surveillance, which may cement it within good mothering, regardless of class.

Claiming a 'moral self' is critical for belonging to the mother group, yet unattainable without aligning oneself with certain 'ubiquitous social norms', even where these expectations are personally incompatible (May, 2008, p.481). '[M]oral boundary drawing' means non-normative behaviours result in accusations of maternal inadequacy or lost morality (Vincent, 2010, p.118, after Sayer 2005). If moral norms are broken, individuals must recreate their moral self. The non-compliant homework mother regains her moral position by offering alternative learning experiences, for example. Moralised norms, therefore, are significant to motherwork and how mothers claim their social position.

In interpreting her motherhood interviewees' narratives, Miller (2005) highlights the problems that arise when mothers' experiences contradict established moral scripts: mothers actively *re*construct their lived experiences, both internally and narratively, to align with established codes. She writes:

> As individuals we are guided in our storytelling by reference to multifaceted cultural scripts, which provide the contours of particular

> ways of knowing … Actors, then, are limited in their narrative construction and reconstruction and make sense of their experiences from, and within, particular locations in the social world (Miller, 2005, p.10)

Disclosing divergent experiences risks mothers' moral identities (Ribbens McCarthy et al., 2000). Feelings are therefore 'monitored, silenced or shaped', because morally-scripted voices delegitimise feeling voices (Ribbens, 1998, p.33).

An individual's actions tend to align with their immediate social context (Smith-Lovin, 2007). Although simultaneously a worker, daughter, friend, where the 'mother' label is most significant socially, this category's norms lead behaviours. This shapes mother-child interactions which are presumed to reflect 'mothering'. According to Smith-Lovin (2007), tension between simultaneously operating identities causes friction, such as between the carer-nurturer and supplementary-educator roles in homework support. In order that locally specific behaviours are understood, therefore, mothering should never be divorced from its context (Hill Collins, 1994).

Moral scripts offer a lens for considering whether mothers' experiences of educational work match expectations, whether mothers express alternative perspectives or emotions, and to what extent, as supplementary educators, they narratively reconstruct their experiences to maintain a good (moral) status. The discrepancy, highlighted in Chapter 2, between parents' apparently positive homework views, and mothers' negative homework experiences, must be considered through this lens, to explore whether mothers can resist or reframe powerful moral expectations of their educational motherwork.

Although motherwork is morally framed and hard to resist, this is not to suggest mothers disingenuously adopt normative behaviours. There is not a more authentic identity beneath adopted norms (May, 2008). I highlight mothering's moral component, but do not challenge mothers' self-positioning as moral or good. Instead, I seek to understand how powerful, yet problematic, moralised mothering scripts shape their homework practices.

Having highlighted that moralised mothering scripts impact mothers' experiences and behaviours and are underpinned by institutional structures, expert views, and self-monitoring, I now outline the particular scripts which support exploration of the portraits in this thesis. Later, I integrate these scripts with the schoolification process discussed in Chapter 2, to demonstrate how the good schooling or supplementary-educator mother is formed out of mothering scripts, and shaped by current school practices.

3.2.1 Script 1: Sensitive mothering

Walkerdine and Lucey's (1989) book, *Democracy in the Kitchen*, charts the development of a *sensitive mothering* ideology, founded in psychology's interest in mother-child attachment, and linked to social and political fears that inadequate working-class parenting skills compromise children's educational success (see the post-Plowden trope already discussed, wherein parental involvement was promoted to 'improve' working-class outcomes). Revisiting Tizard and Hughes's transcripts of mother-child interactions, Walkerdine and Lucey argued that the earlier scholars' interpretations were grounded in a classed notion of maternal sensitivity. Central to sensitive mothering is a 'psychoeducational discourse' (p.184), in which the mother,

privately at home, is made responsible for her child's development through her interactions and home-based, pedagogic practices: 'By producing the correct early environment, she [the mother] … paves the way for independence and autonomy which is taken to lead to educational success' (p.173). Walkerdine and Lucey identify behaviours Tizard and Hughes described as 'sensitive', including interpreting children's gestures, attuning to children's behaviours, neutralising children's relational conflict, avoiding maternal egocentricity, and demonstrating 'healthy' reactions during mother-child interactions (p.57). In other words, the child's needs are prioritised ahead of the mother's. Sensitive mothering emphasises binary normal / abnormal maternal behaviours, natural mothering skills, a central 'nurturant femininity', and the mother's constant attentiveness to her child's developmental needs, with later educational success rooted in appropriate mothering (p.128).

An apparently scientific foundation promotes a vision of good mothering in which motherwork and pedagogic work are amalgamated (Griffith & Smith, 2005) and certain mothering styles are deemed natural and correct. However, Walkerdine and Lucey (1989) frame the script as a socially and historically defined 'fantasy', connected to middle-class ideals and oblivious to class inequalities (p.152). Modern government's 'science as truth' manifesto regulates populations by dismissing lived experiences (p.34), meaning alternative narratives (mothers *not* central to academic development; homework support a *negative* maternal experience; working-class mothers constrained by systemic inequalities), are therefore suppressed as unscientific. By disparaging working-class mothering as deficient, and holding middle-class mothers accountable to a set of apparently scientific ideals, sensitive mothering creates maternal oppression and guilt (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). A

wedge is also driven between mothers, by handing middle-class mothers moral superiority through material advantages, whilst pathologising working-class mothers.

Sensitive mothering directly connects mothers to children's educational development, converting domestic chores into cognitive practices, and deeming motherwork 'necessary to meet the child's intellectual and emotional needs' (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p.23). Yet:

> *Nobody* within a discourse of meeting needs talks about the mother: what effect being 'constantly available' might have on her. No one talks about how she must constantly struggle to maintain the rich environment of which she is guardian or how much hidden effort is made; while the child is enjoying 'liberation' and autonomy, this to some extent depends upon the mother's oppression (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989, p.106)

Long established, sensitive mothering remains relevant to contemporary research: in Balcombe's (2020) analysis of twenty-first century British childrearing; Aamann's (2020) study of classed, neoliberal mother judgement; and Close's (2016) illustration of normalised maternal emotion management. Wong (2012) suggests attachment-style parenting regresses mothers' social status, while Fiona Green (2012) argues that mothers are made responsible beyond basic needs, for emotional, psychological and spiritual wellbeing. Sensitive mothering remains problematic.

3.2.2 Script 2: Intensive Mothering

In *The Cultural Contradictions of Motherhood*, Sharon Hays (1996) identifies a contradictory contemporary practice: mothers must remain dedicated to their

children, whilst also aligning with capitalist working practices. These paradoxical expectations pull mothers between public and private spheres. Mothers respond to this tension using an *intensive mothering* script which sustains both social positions. To uphold their caregiver role, mothers adopt child-centred, emotionally-engaging and labour intensive practices, follow expert guidance, and engage professional childcarers, resulting in financially expensive, emotionally intense childrearing. Those who fail to meet the norms of intensive mothering are considered 'morally insufficient' (Vincent, 2010, p.118).

Hays's theory reflects middle-class lifestyles and is aligned with middle-class mothers' acceleration into the workplace, although she identified diversity amongst her participants. The dominant social group has adapted to changes in *their* labour market experience to maintain a modified version of sensitive mothering which is intensive. Whilst acknowledging that each mother is 'shaped by a complex map' encompassing race, class, employment, citizenship and childhood experiences, Hays concludes that all mothers foreground their child's needs (p.76). Therefore, according to Hays, intensive mothering, if not a single set of practices, is a pervasive, normative standard, unaffected by minor class differences.

In a 'layer[ed]' and 'socially constructed elaboration' of beliefs about natural mothering (Hays, 1996, p.13), intensive mothering roots maternal motivation in 'feelings of love and connection' which tie mothers' relational sense of themselves as mothers to practices which uphold the ideology (S.Brown, 2014, p.38). This prevailing model, 'a story of ever increasing intensification of child rearing' (Hays, 1996, p.22),

requires mothers to be more than good or sensitive: they must be all-encompassing 'Supermom[s]' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.39):

> … in the end it is mothers who are held responsible and who understand themselves as accountable not only for keeping the kids fed and housed but also for shaping the kinds of adults those children will become (Hays, 1996, p.108)

Expectations of mothers who follow this script are wide-ranging and future-facing because here-and-now decisions are considered to have future consequences. Mothers' individualised choices advance children's development across physical, emotional, mental and material dimensions, producing a maternal 'life load' of additional motherwork (S.Brown, 2014, p.40). This child-centred approach gives small-scale decisions and day-to-day activities heightened significance. Already framed by governments and schools as important, mothers' responsibility for future success elevates homework's meaning beyond academic value.

Centring the child's needs is fundamental to this script: firstly, the child deserves protection; secondly, and critical to this study, 'there is [an] emotional intensity of mothers' feelings for their children that flows from the love they experience as they nurture that innocent (and dependent) child' (Hays, 1996, p.129). Intensive mothering therefore supports a focus on the emotions shaping mothers' actions. 'Without question,' remarks Hays, 'mothers experience their own child-rearing beliefs and practices as a measure of their love for their children' (p.155). Investigating how individual mothers experience this emotion in the light of expected practices like homework support, is therefore valid.

Intensive mothering has internal logic:

> … the connections among all its elements begin to make a good deal of sense. The willingness to nurture the child, to listen to the child, to consult the experts … – in short, the willingness to expend a great deal of physical, emotional, cognitive, and financial resources on the child – follows directly from the requirement of placing the child at the center of one's life and putting the child's needs above one's own (Hays, 1996, p.128)

As '[t]he ascendant motherhood ideology' (S.Pedersen, 2016, p.33), intensive mothering is an 'adaptive response' to cultural conditions (S.Brown, 2014, p.27), which reflects society's current view of children as vulnerable (Faircloth, 2014). Neoliberalism, promoting individual responsibility, bolsters intensive mothering, making the family, and thereby the mother, accountable for childrearing (S.Brown, 2014; Ennis, 2014b).

However, the ideology is problematic: imbalanced and burdensome, it causes the policing and judgement of mothers, and pathologises those materially unable to meet its standards (O'Brien, 2007). Internalised mothering goals impact a mother's sense of herself, her public and private agency, and her mothering experience, leaving her struggling against unattainable standards and questioning her capabilities (Walters, 2008). The media promotes extreme mothering standards (Douglas & Michaels, 2004), and mental wellbeing is damaged by pursuit of perfection and sacrifice (Warner, 2012). An emphasis on mother-child connectedness restricts maternal empowerment (Ennis, 2014a), because, despite a mother's employment,

her traditional carer role remains the family foundation (Williams, 2000, cited in O'Brien Hallstein, 2012).

The theory is widely used: to investigate how working mothers reframe mothering (Mayer, 2012); to compare employed and unemployed mothers (Liss et al., 2013); and to develop a range of associated mothering ideologies (Johnston & Swanson, 2003). In Christopher's (2012) adaptation, *extensive mothering*, problems arising from mothering intensively whilst working fulltime are partially resolved by reframing mothers as managers delegating day-to-day care to others. This enables socially and ethnically marginalised groups, who already integrate motherhood and paid work using community support, to meet expectations and achieve good mothering status. Intensive mothering thus has continued relevance.

Although intensive mothering is a popular lens, there are critics. Vissing (2014) argues that a theory centred on *children's* needs obscures *maternal* subjectivities, concealing valid lived experiences within an ideological argument. *Individual* accounts become deconstructed evidence for a theory which explains *universal* mothering. Having feminist, psycho-social interests like Vissing, and aiming to recognise my participants as holistic individuals, I am wary of the universalising risk social scripts bring. However, my methods maintain the mother-participants as holistic individuals, in order that an intensive mothering lens does not whitewash their subjective experiences (see Chapter 4). Analysis will reflect 'how cultural representations of the maternal ideal interact with maternal intrapsychic dynamics' and 'personal meanings of mothering', in order to understand the 'psychological effects' of intensive mothering (Vissing, 2014, pp.106, 107). Both subjective

experiences *and* social constructs are important because failing against (or rebuffing) culturally dominant scripts likely produces negative emotions. Acquiring narratives which reflect alternative experiences may be difficult. The thesis's aims are simultaneously made more challenging and more significant by this dominant mothering script. Uncovering lived experiences, negative or positive, will reveal its power and consequences.

3.2.3 Script 3: Competitive-investment mothering

Next, I propose *competitive-investment mothering* as a cultural script which encompasses future-facing individualism and professionally moulded practices with the responsibility and work of intensive mothering.[7] A paper by Landeros (2011) influenced my ideas, although Landeros, being principally focused on mother-teacher relationships in wealthy neighbourhoods, does not use this term. Other scholars' work aids the concept's development.

Landeros (2011) argues that '[a] competitive society conceives of care as a private good rather than a broad and public value' (p.247). Care work is therefore each family's individual concern. Landeros's affluent, professionally successful mother-participants, living in a socially competitive community, believed they had a 'special function within the educational system', a responsible role with the potential for personal gain (p.248). They used their competitive edge as cultural capital, gaining individual prestige and social standing by labouring to support their children. A child's academic progress evidenced each mother's dedication, as 'a defining and

[7] Here 'professional' refers to mothers' backgrounds / skills, not to educational experts.

visible factor of whether she [was] a 'good mother'' and 'a proxy measure of love, care, and concern' (p.248). These findings have broader relevance.

Social framing of mothering produces constant comparisons and judgements, firstly between children as proxies for their mothers' skills, and, secondly, between mothers themselves. Centring school as the location for maternal surveillance, judgement and blame (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1977), with experts determining mothering standards through appraisal of maternal efficacy, creates 'invidious comparisons among mothers' (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.35). With motherhood made public (David, 2005), and maternal judgement common, gaining in-community status is protective.

Struggles for maternal status occur because feminised care work has low standing. Robbed of recognition, children become a 'competitive resource' and 'projection' of mothers (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1977, p.396), with educational responsibility giving mothers authority over their children's futures (David et al., 1993). These struggles not only reflect desire for family security, but also expose the confusing hinterland mothers inhabit due to tension between the contradictory cultural ideals of good worker and primary carer, which Hays (1996) initially identified. Redefining motherhood as skilled, competitive and socially advantageous, requires the reframing of caregiving as a professional activity. This enhances maternal identity (Stone, 2012) but inadvertently employs tropes of innate caring ability to bolster status and claim maternal expertise (Kilty & Dej, 2012).

Vincent (2010) attributes the rise of professional mothering to the middle-classes who use their professional practices as mothering tools, just as Landeros's (2011)

mothers did. This framing is further supported by Lareau's (2003) c*oncerted cultivation*, in which middle-class parents employ deliberate strategies to stimulate their child's talents and cognition. However, whilst educational support is assumed to arise from middle-class attempts to secure future advantage, recent analyses suggest a more nuanced explanation. Irwin and Elley (2011) claim a natural inclination towards cultural pursuits promotes middle-class parenting behaviours, which are present-oriented, not only future-facing, while Aarseth (2018) critiques the 'fear of falling' and 'quest for advantage' theories as 'one-dimensional', proposing 'affective dynamics' to explain middle-class parenting practices (p.1099).

Furthermore, the educational orientation of concerted cultivation is not solely a middle-class phenomenon. Lareau's binary class model overlooks diverse practices and shared educational desires (Vincent & Maxwell, 2016). Dominant parenting approaches have 'crossed class and cultural borders' (Golden et al., 2021, p.457). Despite limited educational capital, working-class families do not lack educational ambition, engaging with homework for example (Poullaouec, 2021), whilst middle-class mothers' demonstrate variable negotiation of concerted cultivation (Perrier, 2013). If, as already argued, maternal support is not strictly classed, educational intensity can be understood as an individual parenting practice (Irwin & Elley, 2011; Vincent & Maxwell, 2016).

Pressures in uncertain times shape mothering. Neoliberal ideologies, centred on individualism, competition, personal gain and parental responsibility, encourage mothers to embrace a narrative stressing self-interest (Milkie & Warner, 2014) amid assumptions that their child cannot succeed without their intervention. As the rich-

poor gap widens (Dorling, 2019), and the middle-classes flood higher education, the maternal burden increases. If everyone competes, the need to compete grows stronger. Strategies to help their child thrive in an increasingly competitive culture become essential, such that 'mothering practices are entwined with our market-driven culture' (S.Brown, 2014, p.40). Connecting mothering to the neoliberal market culture takes this script beyond Hays's (1996) original theory. Modern mothering is now *principally* characterised by a drive for children's advancement, arising from contemporary uncertainty which impacts even the previously secure middle-classes (Milkie & Warner, 2014). As learning becomes secondary to credentialised advancement (Galloway et al., 2013) middle-class mothers are encouraged to stand on a 'glass floor', protecting their offspring's position using their capitals (Hutchings, 2021). Thus, both middle- and working-class mothers now view their children as potentially at risk. In this sense, families operate in a similar field, in affective if not material ways, leading to a kind of competitive-investment mothering. By 'doing everything possible to ensure that a child's future social and economic status in a competitive marketplace is sustained or improved – [mothers are] in essence weaving an individualized safety net' (Milkie & Warner, 2014, p.66). Twenty-five years after Hays (1996) defined intensive mothering, contemporary mothers' chief obligation is to develop and then safeguard their child's position through education. They use professionalised, competitive-investment mothering to achieve this.

A script which frames children 'as an extension of women' (Milkie & Warner, 2014, p.71), emphasising responsibility, individualism, judgement, and competitive, professionalised, investment mothering, risks considerable impact on maternal wellbeing. If a child fails educationally, the mother may suffer shame, guilt, or

damaged wellbeing. Vincent (2010) describes a 'ferocity' of condemnation when mothers fail against social expectations (p.118). For example, mothers who act outside accepted homework expectations are roundly condemned (Lehner-Mear, 2021). 'Exposure to guilt, invidious comparisons, and anxiety' become 'hazards for mothers participating in the discourse' (Griffith & Smith, 1987, p.97). Normal responses to 'imprisonment in a [maternal] panopticon' might be 'depression, anxiety, self-doubt, low esteem … competition, comparisons, judgement, and regulation of other mothers as well as herself' (Wong, 2012, p.95). Integrating educational responsibilities threatens mental strain (Gimenez-Nadal & Sevilla, 2016) because success is not guaranteed despite considerable labour, while social judgement for failings can be overwhelming: the energy required to participate is therefore emotionally exhausting (Milkie & Warner, 2014). Wong (2012) and Reay (1998) warn against blaming mothers for acting *for* their child and against others, as these responses result naturally from a competitive education system.

Competitive-investment mothering is an act of constant labour. The work is both proactive and reactive: anticipatory, preventive, supplementary, compensatory and restorative, according to circumstance. It is a complex script with multiple behaviours, necessitating ongoing practices and layered actions. Thus defined, it is situated in neoliberal structures and social assumptions about maternal support, with educational participation a core means for demonstrating good mothering. It shares roots with sensitive and intensive mothering because each is constructed around intense mother-child interactions and maternal behaviours as indicative of 'goodness'. Milkie and Warner (2014) suggest mothering has become 'onerous, obscured, and emotionally exhausting' (p.70). Of concern is their prediction that

mothers will become 'increasingly burdened with the responsibility to manage their child's future alone' (p.81), amid disempowering scripts which stress competition.

3.2.4 HYBRID MOTHERING

Nakano Glenn (1994) suggests universal definitions of mothering centre normative patterns, marginalising variation through an assumed white, middle-class view. Historical specificity, a moral foundation, and a framing as *scripts* suggests inflexibility to mothering ideologies. Yet mothers are not homogenous, but 'ontologically fractured and complex … [without] one single and unseamed material reality' (Stanley & Wise, 2013, p.22). Mothers have 'a complex triad' of identities: mother, wife, worker (Bhave, 2011, p.84). They are also daughters who have been mothered. Trying to understand how women balance these identities, Bhave defines those produced within this shifting position as 'hybrid mom[s]', who reflect on their own mothering, sometimes desiring alternative approaches, and actively selecting elements which support their intentions (p.84). Johnston and Swanson (2006) also suggest mothers sift between social norms, due to contrasting pressures, arguing this is important because the dominant script does not match all mothers' experiences, yet all mothers are beholden to it. Mothers, they argue, use cognitive and affective tools to negotiate tensions and contradictions within their role, generating their own hybridised approach.

Hybridism hints at an agential or empowered mother, who surveys options and makes choices, suggesting variation may be possible, even if challenging.

> This view of mothering moves us beyond seeing women only as empowered or disempowered, but rather as individuals who struggle

> with dissonance, oscillating between feelings of being stuck and utilizing various degrees of agency (Bhave, 2011, p.94)

Viewing mothers as neither entirely empowered nor disempowered, but as functioning within social interactions and expectations which are challenging and contradictory, negotiating individual responses to those restrictions, is potentially helpful. This conceptualisation recognises dynamic resistance to competing demands and existing mothering models (Bhave, 2011), suggesting mothering is complex, multifaceted and constantly in construction. This lens understands mothers as potentially agential *within* social scripts and supports this study's matricentric intentions since hybridism re-sites power with mothers, focusing investigation on their responses, rather than on children's needs or schools' demands. I therefore explore homework support with an awareness of mothers' potential to create hybrid practices, which vary individually, and may reform mothering scripts.

3.2.5 THE GOOD SCHOOLING MOTHER: INTEGRATING MOTHERING SCRIPTS AND SCHOOL PROCESSES

In *Class Work*, her seminal text investigating classed and gendered education work, Diane Reay (1998) evidenced that maternal labour is 'strategically located in relation to schooling systems' (p.6). Hegemonic ideas about education, appropriate mothering and neoliberal responsibility circulate around and within mothering practices. As illustrated, dominant scripts tender responsibility for educational progress to mothers, using powerful moral undertones: 'The ideals of mothering in the context of schooling and the mother's responsibility for realizing them are absolute' (Griffith & Smith, 1987, p.94).

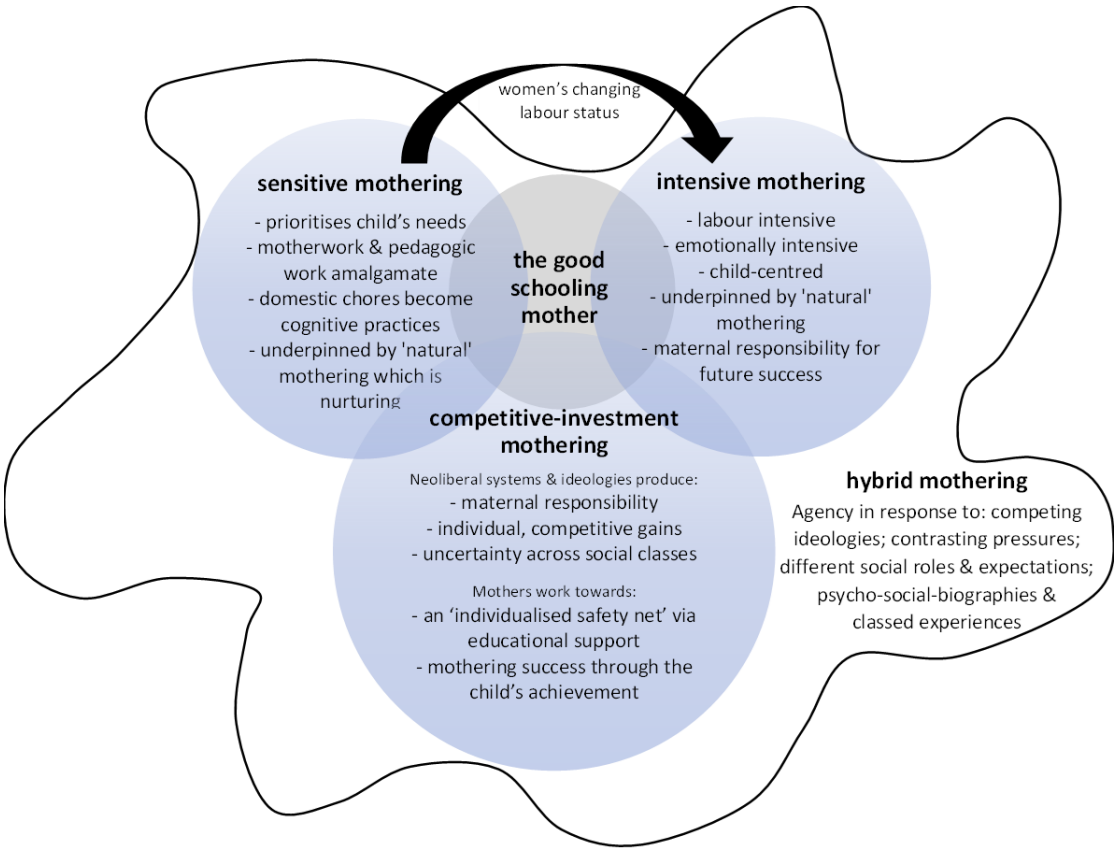


Figure 1: Mothering scripts and the good schooling mother

The scripts discussed emphasise mothers' educational role. *Figure 1* outlines key elements, highlighting connections and overlap, demonstrating that the dual ideas of 'educational support centred with mothers' and 'motherwork as educationally strategic', are dominant: sensitive mothers repress their needs according to their child's developmental requirements; intensive mothers use emotionally-engaged, child-centred, labour intensive practices; and competitive-investment mothers performatively invest in education as a safety net for their children's futures. In each case, the 'normal' child develops only by following a script which includes maternal educational support. Shared discourses of innate mothering, rooted in child development scholarship, mothering scripts, schoolification processes, and neoliberal ideologies, redefine the mother-child relationship through pedagogic

functions (Ribbens-McCarthy with Kirkpatrick, 2005). Work for their child's educational advancement is therefore a principal role of contemporary mothering whether operating as sensitive, intensive or competitive-investment mothers.

However, *figure 1* hints that mothering scripts can be moulded by mothers' agentic potential. Outside apparently fixed mothering scripts are factors shaping individuals (competing ideologies; contrasting pressures; different social roles & expectations; psycho-social-biographies; classed experiences), through which mothers may select, adapt and devise new approaches, accordingly. Hybrid mothering, though not yet applied to supplementary-educator work, enables consideration of agential differences in educational motherwork, through which empowered mothers may shape their own approach to homework support.

Figure 1 further demonstrates that mothering scripts underpin a well-established social idea of the 'good schooling mother' (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, p.15): an individual who supports children's educational development, accepts educational responsibility, and enacts school requirements. As mothers' educational role is a key feature of all dominant scripts, the good schooling mother likely develops whichever approach is adopted, sustained by school practices, social expectations, and neoliberal responsibilisation. Arising from moralised scripts, the good schooling mother is therefore a deeply moralised character, whose educational support tasks are morally framed. If her mothering 'does not conform to the generalized requirements of schooling, or to the particularities of the classroom, it appears as inadequate …' (Griffith, 1984, cited in Griffith & Smith 1987, p.87). The good schooling mother is therefore beholden to homework. Both the organisation of

mothering through schoolification processes and the increased standardisation and competitive measurement of educational progress itself prompt this. Good schooling mothers take on educational motherwork, but are doubly judged for it: their mothering is measured against external, school standards, within which school itself has become more competitive.

Whether sensitive, intensive, competitive-investment or hybrid, the good schooling mother is subject to moral expectations. With her work dictated by schools, her labour, care and anxieties are mobilised (Griffith & Smith, 2005). The possible emotional outcomes of this must be considered, and the relationship with maternal emotions investigated. Therefore, I next conceptualise care and emotion.

3.3 Emotion to emotion practice

3.3.1 Mapping relational emotion: biological instinct, social reproduction and cognitive (un)awareness

Emotion is variously understood: as a biological phenomenon, a social construct, or a cognitive tool. A biological view suggests emotions are physiologically composed, unconscious responses, universally experienced, and fixed (Hochschild, 1979; J.Holland, 2007), implying individuals recognise emotions through awareness of physical responses (Jaggar, 1989). Countering this, emotions can be difficult to identify or verbalise, are variously interpreted and may be a continuing rather than passing episode, attributable after physical indications have passed (Bergman Blix, 2009; Jaggar, 1989). Denzin (1990) calls for a distinction between emotions and physical feelings, with bodily sensations viewed as the external manifestation of an inner emotion and not the emotion itself.

A constructivist approach theorises that social influences shape emotional reactions. Emphasising 'the sociocultural nature of emotions', scholars call for research which considers 'the interrelationship of culturally shaped emotions with other elements of culture' (Middleton, 1989, p.188). If emotions are culturally-mediated, the context within which they are produced becomes significant (Jaggar, 1989). Whilst reflexivity is needed to prevent participant emotions being swamped by the researcher's own culturally-bound emotions, a cultural insider position accentuates the interpretation of emotions. However, a purely constructionist view is also restrictive. Although highlighting how emotional responses are learnt, it obscures individuality.

Furthermore, an absolute distinction between constructionist and universalist viewpoints rules out beneficial dimensions (Bergman Blix, 2009). Researcher empathy for example, suits a universalist perspective: as all emotions are considered the same, the empathetic researcher might 'know' the participant's emotion. A constructionist view that emotions are learnt in particular situations makes empathy a methodologically problematic projection of one's own feelings onto another. A less restrictive conceptualisation means empathy might be constructed as 'resonance' rather than replica, enabling the researcher's 'emotional participation' in the interaction to aid understanding of their participants' experience (Bergman Blix, 2009). A more flexible interpretation of emotion is therefore beneficial.

A third view of emotion takes a cognitive perspective, acknowledging the individual's tacit awareness or judgement, appreciating that their responses might be managed. This conceptualisation is criticised for over-emphasising rationality. By stressing cognition, the affective dimension is minimised, and the spontaneity of many

emotions remains unexplained. However, Jaggar (1989) suggests this framing helpfully indicates that emotions are more complex than the idea of purely instinctive reactions suggests.

Recognising the social production of emotion brings the person to the fore. Individuals respond not just instinctively, but with conscious or unconscious awareness of 'accepted' emotions. Occurring at the 'social interface' (Hochschild, 1979, p.552), or 'intersection' where 'persons are joined to their societies' (Denzin, 2007, p.xvi), emotion indicates disjunction between what was expected and what was experienced (Hochschild, 1983/2003). Emotion therefore reveals a great deal about how a person positions themselves, is shaped, and crafts their behaviours, in response to society-person correlation or contradiction. Thus, emotions are recognised as both individual and cultural (Denzin, 1990, p.86), neither entirely universal nor wholly particular (Loughran & Mannay, 2018a), with malleability possible (Thoits, 2004).

Relation is an important final dimension in how emotion is constructed and experienced. Emotion is fundamental to human connections, shaped by interactions (Denzin, 2007; Hochschild, 1979), produced in response to others, and is therefore relational (Bowlby & Day, 2018; Denzin, 1990). To this end, the study of emotion is beneficial in research focused on any relational experience, phenomenon or context. As this thesis explores homework as a social exercise, emotion is a potentially powerful lens, affording understanding of mothers' homework experiences in the social context of the existing mother-child relationships in which it occurs.

An approach recognising various dimensions of emotional production is more sophisticated than the disciplinary distinctions outlined (J.Holland, 2007). 'Emotions cannot be reduced to biology, relations or discourse alone but belong to all these dimensions as they are constituted through ongoing relational practices' (Zembylas, 2007, p.446). As a combination of cultural, cognitive and physical dimensions, emotion is complex. In this thesis, emotion is conceptualised 'simultaneously and inseparably as a sensuous, cognitive and social/cultural experience' (Hubbard et al., 2001, p.121). It is recognised as an individual response, which is socially, culturally and relationally shaped, sometimes manifest physically, not always recognised or named, and malleable not fixed. Some elements of emotion are socialised into and produced out of the situated context in which they occur: other, less consciously derived, dimensions of emotion may be habitual. This construction allows for the exploration of maternal emotions in ways which acknowledge possible psycho-social influences and individual meanings (see Chapter 4). Acknowledging the complexity of an emotion focus frames my findings as *interpretations*.

3.3.2 Emotion norms and moral feelings of the self

Cultural dimensions and situated context produce normative and moralised emotions for particular social groups. Since mothering scripts are also morally founded, emotions associated with mothering are, in part, moralised by the cultural ideals of normative mothering previously discussed. The concepts of emotion norms and moralised self-feelings are therefore important.

Hochschild (1979) first defined 'feeling rules': emotional responses individuals accept as appropriate in particular social circumstances. Others variously describe 'emotion

styles' and 'emotion characteristics' based in 'constitutive' cultural rules (Middleton, 1989, p.189); 'socially appropriate emotions' (Bowlby & Day, 2018, p.129); and 'emotion norms' which 'reflect and sustain' social structures (Thoits, 2004, p.359). However labelled, such norms are socially, historically and culturally situated (Denzin, 2007), with individuals working their emotions in 'socially patterned ways' (Hochschild, 1979, p.554). Hochschild used this idea to explain why, being socialised accordingly, individuals in particular professions demonstrate similar emotion practices. As feeling rules apply to social roles, this may inform understanding of how emotion influences mothers, since mothering is both a social and work role (see section 3.3.3). Hochschild also links feeling rules to class. Thoits (2004) agrees that such norms may even be 'deliberately created to justify and / or serve the goals of small groups … or entire social systems' (pp.364-365). Gender-specific emotional experiences and behaviours, with masculine and feminine codes, structure how practices are felt (Denzin, 1990; Thoits, 2004). Guilt and shame, for example, are accepted as constituents of mothering (Rich, 1977; Sutherland, 2010). This theory of emotion norms indicates that social rules apply not only to *behaviours*, but to attendant *emotions* too.[8]

In addition, Denzin (1990) describes 'moral feelings of the self' (p.88). Self-feelings signify how an individual feels about themselves and their actions and are a judgement based in accepted moralities because emotion norms are concerned with morality as much as identity (Middleton, 1989). However, moral self-feelings are both situational and unique, reflecting learned emotion norms and behavioural

[8] In line with the distinction made between emotions and feelings, I henceforth use Thoits's (2004) 'emotion norms', whilst acknowledging its root in Hochschild's (1979) 'feeling rules'.

practices associated with a social role, but also shaped by personal experience. In producing maternal emotion norms for particular social circumstances, good mothering ideologies, as the 'mandates of motherhood' (Sutherland, 2010, p.312), engage mothers in measuring their own emotions and making contextualised, moral judgements about how they *should* feel. Such experiences shape moral self-feelings according to the ideologies associated with a practice or site (Denzin, 1990), structuring how individuals feel and make meaning in relational contexts. This 'self-in-emotion' produces maternal emotions like guilt or selflessness (Lois, 2010). This construct enables consideration of connections between the mothering scripts outlined and the emotions mothers discuss, experience and demonstrate (see Chapters 5-7), whilst also acknowledging socio-biographical and psycho-social factors which shape them individually. It affords exploration of connections between the mothers' self-definition against prescribed mothering scripts and their affective experience of homework support, to identify whether moralised patterns of supplementary educational support are mirrored by moralised emotional responses, or self-feelings, about the homework support role. Emotions highlight social identity-practice connections.

Denzin (1990) described moral self-feelings in the context of film viewing. However, here, the mothering ideologies outlined anchor a definition of maternal self to the emotional site of the family. This creates an emotional ideal of the good mother, based on moral feelings embedded in mothering scripts, and demonstrated via mothering practices. These scripts define mothering by particular 'moral feelings' (love, care, devotion). However, negative emotions arise when emotion norms are difficult to maintain despite a mothers' efforts at scripted emotional alignment.

Problematic emotions may be the reverse of apparently positive emotions when norms cannot be sustained, with negative, moralised self-feelings therefore developing.

Hochschild (1979) claims emotion norms encourage 'deep acting' which actively *produces* emotions.[9] Parental norm violations, such as feeling anger, 'motivate well-socialised actors to attempt to alter their feelings' (Thoits, 2004, p.367). Self-feelings influenced by shared norms are therefore 'a tool in self-construction' (Lois, 2010, p.440), as, over time, living particular social roles results in culturally expected feelings. Although this acknowledges the social shaping of emotional adaptation, it also frames the individual as active in producing their emotions. This does not falsify emotions, but illustrates how, although not solely instinctive, deeply felt emotions are fundamental to an individual's social identity. This normatively structured, but active, work by individuals suggests agency.

3.3.3 GENDERED LOVE LABOUR: CARE, CARE WORK AND EMOTION CARE WORK

Mothering's relational basis, already outlined, leads to care and love being viewed as maternal emotions, with many practices and obligations arising from this. Connecting these emotions is 'a sense of the bonds which tie us to [others]' (Graham, 1983, p.15). Care is hard to define *because* it is a relational emotion and experience (Doucet, 2012). However, this makes care significant, because humans *are* relational beings: emotional as well as cognate, social as well as individual (Gilligan, 1995). Care is built over multiple dimensions: biological, social, psychic,

[9] This contrasts with the idea of emotion management as *outward* performance of situational conformity, which Cottingham (2016) argues limits understanding of the 'scope' and 'potency' with which emotion shapes social life (p.453).

relational (Hollway, 2006) and biographical, and given meaning within the individual. Hollway states: 'One feature of selves that is built up in this unconsciously intersubjective [relational] way is the capacity to care' (p.85). Intersubjectivity, and individual psycho-social dimensions, suggest care and care practices should be studied holistically.

'Deep and profound gender inequalities in the doing of care and love work … [and] a moral imperative on women to care that does not operate in the same way for men' (Lynch & Lyons, 2008, p.2) makes the care emotion (and its physical practice, care work) unequal, thereby constraining women, locking them into family practices, including those influenced by schools. This culturally dominant concept of care operates through women's assumed natural dispositions. It expects mothers to be continuously available, emotionally, physically and cognitively, whatever their own contexts or needs (O'Brien, 2008). However, despite the moral imperative for care work created by mothering scripts and emotion norms, and care's criticality to human life, society ambivalently ignores its value (hooks, 2000, cited in Lynch & Lyons, 2008). Whilst neoliberal narratives portray the feminine as inferior, women's care work is devalued (Whiley et al., 2021). Although care's meaning might shift over time, currently, a broad temporal and spatial 'caringscape' responsibilises mothers (McKie et al., 2002).

Care is centred in locations where women dominate, particularly the home and family (Graham, 1983). Pervasive social 'truths' and norms of feminine care tied to the family, underpinned by ideas of maternal self-sacrifice and selflessness (Gilligan, 1995), situate care as a mother's duty. Despite increased maternal employment

(Reid Boyd & Letherby, 2014), becoming a mother invokes traditional care duties (Suwada, 2021). Furthermore, whilst paid employment has reduced women's unpaid *housework*, this is not true for *childcare*. Since the 1970s, maternal childcare time has increased (Lois, 2010; Ramey & Ramey, 2010); during the Covid-19 pandemic, it was 'substantially more' than fathers (Institute for Fiscal Studies, 2020, n.p.; further discussed in Postscript). An increase in developmentally-focused childcare (Ramey & Ramey, 2010) reflects pressure for maternal educational engagement (see Chapter 2). The social assumptions underpinning the traditional 'breadwinner-housewife' myth still exert influence on mothers' work. Mothering scripts turn mothers into 'moral care workers' (O'Brien, 2007, p.160), as both care and care work embed within dominant mothering models.

This cultural framing, bolstered by child development debates (Golden & Erdreich, 2014), and rooted in middle-class childrearing practices, is, according to Gillies (2006b), used to discredit working-class mothers: this 'belie[s] the powerful emotional commitments such mothers make to their children' (p.283) and overlooks the capital advantages which support middle-class mothers' emotional involvement with education, thereby masking working-class mothers' equal emotional investment (Reay, 2000). Gendered care is therefore often also defined by class.

The framing of gendered care work as a natural maternal ability means it is often not considered work at all (O'Brien, 2008). Definitions of economic labour exclude care (Golden & Erdreich, 2014; Lynch & Lyons, 2008). Categorisations of work and care, and their accompanying value, are defined by gender, not task (Doucet, 2012), while the label 'care' attributes the behaviour to personal qualities (or emotional desires)

(Reay, 1998). As the family 'caretaker', mothers are defined by assumptions about who they are rather than what they do; the work embedded in their labour is thereby expunged (Erikson, 1993). This care/work binary produces 'shadow labour' (Hochschild, 1983/2003, p.167), with maternal caring 'rendered invisible' and unproductive, despite being 'fundamental and ethical' (O'Brien, 2007, p.162). Yet caring is a dual practice, shaped by emotional / symbolic bonds, *and* the physical enactment of a service (Graham, 1983).

Asymmetric, gendered differences in care work are structurally underpinned. Institutionally responsibilised care is relevant to homework. As argued, parental educational responsibility is assumed by society, governments and schools. This labour is subsumed into mothers' already invisible care work. Schools demonstrate gendered assumptions about parental support and direct expectations at 'good' mothers; fathers' school support is assistive, under mothers' charge, and usually far below maternal levels, such that a traditional division of care work remains, centring mothers not just as care workers, but as *education* care workers.

The framing of educational care work as maternal is not only promoted by patriarchal institutions. Half of O'Brien's (2007) mother-participants demonstrated 'internalized gender ideologies', believing women were more suited to caring (p.167), resisting descriptions of their labour as 'work', instead using 'narratives of love' which centre the maternal bond (p.170). They justified fathers' lack of hands-on care using traditional tropes (men's longer working hours), or suggested fathers offered background emotional support (O'Brien, 2008). Even those mothers not referencing traditional gender ideologies believed 'no one else [would] care in the

way they did' (p.145). Mothers perceive 'mothering' and 'parenting' differently, with their own care as more effective (D.Pedersen, 2012), aligning with social assumptions that mothers are better carers. Wider literature confirms that mothers view emotion care work, including school support, as 'significant, valuable and inalienable' (O'Brien, 2008, p.138, referencing D.Smith and Griffith, 1990, David et al., 1994, Reay, 1998, and O'Brien 2007), suggesting emotion norms support care itself. Care practices are highly gendered, deeply moralised, ideologically justified, and personally felt.

Key elements of care include emotional responsiveness, or relationality, and a moral framework (Doucet, 2012). As a maternal emotion norm, care produces characteristic emotion behaviours (caring). It is thus subject to both moralised self-feelings, and moralised mothering scripts. Produced within the social role 'mother,' care is defined by assumed practices, reproduced in particular ways, governed socially and constituted relationally. This centres the mother-child dyad within how care is experienced and enacted. As long as society constructs care as a woman's emotion, this relational experience of care will remain invisible (Doucet, 2012).

As gendered care work reproduces itself within acts of caring, mothers develop different skills and knowledge to non-mothers. Gendered knowledge leads to protection, nurturance, education and care (O'Brien, 2008; Ruddick, 1989). However, Nakano Glenn (1994) warns that claiming an emotional and physical knowledge based on mothering experiences reinforces mothers' gendered mantel as main carer. The danger is, '[a]s long as mothering continues to be associated with the daily nurturance of the child … the weight of responsibility for childcare in the home will

continue to fall to mothers' (Sutherland, 2010, p.316). Gendered knowledge should therefore be recognised as skills *developed in the act of caring*, through gendered socialisation, rather than instinctive aptitudes. Just as nurses develop emotions like compassion and empathy through secondary socialisation (Cottingham, 2016), mothers' gendered care knowledge may be socialised through their care worker role.

Duncombe and Marsden (1995) describe asymmetrical, gendered care work and associated emotions as 'the last and most obstinate manifestation of gender inequality', claiming women 'collude with male power by living the family 'myth'' (p.150). Yet women's feelings about their care work are not a form of false consciousness, and women's care labour should be respected *despite* being unequal. Indeed, some mothering discourses, including the desire to nurture, may appeal to mothers seeking explanation for their choices and emotions (Baldwin, 2021; de Marneffe, 2019; Kawash, 2011). Therefore, mothers' acceptance of, and agency within, educational care work, including what shapes their self-understanding as care workers, is important. Although burdensome, and despite emotion norms and mothering scripts, maternal care work may empower mothers *as* morally upright and 'good' parents, affording meaning to their experiences.

Furthermore, maternal care is more than a set of socially produced norms. It is more than skilled support, physical acts, domestic chores, or basic childcare (Erikson, 1993). Care is 'unique', not just a task but a demonstration of feeling, being 'oriented towards the production of another's emotions, feelings and sense of self', it is also social, emotional and cognitive (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, pp.264, 265). Moreover, mothers may desire close involvement in their child's care (de Marneffe, 2019;

Hollway, 2006). Situated within a powerfully close relationship, their work is moral, affective and intense, 'infused with emotional meaning' and focused on children's wellbeing; mothering *is* caring, by simultaneously communicating emotion towards, and enacting labour for, another (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p.273).

Maternal 'skills, love, affection and a willingness to spend time and energy [on their child]' (O'Brien, 2008, p.139) is not just care work, but *emotion care work*, distinct from general care labour because of 'the special texture of the relationship between mothers and children …. [a] powerful emotional dimension that serves also to conceal women's devotion to their children as work …' (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p.265). Emotions arising from each unique mother-child relationship cannot be assumed to match those in non-maternal relationships (Suissa, 2006). As a 'labour of love', or duality between work and feelings (Graham, 1983, p.16), emotion care work is therefore more than the attitudinal support or academic socialisation required by schools. O'Brien's (2007) aforementioned love narratives of education work tie care work to emotion and affect, centring emotional capitals and skills. Such work is complex, deeply embedded in maternal identities and situated in emotional responses to children's needs. 'Love labouring is affectively-driven and involves at different times and to different degrees, emotional work, mental work, cognitive skills and physical work' (Lynch & Lyons, 2008, p.19).

This relational, emotion-based work is fundamentally different because it cannot be commodified or transferred to others (Lynch & Lyons, 2008; O'Brien, 2007; Suwada, 2021). This raises the question of whether homework, having been enveloped within maternal care work, should be extracted from mothers' labours since, once

entangled with love or care emotions, it may become hard to reject, not only for social and cultural reasons, but because the very definition of emotion care work ties this labour to the relational feelings one has towards the recipient, centring it within one's emotional identity. If homework is *emotion* care work, it may be felt and experienced differently than forms of care labour which can be transferred to others (such as health care).

Defining emotion care work (distinct from other care work) as relationally located, interactional, intersubjective and potentially differing mother-to-mother by being situated within unique relations, matches my broader definition of emotion and mothering as relational experiences. DeVault (1999) argues that the term 'emotion work' has a 'braided quality, combining physical caretaking with love, nurturance, and emotional guidance' (p.54). The alternative term 'emotional labour' is, for this thesis, too simplistic, lacking room for the possibility that burdensome work may also have emotional value to mothers. In combining 'care work' with 'emotion work' to produce 'emotion care work', the relational is acknowledged alongside the practical, because mothering, as posited by Ruddick (1989), is a duality: a 'fiercely passionate love' and labour about which mothers can feel ambivalent or angry (p.29). Whilst viewing maternal activities as expressions of love risks diminishing the labour involved (Erikson, 1993), the emotion care work concept tempers this by encompassing both dimensions, including their entanglement. Functional support practices (like homework) might therefore be understood through their emotional drivers.

The emotion care work discussed here is profoundly gendered. Its potential is evident for understanding mothers' work within a school practice already highlighted as highly gendered. In questioning what shapes mothers' acceptance of this imbalanced educational care workload, the emotion concepts discussed will illuminate mothers' narratives, particularly as these definitions afford consideration not just of the social framework of mothers' labour, but their agentic potential too. These concepts are relevant because 'we live in a society that equates women's and mothers' identities with love and care' (O'Brien, 2007, p.171). Mothers' emotion care work, being prompted within maternal relations, is fundamentally distinct.

3.3.4 Connecting emotion and homework

Middleton (1989) argues that emotions require understanding not just in respect of the focus culture (in this case mothering), but in relation to contextual applications or practices, where norms and experiences are 'ordered' by cultural regulation. One example is the education support context. Schools capitalise on mothers' care work, viewing their educational support as within 'natural caring' which mothers 'perform out of 'love' for their children' (O'Brien, 2007, p.173). Maternal emotions, emotion care work and acts of school support therefore intersect.

Gillies (2006b), Reay (2000) and O'Brien (2007, 2008) highlight the emotional capital required for successful education support, while Hutchison (2012) describes the 'intricate emotional management and pedagogical repertoires' required for even basic homework, and tensions when mothers are assumed, but may not be, the most appropriate parent for the role (p.196). Reay (2000) identifies intense emotions (guilt, anxiety and frustration) in maternal accounts of children's schooling, which are

not class-specific, while Else-Quest et al. (2008) observe how emotional 'contagion' and 'convergence' occurs during homework interactions, as anger, boredom, or joy reciprocally transfer between parties. Both children's *and* mothers' emotions are therefore implicated in homework, although the influence of these emotions is debated (Reay, 2000). Whilst the literature reveals negative stories and relational stresses, there are also aspects of maternal homework with emotional benefits, such as self-belief in the pedagogical importance of their support (Levin et al., 1997).

I suggested, in Chapter 2, that maternal responses to homework sit within personal responsibility. When tied to mothering scripts, emotion norms and moralised self-feelings, this produces individualised homework support experiences. This tangle of impacting elements, which includes biographic events, converges in specific emotions bound to a mothers' experience of homework support. Thus, as a commonplace, gendered, cultural expectation, homework support is likely to be better understood when its interaction with emotions is investigated.

The complexity and variability of maternal responses suggests an investigation which recognises the possible range of emotional experiences, could be enlightening, particularly by identifying what shapes these responses and how they impact homework support. In this context, the emotions expressed by mothers will indicate how the homework support culture operates and how it is socially and individually managed. Mothers' public display of their personal emotions, demonstrable through interview, observed behaviour and personal reflection will reveal how emotions are both individualised *and* socially ordered, including possible tension, or synergy,

between the two. Emotion is therefore a helpful tool for understanding homework practices.

3.3.5 EMBODIED EMOTION, EMOTION PRACTICE AND RESEARCHER-NEARNESS

Emotions are 'constructed in relation to other people and *felt as embodied, sensory experiences*' (Bowlby & Day, 2018, p.129, my emphasis). The deeply rooted moral dimensions of relational mothering are therefore both emotionally embedded *and* embodied (Miller, 2005). Thus, emotion is not just experienced, but is visible through embodied micro-behaviours and situated actions.

McKenna (2012) states that 'thinking and doing should not be seen as separate, neither should mind and body be ontologically disconnected' (p.239). Emotion is demonstrated not only through words and description, but also through body actions, affect and learned social behaviours (Bowlby & Day, 2018). Emotion displays are simultaneously automatic and rooted in social assumptions. Embodied micro-practices within relational encounters carry meaning. Thus, embodiments shape knowledge. This conceptualisation of embodiment encompasses the social and the unconscious. Connecting cognition and physicality is therefore important in understanding how reality is experienced and practice constructed. An analysis of embodiment therefore accesses the emotions embedded in experiences, as they are displayed by social and relational actors.

Embodied emotions can be variously interpreted, even when emotions appear universal (Zembylas, 2007). Interpreting emotion therefore requires awareness of the deeply embedded, cultural construction of both body language and emotion norms (Long, cited in Bowlby & Day, 2018). Denzin (1990) defines such 'embodied

embedded actions' as emotion practices (p.89), arguing they are both gender specific and moulded by social structures. The structures nominating the behaviours observed in this thesis are school, the family, society and motherhood itself.

Emotion practice is 'the enactment/embodiment of emotional capital', whilst emotional capital is the management of emotion to further one's position (Cottingham, 2016, p.460). It has been argued that emotional capital is held differently by middle- and working-class families. However, stereotypes of working-class parents are disputed by Gillies (2006b) who found deeply invested working-class mothers 'generated significant levels of emotional capital', although this was differently activated, to compensate for marginalisation and disadvantage (p.261). Thus, varied emotion practices and embodiments do not evidence lack of care, or failed emotional connection, but may indicate different initiation of emotional capitals. However, emotion practices remain pertinent to this thesis, as the embodied manifestation of emotion norms and care work. Socialised and embodied emotion practices are therefore a potential tool in understanding maternal experiences, particularly in illuminating *individual* mother-child homework support.

Exploring embodiment and emotion practice requires recognition of tension between the socialised and the agentic individual: one idea centres power within social structures; the other acknowledges a reflexive, conscious individual. Shilling (1997) recommends a dualistic stance, to appreciate 'the significance for human agency of a socially shaped form of embodiment, yet which refuses to make the embodied actor a mere product of society' (p.737). This view connects mothers'

embodied actions during homework with their reflections on these, viewing embodiment as a lens onto both considered *and* less conscious emotions.

Claims that embodied knowledge is 'metaphysically mysterious or inscrutable' are rejected (Clough, 2013, p.130). Instead '[e]motionally-sensed knowledge' is communicated between individuals as relational humans (Hubbard et al., 2001, p.119). Laying a hand on another's arm conveys a sense of care, connection, understanding, comradeship, or calm. Communicating emotions bodily, within their relational context, occurs because both emotion and embodiment are relational. A child perceives a parent's displeasure through their facial expression and modifies their behaviour accordingly, because emotional knowing produces cognitive responses (Hubbard et al., 2001). Emotion, embodiment and knowledge are therefore entwined.

Feminist epistemology suggests reason and emotion are inseparable. Because 'we infer other people's viewpoints from how they *display* their feeling' (Hochschild, 1983/2003, p.32; my emphasis), research should recognise 'the mutually constitutive rather than oppositional relation between reason and emotion' (Jaggar, 1989, p.163). Emotionally-sensed knowledge therefore affords the use of researcher emotion to view data. Not only does embodiment communicate to the adjacent child, mothers' embodied behaviours carry meaning to the researcher-observer, making the researcher's own emotion responses meaningful (Hubbard et al., 2001, p.119). This complex, iterative, constant process acts as methodological guide, prompting actions and enriching understanding (Knight & Zempi, 2020), 'permeating the entire [research] process and even going beyond it' (Loughran & Mannay, 2018a,

p.262). In facilitating identification between experienced and expressed emotions, and highlighting mismatch, 'emotional participation' brings interpretive nuance to analysis (Bergman Blix, 2009). 'Feeling emotion is necessary to understanding the significance of others' emotion' argue Bowlby and Day (2018, p.138). Indeed, where researcher emotion is ignored, or supressed, knowledge signals are obscured (Kleinman & Copp, 1993). As a 'constitutive element', emotion should not be segued into a separate section, but integrated throughout (Loughran & Mannay, 2018b, p.2), to 'add power in understanding, analysis and interpretation' (J.Holland, 2007, p.195). However, the complex entanglements created by seeking emotionally-sensed knowledge through relational interactions with participants, means interpretations are intricate but uncertain (Bowlby & Day, 2018).

Andrew Cooper (2009) advocates being 'practice-near' or professionally aligned with those studied. A mother-researcher investigating an activity from within mothering practices is an 'expert practitioner' (D.Smith, 1987) with a honed eye for the nuanced data. Researcher response 'enrich[es] the process of producing knowledge; because women using reflexive practices harness emotional and cognitive responses to operationalise a powerful gaze' (Harris & Huntington, 2001, p.133). In this thesis, researcher emotion work mirrors the mother-participants' emotion work through shared experience. Researcher-nearness affords proximity to participants' experiences through a visceral, bodily and emotional closeness likened to 'the smell of the real'; this emotional intensity is like 'losing our minds' as we shift between our own experience and our participant's (A.Cooper, 2009, p.432). Some methodologies intensify this experience, but prompt epistemological uncertainty. Supported by

theory, such epistemological challenges produce analysis with greater relational and emotional depth.

Studies which achieve nearness challenge the researcher, create personal change and produce new understanding, using small samples to afford '[t]he discovery of complex particulars':

> The closer one comes to a single case, the more its uniqueness and particularity demands to be understood; but equally the more its value for the illumination of all other cases with which there is a family resemblance becomes evident (A.Cooper, 2009, p.432)

Group principles are thus revealed by observing differences in detailed cases. Emotion, experience and epistemology are 'inextricably entangled' and explored through researcher-nearness; an emotional connection which aids research (p.438).

3.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter has outlined the concepts relevant to this study. I have differentiated between an oppressive motherhood which demands particular motherwork, and an individual mothering experience which is relational, emotional, and can be both enjoyable and agential. I have discussed the idealised good mother produced in moralised mothering scripts, against which mothers are judged, demonstrating that these scripts entangle with the educational practices and schoolification processes discussed in Chapter 2. I have offered a new construct of competitive-investment mothering, revealing how this underpins the good schooling mother and is hard to resist. However, in highlighting hybrid mothering and the potential malleability of mothering scripts, I have suggested maternal agency in enacting mothering.

In operationalising the concept of emotion, I have drawn on emotion norms, moral self-feelings, emotion care work, embodiment and emotion practices, demonstrating how care and care work's marginalisation as maternal attributes conceals mothers' labours. By connecting care work to emotion, I recognise emotion care work, or 'love labour' (Graham, 1983; Hutchison, 2012; Lynch & Lyons, 2008) as intense, relational and gendered. Finally, I have drawn attention to researcher-nearness, a tool of epistemological-emotional entanglement which deepens knowledge.

In the following chapter, I outline my methodological approach and analytic process, building on the feminist stance discussed in Chapter 1.

4 METHODOLOGY

4.1 RESEARCH DESIGN, RECRUITMENT AND PARTICIPANT SAMPLE

This study produces individual feminist portraits from multiple data collection methods, including semi-structured interviews, participant generated videos of mother-child homework interactions, and stimulated reflections. In this chapter, I explain the methodological grounds for the research, articulating how ideas from matricentric feminism, portraiture and psycho-social studies enabled the research aims to be met. Finally, I illustrate the holistic analysis process.

Data gathering occurred between June 2018 and May 2019. Participants were interviewed twice. Discussion topics were generally framed as 'can you tell me about…?' narrative prompts (Appendix A). Interviews were not linear because participants were encouraged to share their own narrative (Fraser, 2004). Between interviews, each mother filmed example(s) of her homework support. At Interview 2, selected scenes were used to stimulate her reflections, alongside follow-up questions from Interview 1. *Figure 2* indicates the data gathering process.

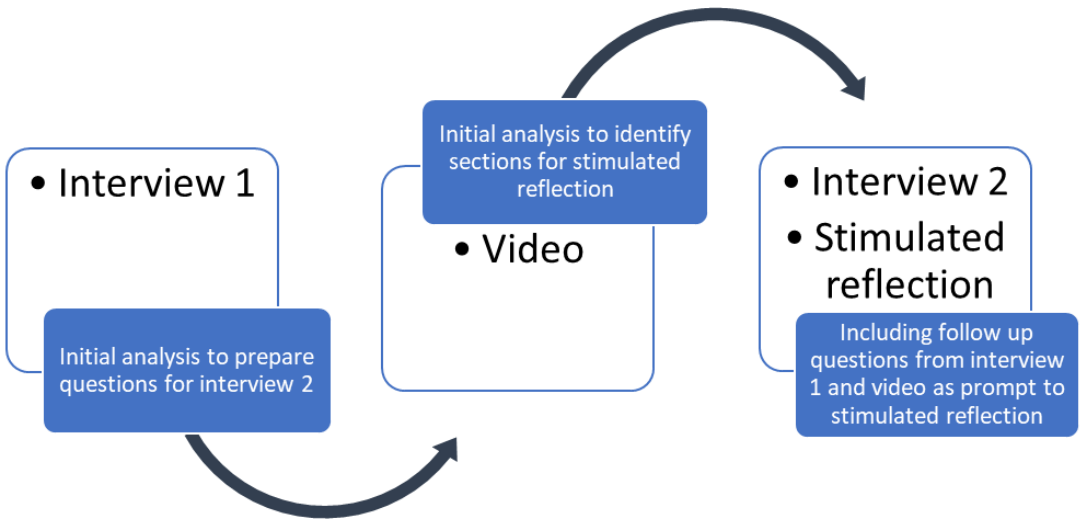


Figure 2: Data gathering process

Across both interviews, I averaged one hundred and forty minutes in conversation with each mother: considerable time to build rapport and pursue narrative detail. *Table 1* indicates timings.

Table 1: Research methods, average duration and timings

Method	initial interview	participant generated video(s)	follow up interview & stimulated reflection
Average duration	69 mins	22 mins (from 1 or 2 videos combined)	69 mins
Timing	-	4-8 weeks after initial interview	within 4 months of initial interview

Since homework is set by most primary schools (Hansen et al., 2010), and most parents declare a support role (DCSF, 2008), I anticipated straightforward recruitment. However, it was challenging. I did not recruit through schools, positing that they might encourage mother-participants with positive homework stories, discouraging those whose narratives could reflect negatively on the school's practices, or its support for families. Dixon and Lewis (2008) suggest some home practices are suppressed when schools control researcher-family contact. Having established that supplementary schoolwork is bound to mothering (Griffith & Smith, 2005), regulated by hegemonic ideologies (Lehner-Mear, 2021), and entangled in a school-controlled parent involvement discourse (Goodall, 2021), I did not wish to gather 'expected' narratives or inadvertently contribute to some parents being silenced. As research interviews already contain power dynamics, and a key aim was to explore how the moral shaping of motherhood intersects with homework, I also sought to avoid meeting mothers in a location (school) which exerts moral power over them (David et al., 1997; Dixon & Lewis, 2008; Hyndman, 2014; O'Brien, 2007),

thereby inhibiting participants' ability to share challenging perspectives or publicly resist homework discourses.

Ethical and methodological complexities arise from pre-existing researcher-participant relationships (Taylor, 2011; Toy-Cronin, 2018). I hoped to avoid these by recruiting unknown participants. I used social media initially, although this risked excluding mothers without digital capital: likely those with limited socio-economic means, or from immigrant and minority backgrounds (Goedhart & Broerse, 2019). I drafted a recruitment poster, created a project website, then attempted recruitment on the following online sites:

- A closed Facebook parents' group (group membership several thousand; not restricted to UK parents).
- NetMums and MumsNet (open access, national parenting websites; millions of monthly visitors).
- Local Parent Association Facebook page (run by parents).
- My personal Facebook page (set to public view).
- An email from my university account asking friends / colleagues to share.

After 24 hours, I made amendments. In the photograph used (mother and child working on homework), the child looked disgruntled and the mother's face was partially obscured. This did not sufficiently forefront the mother as research focus and risked implying I only sought those with negative experiences. Instead, I used an image with neutral facial expressions, with the mother more visible. Maintaining neutrality in the wording was difficult. I used three questions: *Are you mum to a*

primary aged child who receives homework? Are you the parent most involved with homework? Do you have views and experiences of primary homework you are willing to share? (Appendix B)

However, I began to consider potential difficulties in recruiting mothers. My theoretical positioning of mothers suggests they are time poor and burdened by the family-work-care balancing act, thus having limited opportunity for time-intensive research participation. I also conjectured that mothers who are happy with homework might see no need for the study. One month later, concerned about low recruitment, I re-designed the poster. Rapport between a mother-researcher and her mother-interviewees is important in feminist research (Oakley, 1981, 2016). I highlighted my maternal position, appealing to potential participants as another mother who would understand their experiences. Conveying informality and friendliness, I emphasised my interest in mothers' own stories, speculating that attracting volunteers might rest on underlining my openness to nuanced experiences and practical difficulties around involvement (Appendix B). My eventual sample demonstrated that, because success stories are easier to tell (Oakley, 2016), participation was more likely rooted in alignment with good mothering discourses and the feeling rules associated with mothers. Sharing the mothering role was probably insufficient to overcome the morality frame around maternal involvement in children's education.

Having recruited just two participants through social networking sites, I expanded my approach, circulating the poster via: Children's Centres; libraries; centres for children's after-school activities; other mother / parenting-focused online

communities; and mother attendees of courses I have taught previously, who know me as a trustworthy and understanding person and might publicise amongst their friends. I added my poster to the university's mature students' online network, surmising this community might contain mothers willing to participate through greater research familiarity.

Table 2: Participant characteristics

Pseudonym (age)	No. of children	Focus child	Work status	Marital status	Education	Declared class	Cultural class
Anna (40)	1	girl* – 6 (Y1)	f/t hospital consultant	married	Masters	m/c	m/c
Fiona (42)	2	boy – 9 (Y4)	f/t** HR advisor	married	Degree	-	w/c
Helen (29)	2	boy – 6 (Y2)	p/t radiographer	married	Degree	-	w/c
Jenny (41)	3	girl – 10 (Y6)	f/t therapist	married	Masters	m/c	m/c
Leah (44)	1	boy – 10 (Y6)	p/t lecturer	single	PhD	lower m/c	m/c
Nell (35)	1	girl – 6 (Y2)	f/t independent researcher	single	Masters	w/c	w/c
Ruth (33)	2	girl – 7 (Y3)	f/t health care assistant	married	GCSEs	'poorer'	w/c
Sian (41)	2	girl – 9 (Y5)	f/t nurse	partner	PhD	-	w/c

* independent school ** unemployed at study outset

I eventually recruited seven participants: three via people I knew; four from online posts. Finally, I included the mother from my pilot interview. Her original narrative was interesting and because her involvement had been artificially curtailed by not

being offered a reflective discussion, it felt ethical to include and honour her contribution, despite being known to me, personally.

Participant characteristics are indicated in *table 2*. All eight were white, working mothers. Seven had tertiary-level qualifications, though not all identified as middle-class. These characteristics may reflect where I advertised the study, who shared my poster, the reticence of Children's Centres to engage, and the difficulty for those deemed 'unsuccessful' by the education system to discuss their own role in their child's education.

Class categorisation was problematic, though classed issues relevant to mothering, education and mothers' roles in schooling are clear (Gillies, 2006b; Lareau, 1989, 2003; Reay, 1998). Reay (1998) asserts that 'a rigid theoretical framework grounded in occupational categorization has ceased to tell more than a fraction of the story of social class' (p.22). For this study, personal class identification felt more enlightening than assigning class by profession, income or deprivation. Its relevance is in how individual mothers position themselves in relation to dominant, largely middle-class educational discourses, and in how they feel positioned, as classed mothers, by schools. Categorisations in column 7 are those given by the participants, although, probably due to the moral complexities of classed mothering discourses, some declined to answer.[10] I provide my general understanding of their cultural class in column 8, compiled holistically by combining information from interviews with

[10] In Reay's (1998) study of mothers and schooling, she also recognised mothers' *self-positioning* 'in the social space of class relations' as meaningful. Her participants evidenced similar 'ambivalences and ambiguities' regarding their class (pp.41, 42).

details such as home location. Understanding the mothers' classed positions remains a complex, and imperfect, dimension of this thesis.

All participants demonstrated at least some homework approval. Recruiting non-approving mothers, or those with negative experiences, was difficult. Moral scripts of mothering and discourses of parental involvement, embedding of educational support into mothers' care work, and entanglement of maternal emotions in educational practices, makes it difficult for non-compliant or discontented mothers to come forward (Lehner-Mear, 2021, discusses how non-standard homework views are moderated and restricted in mother communities). Discourses of maternal responsibility mean revealing challenging experiences exposes a mother to potential judgement, risking her 'goodness.' The most vivid account of negative homework came from the previously known participant. Research participation required a significant expression of trust in me as the researcher. Recruiting directly from my own social network might have produced a broader spectrum of views, including mothers willing to express negative experiences and opinions.

Chapters 5 and 6 include participant context descriptions. Mothers not centred in those chapters are presented in Appendix C.

4.2 MATRICENTRIC FEMINISM: DEFINING A FEMINISM FOR MOTHERS

Chapter 1 outlined shared feminist intentions, principles and practices, within which a number of femin*isms* are recognised (Parry, 2020) each responding to 'the specific manifestations of patriarchal relations' (Franks, 2002, p.42) and oppressions its protagonists highlight (race, class, geography, sexuality, disability etc.) The

conceptualisation of mothers and mothering given in Chapter 3 suggests the need for a feminist approach recognising maternal experiences.

O'Reilly (2019) describes motherhood as 'the unfinished business of feminism' (p.13). Historically some feminists have rejected mothering, due to its supposed reflection of biological essentialism, arguing that gender is instead socially constructed (Bueskens, 2016; Kawash, 2011). However, feminism's nervousness towards a mothered standpoint inhibits understanding of the gendered and socialised dimensions of mothering (Hollway, 2016; O'Reilly, 2016). Tensions within the maternal role require deeper understanding than is possible from the binary position early feminists took (Hollway, 2016). As Chapter 3 revealed, 'mother' is not only a role taken up by individuals, but is allocated normative practices, through which mothers experience the world by their 'othered' position (Alcoff, 1988). These specific gendered oppressions necessitate a mothers', or matricentric, feminism 'organized from and for their particular identity and work' (O'Reilly, 2019, p.13). *Matricentric feminism* views motherhood as a critical category for understanding oppressions manifest in maternal inequalities. Institutional practices 'undermine[] women's equality' (Bueskens, 2016, p.xv), suggesting both their voices and specific experiences, within processes like homework, must be illuminated.

O'Reilly (2016), elaborating Rich (1977), contends that beyond mother*hood* as a site of patriarchal oppression, mother*ing* 'can be a source of power' (p.201). Matricentric feminism is not essentialist, but advances feminism by simultaneously enabling exploration of the situated knowledges of individuals experiencing motherhood *and* recognising mothers' potential for empowered, individualised responses to society's

normalised scripts and practices. Mothering is a meaningful dimension when mothers live not as women, but as 'mother women' (O'Reilly, 2019, p.20). Perhaps, O'Reilly argues, 'maternity matters more than gender' (p.14). A matricentric, rather than maternalist, approach can encompass all those who self-identify as 'mother'. Since homework support has been identified as a practice burdening mothers specifically, this lens is useful.

Matricentric feminism addresses both scholarly discomfort *and* 'cultural anxiety around nurture, … caregiving and emotion' in women's lives (J.Stephens, 2011, p.1), bridging the feminist-maternal divide by recognising mothers' subjectivities, experiences and emotions. It critiques patriarchal and oppressive motherhood, problematises assumptions of instinctive self-sacrifice and biological essentialism, and yet recognises the 'variegated landscape of empowered mothering beyond the prevailing model of intensive motherhood' (Bueskens, 2016, p.xii).

However, Mauthner and Doucet (1998) warn that some feminisms ignore maternal perspectives which contradict their claims. Baldwin (2021) argues that O'Reilly's matricentric model positions mother and child in tension, whilst de Marneffe (2019) claims mother and child may share reciprocal desires. Both writers assert that denouncing maternalism invalidates or even pathologises the voices and self-identities of women who *do* experience mothering as an internal call. Hollway (2016) describes a connected, or *trans*-subjectivity derived from mother-child relationships which informs maternal identity, suggesting that feminism's social constructivist rejection of biological explanations obscures psycho-social subjectivities derived from mothers' personal experiences, thus limiting understanding of how such

experiences shape mothers psychologically. This intersubjective awareness acknowledges mothers' experiences of a caring or affective role, dovetailing with the relational component of mothering previously outlined, paving the way for maternal emotions to be studied. A feminism for mothers should therefore recognise the impact of inter-subjective dimensions.

Matricentric feminism leads me to adopt methods such as portraiture, stimulated reflection and auteur theory, which enable emphasis on mothers' experiences. However, I heed the warning to recognise *all* mothers' voices, not only those meeting O'Reilly's maternal ideal. For example, my own ideas of maternal empowerment are challenged by the way some participants found agency. Underpinning analysis with a psycho-social-biographical approach (see section 4.5) affords exploration of how mothers gain power and agency from belief in their maternal disposition to care. By recognising oppression and empowerment as differently experienced (Millen, 1997), maternal variety is accepted, not rejected as centred in oppression.

Whilst acknowledging that researcher-researched congruence is imperfect, with particular social characteristics more, or less, significant in different circumstances, the relational ontology, situated knowledges and reciprocity I earlier defined mean that a matricentric mother-researcher investigating private, maternal homework interactions, may overturn previously male-stream assumptions which obscure mothers' experiences (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). A matricentric feminism exploring how mothers are *variously* psycho-socially and biographically shaped, locates knowledges with mothers *and* acknowledges researcher situatedness: 'Her seeing

arises in a context structured by the same system of social relations structuring the everyday worlds of those whose experience provides the problematic of her inquiry' writes Dorothy Smith (1987, p.142). Matricentric feminism is therefore a powerful research tool.

4.3 VIDEO AND STIMULATED REFLECTION

This section articulates how I collected and conceptualised the mother-recorded video data and stimulated reflections, and discusses the ethical issues involved.

4.3.1 COLLECTING THE VIDEO DATA: THE VISUAL AND EMBODIED

To avoid compelling the mothers to meet *my* idea of homework (Q.Allen, 2012), I gave minimal instructions for their videos:

- Routine homework, conducted under usual conditions
- Twenty-to-thirty-minutes long (later reduced to fifteen-to-twenty-minutes)[11]
- Avoid filming mother-child reading[12]
- Film two activities if younger children undertake shorter tasks
- Film using mobile phone / laptop[13]

[11] Even short passages contained considerable relational and embodied activity. My single-researcher capacity to analyse highly detailed videos needed balancing against a desire for 'complete' interactions. Shorter films also reduced the amount needing to be omitted at the stimulated reflection phase.

[12] Research already indicates this is beneficial; see Kalb & van Ours, 2014; Price & Kalil, 2019; Sénéchal & Lefevre, 2002.

[13] Mobile phones and webcams reform researcher access to family interaction, making in-home filming easy (Jewitt, 2012). Although two potential participants declined involvement due to the filmed requirement, this element was generally smooth-running because the technology was commonplace and filming was a socially familiar, family behaviour (Holliday, 2004).

The following occurred:

- Most participants filmed English or Maths homework; two filmed History, one of which was craft-based
- Two mothers artificially curtailed their video when the suggested time was reached
- All videos showed the mother supporting one child; some moved into and out of shot according to their level of interaction

Table 3 shows the curriculum subject and length of each video, by participant.

Table 3: Participant video data

Participant	Length of analysed video	Curriculum subject
Anna	1st video: 8.5 mins 2nd video: 6 mins	Literacy & Maths
Fiona	32 mins	History
Helen	16 mins	Literacy
Jenny	19 mins	History / Design Technology
Leah	31 mins	Literacy & Maths
Nell	17 mins*	Maths
Ruth	15.5 mins**	Maths
Sian	28 mins	Literacy

* also provided a second video which demonstrated mother-child reading so was excluded
**also provided a second video which replicated similar elements so was excluded

Visual methods can deepen understanding (Mannay, Creaghan, et al., 2017; Muir & Mason, 2012) by reflecting situated events which are not replicable in researcher-constructed settings, displaying a whole phenomenon in context (Mondada, 2006), capturing the minutiae or 'granularity' of interactions (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002, p.101; Prosser, 2005) and affording methodical analysis of micro-behaviours, environments and relational responses which are not discernible from interview alone.

However, video exposes more than just observational detail. During interactions, individuals focus on social engagement, with other behaviours unconsciously produced, therefore impacting what can be revealed during interview. Switching from a single perspective on talk uncovers the 'unnoticed character of human activity' (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002, p.103), including broader embodied and extra-linguistic features (Mondada, 2006; Muir & Mason, 2012), capturing how culture is 'mapped out on bodies' (Holliday, 2004, p.50) and highlighting actions not considered integral to the focus phenomenon. Homework observations are therefore doubly compelling, orienting me to non-verbal elements and introducing the backstage of maternal homework support: details integral to mothers' social role in homework, but which neither the participant articulates, nor the researcher enquires about.

Interview narratives are structured within broader social discourses, such as 'homework as an educational tool' or 'mothers' responsibility for education.' As 'act[s] of telling' (Holliday, 2004, p.61, after Felman, 1992), video goes beyond that which *can* be expressed at interview (Perakyla, 2006), augmenting participants' conscious intentions, making visible elements outside accepted discourses, and revealing cultural and social dimensions that written or verbal text cannot, in 'glimpses' which are 'sometimes quite profound' (Muir & Mason, 2012, para 4.9). A focus on consciously or unintentionally concealed dimensions is supported by unconscious analysis techniques. Hollway (2015, 2016) later added observational methods to the free association method I adopt (Hollway & Jefferson, 2000, 2013) (see 4.6), arguing that moving beyond what is said accesses embodied and relational dimensions of the psycho-social experience. Observational methods therefore reveal

‘the unsaid to the unsayable … those that reside in and are expressed through the body’ (Hollway, 2009, p.466).

Participant-recorded films reveal the ‘messy … complexity’ of lives, connecting the visual to other senses (Muir & Mason, 2012, para 4.15; Pink et al., 2017). In accessing ‘shared moments of intimacy’ (Gabb, 2010, p.464) and ‘records of fleeting, emotional, dynamic moments’ (Rose, 2016, p.95), sensory aspects of embodied emotion found in visual data create an ‘empathetic technology’ (Pink et al., 2017). This emotional connection with participants' experiences ‘breath[es] a vitality’ into knowledge-making (Muir & Mason, 2012, para 4.13). Consequent researcher reactions coalesce with images to enhance and nuance later interpretations.

Capturing situated, sensory aspects of peoples’ lives is particularly helpful in research focused on private aspects of mothering. Many factors inhibit direct observation of homework support, including ethical questions around entering homes: researchers describe ‘push-me-pull-you’ feelings arising from integration inside families (Gabb, 2010, p.461), or tension from a part-researcher-part-guest role (Yee & Andrews, 2006); others suggest researchers should not intrude private spaces at all (Brannen, 1988). These issues are particularly pertinent to feminist ethics (Gabb, 2010). Further challenges include: adult-child interaction being altered by researcher presence (Baum et al., 1979) and in-person observation requiring impractical family commitment to set homework times (prevented by the unpredictability of mother-child obligations, teacher control of homework timetables, mood, spontaneous learning etc.) These factors are not negated by participant videography but may be reduced (Caronia & Colla, 2021).

Corsaro (1982) claims video is less reliable than other data. However, embedding video into a multi-source study meant it did not operate in a vacuum (Muir & Mason, 2012; Pink, 2021). Arguably, I accessed naturally arising social contexts which would have taken place without my research request (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002; Mannay, Creaghan, et al., 2017; Mondada, 2006). However, research videos are not 'pure'. To avoid pressurising busy mothers, I suggested a one-month period for videoing, which gave participants multiple opportunities to choose what to record, film multiple examples, or re-record until they were satisfied (Holliday, 2004), particularly where homework load was heavy. Decision-making included questions of location, time, mother-child positioning, assistance given, talk used etc. The tendency to film English and Maths may indicate common homework, or that which the mothers perceived to be important, which they felt confident with, or which avoided tensions. Renold et al. (2008) emphasise the ethical importance of participant choice. These invisible decisions emphasise the data's constructed nature, indicating the value of both stimulated reflection and the auteur theory shortly described.

The film-maker mothers had agency to construct individual micro-cultures (Prosser & Schwartz, 1998). A focus on participants' subjectivities supports feminist epistemology, meaning participant-generated video may empower individuals in the research process (Q.Allen, 2012; Hutchison, 2011), although this empowerment is debated (Kindon, 2016; Lomax et al., 2011). Participant-videographers may imagine the observer will be 'like' them (Holliday, 2004). However, as highlighted, binary insider/outside labels insufficiently appreciate variable researcher-participant proximity (Mannay, 2010). Therefore, my positionality's relevance to individuals' video constructions altered according to how 'similar' to me the mothers felt.

Furthermore, all participants filmed footage *after* initial interview, meaning their videos and stimulated reflections were embedded in both mothering / homework discourses, and assumptions derived from our conversation. This 'network of power' shaped the data (Holliday, 2004). Therefore, although self-filming, or filming for another mother, *may* be empowering, the continued impact of moral mothering scripts on the videos cannot be ignored.

Following Kindon (2016), I am wary of claims that video enables 'looking alongside' rather than 'at' participants (p.497). Video contains the 'double hermeneutic' (Giddens, 1984), wherein layered interpretations interact, 'refracting the lives, experiences and explanations of subjects *through* the lives, experiences and explanations of researchers where *both* borrow their discursive frameworks from their respective locations' (Holliday, 2004, p.50, my emphasis). Insider proximity may bring our dual reflections closer, particularly for those who were white, educated, working mothers, but many other previously highlighted differences which create insider liminality remain important. Analysis, as with interviews, remains one interpretation among many, perhaps coming close to the mothers' positions, but never experiencing events as they did, because the lens through which I viewed the videos is culturally embodied within me (Büscher, 2005). Video data is therefore both complex and multi-layered.

4.3.2 Conducting stimulated reflections: auteur theory

Stimulated reflection, an 'introspective research procedure' accessing 'higher order mental processes', encourages participants to recall their thinking while watching a video of themselves (Lyle, 2003, pp.861, 862). Recalling feelings and thoughts during

replayed scenes, emphasises reflexive conversation and 'move[s] beyond the question-answer technique' (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017, p.346). As Rose (2016) suggests, even mundane images increase participant articulation. Not principally focused on seeking clarification of my observations, this assumed participants' reflexive capacity: until I asked the mothers to explain their experiences, I could not predict what was meaningful. This pursued the 'unknown unknowns' (L.Allen, 2011, p.492).

Using participant-filmed video prompts as a form of self-elicitation (Harper, 2002),[14] is beneficial when the phenomenon, like homework, is inaccessible, or has difficult to articulate aspects, like the aforementioned relational elements not readily recognised by homework's generic positioning in school discourses. Further details can be lost in interview because homework tasks are automatic, day-to-day and repetitive. Using a similar technique, Gabb (2010) accessed otherwise inaccessible 'moments of intimacy or routine practices' in families, then interviewed participants' for their 'framing of these interactions' (p.464). This mirrors my conceptualisation of homework interactions as both routine and intimate, taking place relationally between mother and child. Stimulated reflections thus prompted insightful discussions about moments of relational mother-child interaction which are ordinarily beyond homework research's reach.

Videos are not 'undisturbed' culture (Pink, 2021, p.126), but are embedded in the social context which creates them. Their contents are a version of reality which is

[14] Although sharing parallels with photovoice (Wang & Burris, 1997), in which participants discuss the meanings behind photographs they have taken, photovoice is associated with participant-led, activist research, whereas I also analysed the videos separately, considering their micro-processes and unconscious or embodied dimensions.

crafted, both consciously and less consciously (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017). They cannot therefore be 'read' for a 'message' without reflection. *Auteur theory* (derived from film studies: Schepelern, 2004), suggests images are understood by focusing on the creator's intentions, recognising that, as expert in their visual output, the image-maker's meanings are distinct, possibly different, to those 'seen' by the audience. Thus, discussion should target their perspectives and expertise as knowledge-producers (Mannay, 2016; Rose, 2016; Schepelern, 2004). As auteurs, the mothers demonstrated and then narrated their experiences.

Contrary to Collier and Collier's (1986) claim that visual analysis translates subjective, visual data into objective, textual meaning, instead a reflexive process begins with the participant (Pink, 2021). According to Holliday (2004), individuals perform their identity through video, matching physical performance to verbal explanations. The mothers' may therefore intentionally parallel, in their videos, the homework story narrated at interview. However, Hutchison (2011) and Mannay (2016) suggest visual and spoken accounts *can* differ *because* they are managed and constructed. For example, one mother agentially contrasted the 'authoritative mother' narrative given in response to my interview questions, by advancing, visually, a 'softer' presentation of her homework approach. Video may therefore offset unintended researcher management of interviews, giving participants opportunity to make *their* meanings visible. Whichever situation arose, the idea of videos encapsulating entirely natural incidents discounts the intentions and agency of those controlling filming.

Understanding subjective meanings requires contextual appreciation of participants' intentions to extend or alter their narratives. Recognising such reconstructions helps

in understanding participants' realities and meanings (Liebenberg, 2009). Images can be simultaneously themselves and not themselves (Bloustien & Baker, 2003), with elements exaggerated to make particular points (Pink et al., 2017), and omissions as meaningful as inclusions (Bloustien & Baker, 2003; Holliday, 2000). One mother's limited appearance in her video, for example, was a deliberate act, reflecting her self-construction as without responsibility and conscious narration of herself as *un*involved. Exploring mothers' visual constructions of themselves as homework supporters, and their reflections on these, therefore demanded researcher reflexive analysis, to interpret participants' subjective meanings, as auteurs (Mannay, 2016; Pink, 2021; Rose, 2016).

In being reflexively produced and highlighting participant meanings, video results in 'qualitatively different' outcomes (Holliday, 2004, p.50). Reflexively-produced talk about such images produces 'deep and evocative insight' (Allen, 2012, p.449), partly due to the detail captured, but also because the conceptually different data produces different responses: more emotional and affective (Bagnoli, 2009; Böök & Mykkänen, 2014), resulting in deeper thoughts and 'reflexive engagement with the realm of emotion' (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017, p.350).

> These aspects are neither marginal (so that we may ignore them) nor problematic (so that they might "distort" the phenomena at hand) … the very ways of producing images give us central insights …
> (Mondada, 2006, p.2)

Video stimulation thus afforded opportunity to understand mothers' affective responses, emotional motivations, and sensorial and embodied dimensions. Indeed,

Harper (2002) recommends elicitation methods specifically for emotion-focused studies.

Some video-stimulated discussions had a different, more relaxed tenor. Shifting the focus to their child, mothering and daily experiences, made conversations less formal and abstract, and more peer-to-peer and shared. Connections developed naturally through a mutual interest in their children's antics, aiding my feminist research intentions, where earlier interviews had relied on a more conscious intention to build rapport through discovering mother-to-mother connection. Furthermore, in giving the mothers distance from their immersive homework support activity, embodied, relational and emotional elements of their homework practice which were rarely referenced at initial interview, were now accorded reflexive focus. Indeed, Mannay, Creaghan et al. (2017) suggest participants sometimes prefer multimodal approaches because visual prompts aid reflection.

Like video, stimulated reflection is considered more collaborative (Q.Allen, 2012; Liebenberg, 2009), although, as before, the degree of participant agency is questioned (Kindon, 2016; Lomax et al., 2011). Participants may construct reflexive explanations which either defend what was captured or which match assumed researcher expectations (Gass & Mackey, 2000; Nguyen et al., 2013). Lyle (2003) concludes that these risks are outweighed by the method's benefits and advocates mitigations, such as prompt reflection to avoid 'memory decay' and carefully planned questions which do not steer the participant (p.875). In this study, shared participant-researcher status and common experiences probably circumvented some risk of constructed reflections, notwithstanding the discrepancies in insiderness

previously outlined. Whilst acknowledging the tentative nature of collaboration, this method encouraged greater sensitivity to the mothers' subjective meanings, 'provid[ing] a gateway to destinations that lay beyond [the researcher's] repertoire of preconceived understandings' (Mannay, 2016, p.32). Centring the participant in the discussion, as auteur or meaning-maker, certainly shifted the focus beyond the researcher view (Mannay, Creaghan, et al., 2017), de-emphasising my mother-as-homework-supporter knowledge, affording deeper analysis of *their* homework constructions.

Nevertheless, whilst motivated to understand the mothers as auteurs, practicalities meant reflections were, to a degree, researcher-managed. Reviewing complete videos could have offered more participant-led reflections. However, each interview included both follow-up questions from interview 1 *and* a stimulated reflection. Honouring the proposed interview time was important because participation was already a substantial commitment and reflective discussion is particularly burdensome (Flewitt, 2005). With between fifteen and thirty minutes of video per mother, scenes were therefore selected to replay. These choices were validated with accompanying, mostly open, questions ('can you recall what you were thinking?') (Keats, 2009) although sometimes aspects of scenes were targeted (see Appendix D). Despite intention to honour the mothers' meaning-making, these decisions increased my influence, shaping the narratives in this thesis. However, I showed multiple scenes, did not limit mothers' responses, and ended every interview with an invitation to add further reflections.

4.3.3 ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Feminist practices focus on an 'ethics of care' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002): what can be known should be explored ethically, respectfully and by valuing participants' knowledge contribution, not objectifying them. Ethics must embed within methodology and epistemology (Doucet & Mauthner, 2002) and not be reduced to an approval event in the research process. Beyond standard ethical issues, included within an institutional ethics application, additional concerns, arising from participant-generated images, extended my ethical considerations, including: how the video data was produced, analysed (Pink, 2017) and will be disseminated. Prosser and Loxley (2008) suggest 'multiple factors' determine ethical use of images (p.51). How I negotiated this 'moral maze' (Prosser, 2005, p.133) is herein outlined.

Institutional approval permitted the video method. I created two participant information sheets, plus a consent form for mothers (Appendix E). Debate surrounds children's ability to consent, partly because their understanding cannot be definitively measured (Prosser et al., 2008). Some scholars emphasise children's rights and capacities (Coyne, 2010; Flewitt, 2005); others claim ethics systems should protect them (Wendler, 2005). The university ethics committee determined that children could 'agree' but not consent, so I produced a children's agreement form (Appendix E). However, even a child's 'agreement' is provisional. Adult-child power relations mean children may feel obliged to concur (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014) or have absolute trust in their parent. Parental consent to use children's images is common (Jorgenson & Sullivan, 2010; Mizen, 2005; Rose, 2016). This approach has detractors (Coyne, 2010, argues it causes more cursory ethical protections than if children consented themselves) but was considered pragmatic. Mother-participants therefore

acted as 'ethical mediators' (A.Clark, 2012, p.20), explaining the research, answering questions and seeking their child's agreement to be filmed (Flewitt, 2005), before giving final, parental consent. This relied on mothers understanding the potential consequences of visual involvement, and trusted their judgement of their child's comprehension.

Early videos highlighted this data's importance regarding emotional, embodied and relational aspects of homework support. I hoped to analyse the extracts in full, to understand how these dimensions connected to the original narratives. The videos became key to my developing analysis. I therefore sought further ethical approval to use still images within my work, returning to the mothers for additional consent. Gaining consent at multiple points is common when visual data becomes important over time (Wiles et al., 2008). However, broadening the audience beyond my supervisory team, brought additional moral responsibility and required researcher-mother relationships built on 'trust, confidence, faith and intimacy' (Prosser, 2005, p.147). Consent was staged around two nuanced uses (still images within the thesis; stills/videos within talks) enabling one mother to give partial consent. (I discuss, shortly, reasons for stopping short of using images in publications). I offered both verbal and written explanation of why visual elements had become important (Appendix E) and mothers gave consent after their second interview, or were contacted later. Wiles et al. (2008) suggest participants should review visual data before giving consent. In this case, individuals had reflexive knowledge of the video content at the point I sought consent.

I did not seek the children's further agreement because sufficient understanding of implications is required for assent to have legitimacy (Alderson & Morrow, 2004). Although Alderson and Morrow conclude that often children *do* have this capacity, I judged that a single researcher watching a video to learn about their homework was conceptually more understandable for a primary-aged child, than issues surrounding visual dissemination to unknown and unimaginable others. I therefore relied on the mothers as ethical 'gatekeepers' for the images (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014, p.618).

The images deepen understanding of the mothers' experiences, by affording a visual and sensory illustration of my findings. Commentary given alongside image supports effectiveness (Bezemer & Mavers, 2011). Yet, image use requires careful consideration. Creating 'whole' portraits rather than dissecting interviews into themes, and connecting interview narratives to videos, risked exposing the mothers. '[V]isual researchers create subtle, intricate interrelationships between text and visual materials that are highly contextual' (Rowe, 2011, p.707). Indeed, my holistic analysis approach explicitly intended this. Detail within videos (home environments, family practices, bodies, faces) is sometimes considered 'too personally intrusive' to share (Muir & Mason, 2012, para 4.16). Moreover, neither I nor the mothers might anticipate the impact of revealing this.

Furthermore, whilst the mothers could consent or prohibit the use of their images, this right was not extended to anyone implicated in their narratives. Mannay (2011) describes 'the boundaries of the immediate culture and memories of the past' which, in shaping experiences, might be discussed in interviews, suggesting that opening this 'Pandora's box' brings forth 'a cast who are not privy and thus not giving

consent' (pp.962, 963). Each participant discussed their child's father and teachers, their own upbringing, and relationship with their parents. Connecting images to these narratives inadvertently exposes individuals who have not consented to inclusion in research outputs. Researchers protect their participants' dignity (Wiles et al., 2008). This should also apply to non-participants.

I explored several solutions. Modifying images through blurring or pixilation (L.Allen, 2015; Flewitt, 2005; Wiles et al., 2008) protects the unknown others by anonymising the mothers beyond pseudonyms. However, obscuring visual identities also obscures the meanings in the images, particularly embodied dimensions (eye contact, facial expression, relational behaviours). If visual methods aim to reveal features inaccessible through other methods, this is 'illogical' (A.Clark, 2012, p.21). It distorts meanings, limits participant agency, reduces understanding and is objectifying (L.Allen, 2015; Wiles et al., 2008) which is at odds with my research methodology. Muir and Mason (2012) suggest excluding controversial images. However, my right to identify what others consider controversial is questionable, particularly as circumstances change. The 'time immemorial' dimension of publications leaves them perpetually accessible (Brady & Brown, 2013, p.102). As children grow up, they might learn about their mothers' relationships with their fathers and grandparents through this research. Böök and Mykkänen (2014) respond to this by only publishing unidentifiable images of children. However, the combination of maternal image, commentary, holistic analysis and portraiture, means even this would insufficiently protect individuals in this study.

Without a failsafe solution, I decided to include unaltered images within the examined thesis *only* and redact them from the public document. Although denying the images to subsequent readers, this protects the unmet others, children and future adults connected to this study. Whilst access to the images is important for the study's trustworthiness (Prosser, 2005), displaying them for examination should assure later readers that my interpretations have been reviewed in context by established scholars.[15]

4.4 PORTRAITURE: BLENDING PARADOXICAL LINES

This thesis presents its findings using *social science portraiture*. First described by Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) and later elaborated in collaboration with Hoffman Davis (1997), portraiture's holistic intentions support my principal aim to understand the mother-participants as whole individuals, with interconnected back and fore stories, honouring their contributions by retaining, not decontextualising, their narratives, and telling their stories 'in vivid human terms' (Featherstone, 1989, p.375). Inspired by the experience of being painted, Lawrence-Lightfoot (1997) recognised the 'haunting paradox', which challenged her self-knowledge: in the painting, she viewed herself and more than herself simultaneously (p.4). Social science portraiture embraces the paradox of self and more-than-self as methodologically advantageous.

Initially I was concerned that free association analytic techniques (see section 4.6.1) and a framing of homework as an emotion practice, might surprise participants with

[15] Copyright, retained by the mothers under UK law, was assigned via their second consent form, permitting me to present images herein (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014; Prosser et al., 2008; Wiles et al., 2008). If I later wish to publish individual stills, the ethical issues discussed would need reconsidering for each image (Flewitt, 2005).

unexpected findings, particularly as homework's usual location in educational discourses means emotion is unlikely to centre in mothers' conscious reflections. However, portraiture's highly focused, empirically observed and empathetic view of the holistic human, explicitly recognises that outcomes will be 'familiar and exotic' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p.4). Attending to the participant as they have not been seen before (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) invites readers to encounter participants' experiences more intensely, even whilst the possibility of startling the individual with unexpected findings seems paradoxical to feminist intentions. In fact, DeVault (1990) argues that in studying women's experience specifically:

> we should make our talk richer and more complex – we should use many words, and put them together in ways that force readers to imagine the reality we're describing in a new way – to taste it, try it out, turn it over, take it apart (p.111)

Portraiture uses 'a conscious process of nesting stories in the dimensions of time and history and culture' (Featherstone, 1989, p.376). Together, researcher-participant context and wider social context shape how mothers construct or reconstruct meaning, both inside their lived experiences and within the interview relationship. In recognising this polyvocal relationship between voices in research and their context (Waterhouse, 2007), portraiture contrasts with other approaches, which either remove participants from their context to study them as objects within an assumed fixed reality, or decontextualise participants' words using quotations mapped to meta-themes. In contrast, portraiture offers nuanced, individual meaning.

Portraiture aims to shape public discourse through intimate storytelling (Featherstone, 1989; Hall et al., 2011), thus upturning notions of generalisability. Ordinarily, generalisability focuses on collective experiences and case convergence, being uninterested in individual particularities, seeking application to multiple contexts. Going 'deeply' into each story to craft intimate, detailed, holistic portraits, contextualised within discourses of homework and maternal support, connects personal narratives to broader social and cultural issues, thereby 'captur[ing] more universal themes' (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2016, p.22). '[E]mbedded in [individual portraits], the reader will discover resonant universal themes. The more specific, the more subtle the description, the more likely it is to evoke identification' (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.13). Truth, authenticity and credibility, are demonstrated by reader identification. 'It is the verisimilitude of that particular case … that enables the general significance of what is displayed to be recognised' (Rustin, 2000, pp.42-43). Counterintuitively, the broader the audience I wished to relate to, the more specific and contextualised my portraits had to be, straddling the assumed gulf between academic rigour and intimate storytelling.

In framing generalisability differently, portraiture accepts conflicting themes and does not disregard elements that do not 'fit' (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). This is important because this study investigated why homework was simultaneously a burden and an activity to which mothers were dedicated. Barone (1992) argues that, change can be demanded by telling compelling stories which locate 'the sources of … pain' (p.146). This does not mean only highlighting difficulties. Indeed, Lawrence-Lightfoot and Hoffman Davis (1997) call for research to avoid pathologising and

emphasise ‘goodness’. However, by offering multiple angles, portraits become penetrating and complex, although sometimes less certain.

Portraiture’s dynamism, complexity and blended roots, drawing from ethnography, phenomenology, auto/biography and life history (to which this thesis adds psychoanalytic influences), bring methodological benefits. Lawrence-Lightfoot believed aesthetic outputs would make scientific research more meaningful. Art and science as mutually supportive is an established idea: Du Bois advocated no ‘wall’ between them, while Dewey claimed all meaning-making is artistry (both cited in Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Combining meticulous scientific analysis with detailed modes of expression makes the portraitist-as-weaver metaphor apt. Although criticised as romanticising research and risking misunderstanding, in emphasising subjectivity, illustrating complexity, and highlighting both research process and outcome, imagery enhances research meaning (Fraser, 2004; Lewin-Jones, 2017).

As an integral ‘instrument of inquiry’, portraitists listen *for* and not *to* a story, discerning perspectives and hearing nuances, in preparation for curating interpretations (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.11). Positionality aided my ability to meet portraiture’s ambition for contextualised interpretations. The researcher is within the work, yet uses analytical precision and judicious placement of voice (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005) to balance witness and interpreter roles (Ngunjiri, 2007), holding the line between a holistic aim and an insider view. This central witness-interpreter position, requires reflexivity, to consider the roots and contours of

interpretations, aligning with a feminist approach and appreciation that social, cultural and historical dimensions shape the meanings created.

Holistic knowledge underpins this thesis. Described by portraitists as 'essence' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p.4) it illuminates the participant's whole being. Portraits thus pierce:

> … the mask through which we can be seen, and with every tell we stop the flood and swirl of thoughts so someone can get a glimpse of us, and maybe catch us if they can … (Grumet, 1990, cited in Waterhouse, 2007, p.274)

This glimpse of a core, both timeless and momentarily captured, is reflected in my interpretations. The notion of a holistic essence appears counter to portraiture's emphasis on the researcher's role in shaping stories. However, portraiture recognises 'myriad dimensions' and possibilities, not a single research interpretation (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983, p.6), because reality is fluid and subjectivities and positioning impact both researched and researcher. Research is therefore a crystal through which an 'infinite variety of shapes, substances, transmutations, multi-dimensionalities and angles of approach' produce a 'deepened, complex, thoroughly partial, understanding' (Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2008, pp.478, 479).

English (2000) argues that portraiture's adoption of the term 'essence' entrenches it in positivistic notions of a stable identity and fixed reality, which it claims to reject. Being ultimate arbiter of the story, and using aesthetic writing techniques, precludes readers from testing conclusions or replicating the study, producing, English suggests, 'structured silences' (p.22). However, in claiming 'there is no way to

unmake the omelet (portrait) once it is cooked (constructed)' (p.21), English exposes his assumption that data is 'pure' before analysis, a widely contested proposition, and one which I also rejected in my discussion of video and auteur theory.

English cites Usher and Edwards (1994) to bolster his argument that portraiture is only interested in *one* truth:

> … there is no *one* story, although there is *a* story, a very powerful story, that says there is. Some stories 'enclose' and by so doing provide a world which can be controlled. … Imposing a closure therefore … attempts to fix subjectivity (p.147)

Yet, English's circuitous critique reveals his own belief in a fixed reality and single, objectively verifiable truth. By arguing that portraiture obstructs truth-checking, English reveals a fear of multiple possibilities, and himself attempts to enclose research. Clinging to the 'very powerful story' *criticised* by Usher and Edwards, of only one truth, and insisting that subjectively positioned interpretations are invalid, English is 'trapped in the positivistic box' (Bloom & Erlandson, 2003, p.877).

Portraiture's legitimacy derives from the idea that stories have 'an intrinsic truth in the moment of telling' (Waterhouse, 2007, p.275). This acknowledges the fluidity of human reflections, whilst establishing a credibility to the moment, period or context represented: the richer the contextualisation, the fuller the truths. Portraitists are candid about the researcher role in crafting interpretations and embrace the idea of not containing, constraining, resisting or solving subjectivity in the continual recreation of self-stories, social stories and research stories. Aware of the chaos of reality, the impossibility of complete representations, and the necessity for selection,

portraitists balance between 'documenting and creating … receiving and shaping' (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.10), 'weav[ing] competing truths' into holistic, compositional interpretations (Hackmann, 2002, p.53). Telling research stories is 'a messy business … not designed to please scholars preoccupied with neatness' (Patai, 1988b, p.147). Varied, shifting truths, remain truths, since truth is not 'as it actually was' but 'of our experiences' (Personal Narratives Group, 1989b, p.261). Validity, veracity, authenticity and trustworthiness are therefore established through deep connection with and analysis of the data, individuals and context: *this* portrait is the result of *this* portraitist. Essence is neither absolute, nor essential, but reflects back stories individuals tell about themselves, in ways which are surprising *and* recognisable, just as Lawrence-Lightfoot experienced when being painted.

In this thesis, portraiture's holistic thrust is grounded within methodical, clearly described, empirical procedures. Therefore, I too straddle a paradox, between Lawrence-Lightfoot's insistence on researcher vision, and the detailed, incisive bedrock of my analysis.

4.4.1 A STORIED LANDSCAPE: STORYING, NARRATIVE INTERACTIONS AND EMOTION

Portraiture draws from a 'storied landscape' (Blacher, 2005, p.101), where telling stories is human (Plummer, 1995) and individuals are 'imbricated in' their narratives (Squire, 2013, p.50). Using narrative, individuals create meaning, represent their identity, define experiences, share common practices, and understand themselves and their context (Atkinson, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Fraser, 2004). Stories, as contextualised meaning-making, are powerful acts of telling, witnessing, interpreting, and understanding.

Portrait narratives offer a doorway into the mothers' lives, providing intricate, multidimensional and rounded pictures of individuals or experiences, making their condition more understandable (Merriam, 1983, cited in Karpiak, 2008). This quest for holistic understanding balances twin aims: respecting participant complexity yet affording an authorial or curatorial researcher role (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005). However, although pivotal to the interpretations, as researcher, I was not their core. To thus inflate my importance diminishes maternal agency and makes fixed the shifting story derived in social interaction. The participant is 'not a passive or neutral transmitter, but … an agent actively and creatively shaping and constructing her narrative' (Patai, 1988a, p.32). As both narrator and lead character (Koven, 2012), she constructs and re-constructs a narrative, 'making sense of [her] experiences and presenting [her]self' (Miller, 2005, p.19).

Both storytelling and narrative-in-interview are relational acts. In the interview's 'interactional context', stories are both told and heard (Koven, 2012, p.165; also Bruner, 1990). In this case, an active and reactive researcher-participant and mother-to-mother relationship 'punctualized' the conversation (Munro, 2004), moulding the emerging story. Thus, interpretation requires sensitivity to the dynamism of the social processes from which the portrait is derived. With the researcher as 'catalyst' (Miller, 2005, p.157) participant understanding may be transformed. The relationship between storying and understanding which develops in processes like interview, video-making and stimulated reflection, make portraiture impactful. Story was thus the framework for knowledge construction.

Portraiture is an effective way to spotlight and study emotion (Anderson, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983) because storytelling is an emotional expression (Fraser, 2004; Karpiak, 2008; Personal Narratives Group, 1989a). Portraiture's emphasis on intense researcher-participant relationships supports empathetic intentions, thus provoking greater 'resonance' (Bergman Blix, 2009) than through traditionally-detached, impartial observer approaches. Expressing the richness of the mothers' reflections, capturing the emotions ingrained within their interviews and videos, and creating deep interpretations, makes tangible their emotions and emotion practices, thereby invoking greater reader understanding. A story's 'immediacy and vividness … lets us see, or in effect hear, for ourselves' (Patai, 1988b, p.148). Barone (1992) describes moving beyond superficial observations, 'avoid[ing] sentimental distortions … and cruel prejudices' (p.143).

Lawrence-Lightfoot (1983) stipulated 'empathetic regard … and a discerning gaze'. She tied this not just to portraiture's effectivity, but to the participant's research experience, suggesting that 'finding the underside, … piercing the cover, discovering the unseen' must be done sensitively (p.6). Arguably, portraiture intensifies the need for sophisticated interpersonal skills (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002; Waterhouse, 2007). Rapport takes time (Miller, 2017), is not always deeply achieved (Duncombe & Jessop, 2002), and relies on both researcher attributes and intentions, and the mothers' characteristics and feelings. Interviewing each mother twice aided rapport-building, as did a shared social role. However, what happened 'in the spaces around the recorded interview' became important (Miller, 2017, p.86). These reflections advanced both my understanding and the researcher-participant relationship.

The eight mothers in this study each had their own constructions of maternal homework support. I did not want to deconstruct or de-personalise their experiences using traditional research techniques. Portraiture supported my desire to represent them as embodied, emotional individuals, through holistic, storied interpretations which maintained their heterogeneity.

4.4.2 Weaving a feminist portrait

Portraiture's aims resonate with feminist intentions and its practices mirror feminist traditions: active listening, an interest in individual voices, engagement with participants as knowledge co-creators (Anderson, 2011; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997; Ngunjiri, 2007). Portraiture is simultaneously 'the making of knowledge' and an 'act of coming to know' in which both teller and listener develop understanding (Waterhouse, 2007, p.273). This openness to mutual transformation makes portraiture a fitting feminist approach.

This thesis highlights the researcher-participant relationship throughout. Interviews were more conversational than interrogative (Fraser, 2004; Patai, 1988b). I did not evade personal questions and I acknowledged similar experiences. At times, there was an air of complicity, our shared comradeship in motherhood openly worn. Feminist inclinations towards rapport and self-disclosure are echoed in portraiture.

> [Portraiture is] shaped through dialogue between portraitist and the subject … The relationship between the two is rich with meaning and resonance and becomes the arena for navigating the empirical, aesthetic, and ethical dimensions of authentic and compelling narrative (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997, p.xv)

Relational intensity, connections 'rich with meaning and resonance', and a focus on maternal experiences bring portraiture and feminism together. Adding videography, stimulated reflection and a longitudinal element developed the research relationship and enhanced the mothers' position as knowledge-producers, although the researcher's holistic perspective means portraiture is not strictly collaborative.

Focusing on the small-scale, acts as a bridge to broader social understanding of maternal experiences, such that one mother, though unique, can symbolise other mothers. Storytelling approaches 'destabilize the fantasy that 'scientific research' is apolitical' (Fraser, 2004, p.183). Portraiture thus links to matricentric feminism's intention to create powerful new knowledge by centring mothers' experiences. Being 'seen' is simultaneously inspirational, emotionally impactful and may stimulate individual change (Hackmann, 2002; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Thus, portraiture supports feminism's critical intentions.

A final feminist advantage lies in portraiture's aim to avoid pathologising and portray 'goodness' (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997). Whilst I do document challenges and strains faced by the mothers, I also highlight the myriad agential transformations they make through their role construction, associated practices, and embodiments. My analysis demonstrates that viewing homework as a purely colonising experience traps mothers within an oppressive narrative. Thus, portraiture, like matricentric feminism, affords the creation of empowering models.

However, I recognise portraiture's tensions:

> [W]e enter people's lives, build relationships, engage in discourse, make an imprint … and leave. We engage in acts (implicit and explicit)

> of social transformation, we create opportunities for dialogue, we pursue the silences, and in the process, we face ethical dilemmas and a great moral responsibility. This is provocative work that can disturb the natural rhythms of social reality (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 2005, p.12)

Steering a feminist course requires moral responsibility. Disrupting participant lives without recognising the emotional toll of personal transformation is problematic. I have considered the mothers' potential reactions to the associations drawn in my portraits, and the complex ethics of portraiture and visual imagery. My application of portraiture therefore responds to important feminist ethical intentions.

Entwined within public discourses about parenting and scripts of mothering, homework is both political and moralised. In seeking to explore homework beyond its common framing as an educational tool, and in highlighting the maternal role, portraiture enabled holistic interpretations from amongst a plurality of truths. Portraiture humanised and made sense of forgotten voices in this tangled debate and worded *their* world into existence (after Richardson, 2001). It afforded solidarity with and commitment to the participant-mothers (Featherstone, 1989), enabling my feminist researcher position to be woven throughout.

4.5 Psycho-social and socio-biographical influences

In this section I draw on substantive work by Hollway and Jefferson (2000, 2013), although this is not a psychoanalytic study, nor an absolute application of psycho-social techniques. It is a 'dialogue with' these methodologies (Hollway, 2015, p.31), which enhanced a traditional qualitative approach with psycho-social and biographical elements. I discuss the affordances of psycho-social approaches, their

meaning for reflexivity and the participant-researcher relationship, and outline key concepts which shaped my analysis.

Sociological studies are predicated on the idea that the individual's experience is structured by their social positioning (Rustin, 2000). Homework and mothering are strident discourses, and they are important in understanding mothers' behaviours. However, rejecting the particular in pursuit of the general, emphasising discourse and theory, and focusing only on society as the shaping force, closes avenues for understanding (Hollway, 2015). A purely socially constructed subject, deconstructed into socially derived elements (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Rustin, 2000) negates my intention to represent the mothers holistically, ignoring their diverse experiences. Each mother constructed her homework role individually, even within sub-categories: lone, professional, or working-class mothers.

Psycho-social approaches reject binary ideas (the individual versus the social, or structure versus agency), producing nuanced understanding by recognising contradictions, complexities and dynamic interactions between individuals and their social world (Hollway, 2015). Understanding individuals as more than socially structured (D.Holland et al., 1998), with personal 'effectivity' arising from their biography (Rustin, 2000, p.46), produces new knowledge and informs theory, even whilst acknowledging wider social frameworks. In this thesis, I explore how the heterogenous experiences of individual mothers are shaped not just by social positioning, but by biography and emotive responses to socio-biographical elements. 'The question of who we are, is always tied to the memory of who we have been, and the imagination of what we might become … the future is haunted by phantoms

of the past, which impact upon the present' (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017, p.354, after Henriques et al., 1998 and De Beauvoir, 1949).

Weaving the social and biographical produces understanding of the individual mother first, and society thereafter. Perspectives are shaped by individual dynamics, which include previous experience, personal differences, biographies, and the interaction between internal and external (social) worlds (Hollway, 2015, drawing from Klein, 1963). This idea derives from psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious as influencing factor. (See section 4.6.1 for how this idea informed my analysis.) I studied each mother through a multi-layered lens: psychologically, biographically, *and* socially positioned in relation to motherhood and education, rather than by one element alone (Archard, 2019).

Hollway (2015), also researching motherhood, responds to critiques that psycho-social approaches give insufficient weight to the social, by citing Roseneil's (2010) argument that:

> the sphere of personal life - [including] parenthood – is *both* socially patterned and constructed, varying cross-culturally and historically, *and* that it has a life of its own, that it is experienced as beyond the control of reason, as inherently individual, internal and as particular to specific relationships (Hollway, 2015, p.30)

If becoming a mother cannot be fully explained using cognition alone, then the experience of mother*ing* is only partially understood through social explanations, making this thesis topic suited to psycho-social approaches, which offer a 'third space', wherein the social, cultural and psychic are researched simultaneously,

without undue emphasis on either individualism or essentialism (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p.88).

Acknowledging the individual perspective, the conscious-unconscious interface, and social, biographic and psychic interactions, does not discount that broader discourses also shape mothers' personal constructions. Individuals are discursive subjects, influenced by and invested in social discourses, and they generate meanings and practices in relation to their positioning. Psycho-social approaches see these discursive investments as 'unconscious, defensive and intersubjective' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.17). To understand these, an analysis method was needed which afforded access to unexpressed, even unacknowledged, productions between the unconscious and the social.

Analysing unconscious associations between the individual and the social may appear to value researcher interpretations over participants', thus imbalancing relationships. However, 'fair, democratic and not patronising' interpretation is legitimate; researchers are 'not … neutral vehicles for representing knowledge in an uncontaminated way … there is no special objective status' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.3). If mother-participants are thus known through my subjectivities, interpretations drawn from biographical and unconscious associations may surprise them. Such intense interpretations can appear intrusive or a misuse of the individual's consent (J.Brown, 2006). However, sufficient detail and reflexivity means interpretations are neither 'speculative' nor 'wild' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.90). Whilst participant surprise may, as with portraiture, be inevitable, this is not harmful (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Indeed, Roseneil (2006) argues researchers 'often

produce analyses which are not congruent with … subjects' own self-identifications' (p.865). However, just as with portraiture, psycho-social interpretations may be recognisable or even reassuring (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013).

Scholars adopting psychoanalytic ideas are criticised for applying clinical tools to research interactions (Thomson, 2010). Yet, researcher motivation is different: to understand, not to therapeutically support (Frosh & Baraitser, 2008) or question the participant's self-understanding (Archard, 2021). Reluctance to transfer psychoanalytically-informed techniques into research may unnecessarily inhibit understanding (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017). Clinical practices, such as awareness of interpersonal dynamics and sustaining relationships, may support more layered understanding (Hollway, 2010a; Thomson, 2010).

Concerns over interviewer power or researcher 'licence' to interpretive expertise which trouble ideas of the participant-as-knower, are found wanting in the face of active participants who construct and negotiate their data (Archard, 2019, p.63), seen in how the mothers constructed their videos (section 4.3). Participatory techniques, like video and stimulated reflection, make psychoanalytically-informed methods more democratic (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017), as did alertness to the potential dominance of my viewpoint, alongside cognisance that my interpretation is 'a story amongst other stories' (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p.88). Psycho-social approaches are therefore not dangerous examples of inexpert psychoanalysis wielded against participants' knowledge-production.

Psycho-social approaches are both methodology and a way of thinking about knowledge, its production and where or how it is located. In eschewing a solely

discourse-led analysis, such approaches avoid reproducing dominant ideas (Hollway, 2015), opening research to new knowledges. This matched my research intentions to expand homework research into the largely overlooked maternal sphere. Drawing insights from an epistemology that recognises affective and embodied ways of knowing alongside linguistic explanations, adds to existing perceptions, giving this thesis a psychoanalytic 'sensibility' without claiming to *be* psychoanalysis (Baraitser, 2008; Hollway, 2015).

4.5.1 Finding the feminism in psycho-social-biographical approaches

Psycho-social and feminist approaches appear uneasy bedfellows (Bondi, 2014; Rose, 2016) because the researcher seems to access 'knowledge' the participant cannot. Oakley's (1981) renowned critique of psychoanalytically-informed interviewing, which underpins later feminist practices, situates feminism and psycho-social techniques in tension. Oakley critiqued traditional interview relationships as hierarchical, arguing that psychoanalytically-informed approaches align with patriarchal claims to rationality and objectivity, which dismiss women's appreciation of emotion and relationality as knowledge sources.

Yet, Thomson (2010) notes that several key psycho-social researchers became advocates through a feminist frustration with sociological approaches that positioned the individual as 'a cipher of discourse, a one-dimensional figure on whom social messages were writ' (McLeod & Yates, 2006, p.31; also Hollway; Walkerdine, Lucey and Melody). They sought a more feminist way of knowing through affective and psychological explanations of how discourse produces subjectivity. Exploring why mothers accept burdensome homework support and

what their emotional and psycho-socio-biographical drivers might be, mirrors this intent.

Moreover, psycho-social techniques can be adapted to counter the researcher as all-powerful, making researchers 'witnesses' not 'authorities' (Bondi, 2014, p.5).[16] As discussed, creative and collaborative methods move knowledge away from researcher 'expertise', expanding what can be known, and by whom (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017). Similarly, involving participants in making sense of their psycho-social experiences, develops collaborative knowledge (Falconer, 2009). Adopting both creative and collaborative tools (videography; stimulated reflection) ensured the participants' perspectives and roles as meaning-makers were not erased, and, thus, fits within a feminist frame.

Fear of the psychoanalytic foundation of psycho-social research causes overfocus on whether participants will *like* the analysis (Gabb, 2010). This inhibits understanding by encouraging sanitised explanations and the avoidance of conflictual elements. Although Falconer (2009) experienced tension between her interpretations and her feminist emancipatory standpoint, fearing her participants would disagree with her findings, Gabb (2010) underlined that her explanations, or story beneath the story, were not ideas her participants *could not* know, but ideas they *may or may not* fully realise. Likewise, I found participants had a tentative, though under-realised, appreciation of connections I later elaborated. Gabb (2010) refers to Doucet and Mauthner's 'knowing responsibly' (2002) to highlight the ethical approach such

[16] See examples in Bondi, 2014; Falconer, 2009; Gabb, 2010; Mannay, Staples et al., 2017; Thomson, 2010.

analyses require. She argues that feminist researchers use psycho-social techniques *because they go beyond researcher-controlled conversations*, to explore situated, relational and affective knowledges, which 'pull together the individual threads of a story … tracing intersections between biographical, experiential and social factors, making visible layers of subjectivity and meaning making … [within an] honoured … trusting research relationship' (Gabb, 2010, p.468).

As a feminist researcher, I engaged interpersonally with participants during interview ('that must be hard'; nodding; shared laughter), validating, indicating significance, and impacting their talk (Archard, 2019). Reactions and follow-up questions hint at the nature of analysis (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998), but are central to feminist reciprocity. I did not, therefore, try to avoid 'interpretive presence,' as some psycho-social researchers advocate (Archard, 2019, p.72). Psycho-social reflexivity about this process and its impact on both researcher and participant (Frosh, 2003) chimes with a feminist perspective (Hesse-Biber & Piatelli, 2014). Studies framed around 'personal, microsocial and macrosocial levels and … psychological investments' support feminism's enterprise (Frosh, 2003, p.1560). I was thus able to reflexively consider the feminist, maternal bind of homework: why mothers were both confined by and devoted to homework; what allowed them, despite their burdened state, to be agential and empowered. A psycho-socially-informed approach was thus siphoned through feminist practices and sensibility.

4.5.2 PSYCHO-SOCIAL REFLEXIVITY AND THE RESEARCHER-PARTICIPANT RELATIONSHIP

Whilst psycho*analysis* is critiqued as universalising, psycho-*social* approaches highlight the individual. When the individual is understood as situated *between* social

and psychological contexts, and their affectivity imbricated with the social (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p.87), the research situation itself becomes significant for meaning-making (Frosh, 2003). Mother-to-mother relationships were important for the participant-led, narrative style interviews and feminist reciprocal approach already outlined. However, because the research questions explicitly sought to understand what shapes mothers' constructions of their position (social, discursive, biographic or affective) reflexive awareness of the research context's impact was essential. Frosh et al. (2002) found their participants performed 'boy' differently in various research situations. Similarly, powerful discursive structures of mothering likely infiltrated this research context, shaping researcher-participant relationships and narrative co-production. Reflexivity was thus critical to my later psycho-social interpretations.

Traditional approaches to reflexivity assume language captures complex feelings, reflects distinctions and reveals deep meanings. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) suggest this lacks the subtleties of real-life interaction, wherein individuals question, interpret and detect hidden meanings. Psycho-social researchers do not assume participants are fully reflexive, rational beings, with conscious intent and ability to wholly understand themselves (Hollway, 2015; Hollway & Jefferson, 2013; Walkerdine et al., 2001). Going beyond the individual's cognisance to seek their 'dialogue of unconsciouses' (Ferenczi, 1932, cited in Hollway, 2010a, p.137) avoids simplistic, binary understanding based in either the social or the psychological, and grasps complexities lost to other methods.

Reflexivity is conceptualised differently in psycho-social research (Hunt, 2011). Mediated within the researcher-participant relationship, it may include both conscious and unconscious reactions (Davis, 2001). This relationship between the unconscious and reflexivity, suggests factors of which I was unaware also influenced my reactions. However, recalling Gabb's (2010) logic that participants *may not* but *can be* aware of interpreted connections, I similarly reject the psychoanalytic idea that full reflexivity is prevented by the unconscious. Yet deep reflexivity *is* challenging. '[A] profound level of self-awareness is required to begin to capture the perspective through which we view the world' (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.122). This requires specific motivation and sufficient time for analysis.

Like feminism and portraiture, psycho-social methods use researcher subjectivity as 'an instrument of knowing'. My own discursively positioned role, *as another mother*, was valuable. I experience the discourses from which my participants' reflections derive, therefore the 'doing mother' they shared mirrored my subjective position, in a three-way mother-to-mother-researcher-to-shared-discourse interaction. Considered 'bias' in other research approaches, a psycho-social stance sees my interpretations as brought closer to the mothers' constructions through reflexive awareness of interplaying subjectivities. However, reflection must go beyond 'imposition of one's own belief system', to be more than cognitive, draw on 'affective dynamics' between researcher and participant (Hollway, 2015, pp.31, 167), and engage with all emotions to understand how positionality shapes the co-creation of data (Roberts, 2018). An intersubjective 'dance' (Josselson, 2013, n.p.), derived from our psycho-social-biographic positionings, produced varying relationships with the mothers (Hunt, 2011), but written reflexivity allowed me 'to turn back on

[myself], to examine how [my] presence or stance functions in relationship to [my] subject' (Pelias, 2013, p.554). In a reflexive diary I noted interpersonal observations and post-interview 'wonderings' (Nadin & Cassell, 2006; Thomson, 2010, p.11). These reactions aided interpretation and analysis, as long as I reflected on their relation to both my own position and the participant's, through which I became aware of myself, my assumptions and experiences, my participants and our interactions (H.Elliott et al., 2012; Hunt, 2011; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). Reflexive emotionality within the researcher-participant relationship was an attitude and practice, alongside an analysis tool, although there are limits to researcher self-reflection (J.Brown, 2006). However, these techniques highlighted the possible roots of my interest in emotion within the mothers' narratives, as founding elements of both my own mothering and the discursive positioning of mothers as carers. A feminist-informed 'rolling reflexivity' thus permeated this research (Baldwin, 2021, p.135). Participant-researcher intersubjective interactions, reflexivity, and analytic emotion, were each significant to this approach, informed by both psycho-social approaches and a feminist framework.

4.6 Holistic analysis

4.6.1 The stone in the pond: analytic free association and the Gestalt principle

This study is informed by Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2013) *free association* concept, defined within their Free Association Narrative Interview method (FANI). Although sharing similarities with FANI processes (a narrative style; open, topic-based questions), I did not restrictively follow this interview method, since I was already influenced by feminist principles of reciprocity which positioned me more

centrally in the encounters. However, adopting the key concept free association within my analysis, I conducted what I term a Free Association Narrative *Analysis* (FANA), seeking *unconscious associations* within and across the data. Seen as a 'catalyst for ideas' not a 'prescriptive 'recipe'' (B.Elliott, 2001, p.262), Hollway and Jefferson's approach is also adapted elsewhere (see Archard, 2019; Gabb, 2010; Gregor, 2013; Morgan Brett, 2019). Indeed, Hollway and Jefferson have themselves expanded their original proposition multiple times: together, separately, and with others.

Like other psycho-social ideas, free association assumes that humans are not rational unitary subjects who consciously control their communication but are also driven by unconscious responses founded in long-standing biographical, or psychic experiences. Emotionally-led, 'pathway[s] of associations' between past and present, are visible in research data, as long as researchers do not structure, contain or direct participant talk (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.38). Associative analysis enables episodes and viewpoints to be understood in the context of past stories, which may be drawn upon within the telling, or found in repeat references, sudden changes in topic, pauses, emotional reactions, or in supplementary data. Unconscious, or 'free' connections are a meaning-frame for the narrative, and particularly useful when a research question 'implicates a person's sense of self' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.143), thus supporting my aim to understand mothers' homework role in light of their own self-constructions as mothers and homework supporters. While Hollway and Jefferson caution against making associations during interview, I have recognised that feminists embrace constant interpersonal interpretations.

Free association analysis captures meanings underlying or linking surface explanations, by noting spontaneous connections in the narratives and relationships across various data. Coalescing with this project's focus, this is premised on the idea that 'free associations follow an emotional rather than cognitively derived logic' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.140). Locating associations in mothers' narratives produced a deeper, fuller, richer understanding which better reflected individual experiences, than that resulting from participant cognitive explanations, or researcher hypotheses. This approach does not require a polished, justified description from a rational, coherent being; it accepts irrational, contradictory or shifting explanations. The researcher, as principal interpreter, need not present a cohesive, or sanitised, account, but is sensitive to contradictions, inconsistencies, emotion changes, avoidances, or absent themes, and uses follow-up interviews to explore apparent connections (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013). Furthermore, the researcher's interpretation can also alter, since they too experience shifts in their unconscious subjectivity (Thomson, 2010). In this case, my relationship to homework, and my homework support role, changed twice during this study: my daughter, initially in primary school, then left; later, my son began primary education.

The principle of Gestalt, that the whole is more meaningful than the sum of its parts (Hollway & Jefferson, 2001), connects my methodologies: portraiture 'is likened to the weaving of a tapestry and is expressed as a means to create the gestalt' (Waterhouse, 2007, p.278); feminist researchers advocate understanding participants holistically through sustained interactions (Brady & Brown, 2013; Mauthner & Doucet, 1998; Parry, 2020); whilst FANA's free associations technique

emphasises how the whole illuminates the smaller parts. Therefore, incorporating biographic or social details is not purposed on producing life stories or narrative biographies, but on understanding how a mother's Gestalt shapes her responses to homework. Hollway and Jefferson (2013) were originally interested in discovering how their participants' relationship to, and experience of, crime connected to their identities. Similarly, I wished to understand how each mother's relationship to homework, and experience of the homework support role, connected to her identity. Analytic Gestalt and free association analysis highlight holistic processes in participants' meaning-making *and* afford the researcher a holistic technique: 'the internal capacity for holding … data together in the mind' so that individual pieces can be understood in their contextualised whole (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.64). Analytic Gestalt connects a participant's former and current experiences using patterns in their data derived from free, unconscious or less formulated associations, producing an 'enriched, more complex, nuanced and, arguably, more humane and ethical view of the human subject' (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.143), which dovetails with my other key methodological approaches: feminism, portraiture and a

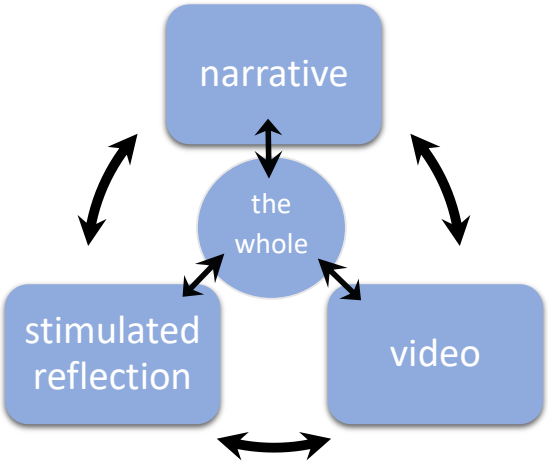


Figure 3: How the whole and the parts integrate

personal aim to holistically represent the women I met. *Figure 3* indicates how the whole both shapes the individual elements of data, and is shaped by those elements, whilst data from each element also interrelate.

Finding the meaning of a particular episode or experience by considering the whole, resists data deconstruction, and avoids thematic explanations which merge participants' accounts and decontextualise evidence. Tracing across or within an *individual's* data, rather than between participants maintains data complexity (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998). In avoiding data fragmentation, a Gestalt approach therefore increases understanding (Hollway & Jefferson, 2005). It also felt more ethical to respect the mothers as holistic individuals, rather than dissecting their generous research input and reconfiguring it into a decontextualised, impersonal 'group' data set. Principles and patterns can still be derived from across a sample of participants (see Chapters 7 and 8), but analysing each mothers' data holistically, was critical to maximising understanding.

A Gestalt approach produced a pulsating, interconnecting, multiway analysis. Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) metaphor of a stone thrown into a pond illustrates how holistic interpretations are validated as each element illuminates others: 'if an interpretation 'works' the ripples reverberate through the rest of the analysis' (p.55). The 'whole' of each mother's data informed the meaning of individual elements, as found in her associations, whilst my interpretation then reflected greater understanding back onto her 'whole'. Interpretations become authentic and trustworthy through this interconnection between the whole and its parts.

4.6.2 AN ORGANIC-RECURSIVE ANALYSIS PROCESS

Whilst not a direct application of Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) method, this interpretive analysis developed elements of their free association approach to include analysis of affective, embodied and relational dimensions (Hollway, 2016). '[L]ayered reflection' (Hollway, 2015, p.48), in which theory is not applied during initial phases, and recursive analysis is used to avoid 'speculative' or 'wild' interpretations (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.90), supported this approach.[17]

Hollway and Jefferson (2001) embrace intuition, insight and hard work. A more structured approach (outlined in *Table 4*) drew on their principles of free association and researcher intuition, whilst affording some logical progression and extended analysis time. Re-immersion, re-listening and re-reading occurred throughout (Morgan Brett, 2019).

Table 4: Analysis process (all data)

Step	Description
1	Post-interview, made Reflexive Diary entry, noting: elements which stood out, appeared important, were puzzling, or raised questions. Reflected on the participant-researcher relationship and points arising which connected to extant literature, or other interviews/interviewees. These reflections on my 'initial unprocessed experience' (Gregor, 2013, p.67) were 'freely' written in awareness that they might later become significant (Morgan Brett, 2019).
2	Listened to interviews soon after conducting. Made note of key observations / initial ideas / elements drawn to. (See example; Appendix F)
3	Transcribed interview. During phrase-by-phrase transcription, made notes on ideas/observations which seemed interesting/important. This immersive transcription process (S.Clarke, 2002) highlighted elements not previously noted in steps 1 and 2. Recorded non-verbal features

[17] Other psycho-social scholars taking a layered analysis approach include Lucey et al. (2003), Morgan Brett (2019) and Walkerdine et al. (2001).

	linked to the telling e.g. laughter, pauses, sighs (See example; Appendix F).
4	Conducted initial line-by-line analysis, creating follow-up questions for Interview 2, according to early interpretations, or to clarify meaning.
5	Wrote 'context description' of the participant, following both interviews and receipt of video, including biographical details.
6	Conducted intense, holistic, free association analysis of transcripts, using sequential line-by-line approach, in which the 'whole' was 'held in mind,' while connections were sought: between phrases, lines, statements, and with holistic knowledge of the participant from wider data (interviews; videos; context descriptions; Reflexive Diary; knowledge of material, social, economic conditions; impacting discourses). Examples of questions which aided process: • Why did participant say X, immediately after Y? • How does this statement relate to biographical knowledge, social situation, or discourse? • Has participant mentioned Z before? In what context? Is this the same, different, or the development of an idea? • What emotion explains this connection? Or is identifiable at this moment? How? • What might this laughter / sigh / pause / hesitation / repetition / change of subject indicate? • Is there anything in the wider data (Reflexive Diary, other interview, context description, videos) that might explain / expand / give meaning / connect to this? (This included consideration of my personal responses, as noted in steps 1-4). *NB: This stage included re-listening to interview recordings and re-watching video recordings of interviews, to encompass non-verbal cues, tone of voice etc. Plus reflection on how intersubjective emotions during research interactions informed interpretations (Hollway, 2009, 2010b).* Highly detailed, in-depth analysis produced comprehensive holistic interpretations of several thousand words per participant. (See brief example; Appendix F).
7	Created condensed bullet point development of main ideas / themes / patterns, arising from the holistic interpretation (step 6). Highlighted critical ideas.

	Mapped individual analyses diagrammatically (Gabb, 2010). Connections were indicated by positioning, interconnecting arrows, or highlighting. This aided interpretations and indicated patterns. (See example; Appendix F)
8	Final portraits crafted through written interpretation.

This organic-recursive approach of layered analysis phases meant data were considered on multiple occasions and in various contexts. Interpretations developed over time, rather than fitting an early pattern or hypothesis. This was respectful of participants, as well as deepening meaning. I came to know the mothers through an intentionally feminist, reciprocal, longitudinal relationship, and interpretations were written 'into' over time. Final portraits were produced through a holistic, reflexive, organic-recursive, detailed analysis approach, framed around free associations, in which psycho-social-biographical elements connected through writing as a final interpretive act. As an inquiry method itself, crafting the interpretations (Richardson & Adams St Pierre, 2008) moved me towards a place of 'resonant articulation' (Pelias, 2013, p.548).

The range of data, and principles of Gestalt, holistic interpretation and unconscious associations, meant holding in my mind the 'whole' whilst I reflexively analysed the parts (see 'Ruth' example in Appendix F). Detailed, line-by-line analysis is labour intensive and slow (Archard, 2019; Fraser, 2004; Gabb, 2010), and holding on to 'wholeness' while 'mov[ing] between parts and the whole' to find connections is difficult (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013, p.63). It also risks some elements being lost as interpretations develop, echoing a challenge associated with portraiture. However,

dedication to the individual mothers, heightened by feminist inclinations and reciprocity in data gathering, sustained holistic intentions throughout analysis.

Hollway and Jefferson (2013) advise distance from participants during analysis, although also recommend 'empathetic sensitivity' (p.65). As a feminist mother-insider, drawn strongly towards empathetic sensitivity, I did not seek distance, though remained acutely aware of my subjectivities and their impact. Researcher positionality was an important feature, shaping the associations I observed within the mothers' data, and the interpretive portraits constructed. A central interpretive role, as portraiture, feminism and psycho-social approaches all state, is shaped by my creativity and intuition as research instrument. However, careful attention to reflexivity, alongside a detailed and recursive analysis approach supported the interconnecting, holistic analyses sought.

Video, as a prompt to participants' reflexivity, was part of the holistic analysis and portraiture development, but was also analysed separately, as a discrete data source. This drew on Banks and Zeitlyn's (2015) idea that visual data reflects interrelating narratives, both internal or content-based (suggested by the image), and external or contextual (found in the social relations and context through which it is produced). As multimodal data, the 'ensemble' of visual and aural elements were first understood by closely analysing individual components (facial expressions, actions, verbal cues), in order to inform understanding of the whole (Kress, 2011, pp.254-255). While some visual analysis focuses on framing and viewpoint (Keats, 2009), here the focus was embodied dimensions like body proximity and touch, and oral aspects including humour and family talk (Chapter 7). The more aware I became of

individual elements, the greater my ability to identify meanings connecting them, echoing the holistic analysis approach applied to the whole data.

Visual content was considered for information (mother sits beside child), and meaning (why are they seated together?) Deeper understanding came from considering the image creator's intended meanings. For example, what does the mother-child positioning indicate about the participant's framing of this homework interaction? Using these principles, I analysed the videos for both visual and contextual meanings. The stimulated reflections enhanced the contextual analysis, developing my understanding of what shaped each mother's homework support through their given meanings, as auteurs. Stimulated reflections were then analysed in the context of each mother's interview narrative, with the interview shaping understanding of the stimulated reflection, and the stimulated reflection enhancing understanding of the interview narrative. As filming took place between interviews, the videos and stimulated reflections were part of a multiway analytic process (Heath & Hindmarsh, 2002): my understanding of the mother from interviews aided analysis of video and stimulated reflection; the video and stimulated reflection analyses increased understanding of her interview narrative (*figure 4*).

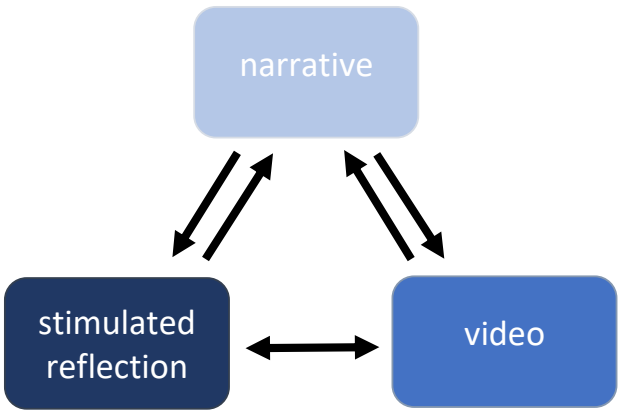


Figure 4: Multiway analysis between narrative, video and stimulated reflection

This approach mirrors Keats' (2009) multiple text method, in which combining separate analyses into one 'relational reading' deepens understanding by highlighting how data 'integrate and influence each other' (p.181, p.188). Integrated meanings, argues Keats, are improved when participants also reflect and make connections, as afforded by the stimulated reflections. Revealing connections across multiple data relating to a participant led to construction of individual, holistic portraits. Therefore, the video analysis augmented the full holistic analysis shaped by Hollway and Jefferson's (2013) free association approach and the principles of Gestalt already described. Keats (2009) calls this process 'explor[ing] the parts of each story that contribute[] to shaping the meaning of the whole' (p.190). *Table 5* indicates how analysis of video and stimulated reflection integrated into the overall holistic approach.

Table 5: Analysis process (videos and stimulated reflections)

Step	Description	Process
1	Visual reading of video data	Both • Analyse visual content as discrete data. Mapped diagrammatically, using highlighting (see example; Appendix F). • Use data in stimulated reflection interview
2	Analysis of stimulated reflections	Analyse in the context of the mothers' holistic narratives and add to these narratives
3	Relational / integrated reading	Analyse connections between different texts e.g. interview, multimodal videos and stimulated reflections Conduct intertextual and intratextual reading (see examples of both readings; Appendix F)

The final integrated reading encompassed cross-data connections, using both an intertextual technique, identifying patterns across all participants' visual data and an intratextual approach (Hollway & Jefferson, 2013) to identify meanings across a mothers' complete data (interview, video, stimulated reflection). Close, frame-by-frame observation of each video produced mind-maps of actions, words and

interactions, which I grouped, by highlighting, to build an understanding of key meanings situated in each mother's case. To see intertextual patterns, I transferred the key ideas from individual mothers' videos onto cross-participant, themed mind-maps, which revealed recurring practices and behaviours (see example 'embodiment'; Appendix F).

Observation harnesses the researcher's emotional responses as 'an instrument of knowing' (Hollway, 2010b, p.28). Thus, the sensory experience offered by video afforded the use of emotion as an analysis tool. Pink et al. (2017) identify video as an 'empathetic technolog[y]' encouraging 'empathetic imagining' (p.371) and 'empathetic visuality' (Sumartojo & Pink, 2017). Thus, I came closer to the participant's experiences, partly by engaging with the mothers' affective, embodied, emotive and relational experiences of homework support, but also because in creating videos, as discussed already, the mothers were knowledge-producers. Given only one simple instruction, participants had considerable choice over what to present, resulting in an 'empathetic co-creation of sensory knowledge between researcher, research participants and potential audiences' (Sumartojo & Pink, 2017, p.39). Participant reflection is often used alongside this approach to increase empathetic understanding of sensual, physical, relational and embodied experiences (Ernwein, 2020; Pink et al., 2017; Sumartojo & Pink, 2017). Video observations and stimulated reflection therefore offered a broader array of analytic touchpoints, enhancing the experience-near interpretation of mothers' relational, embodied and affective responses to homework support.

However, empathy in research is critiqued. Scholars claim it is violating (Lather, 2000) and colonial-esque (K.Gregory, 2020; Watson, 2009). I counter this because feminist intentions to come closer to participant experiences do not value *researcher* knowledge over *participant* knowledge, but aim to bridge the divide. *Full* knowledge of another's situation is never possible (Pink et al., 2017) because participant feelings are understood as distinct from the researcher's (Bondi, 2014), meaning empathy is thus negotiated with participants, who, ultimately, decide what they reveal. Mothers shared sensory, embodied, relational or visual aspects of their homework support within the 'mutual, interpersonal process' of our mother-to-mother relationship (Gieser, 2008, p.311), established in feminist interview techniques. Furthermore, reflexivity supported careful use of empathy.

Throughout, my role was central to the resulting interpretations. However, seeing and knowing are complicated since my seeing is also influenced by my unconscious subjectivity. Lacan (1977) argues that 'in the matter of the visible, everything is a trap' (cited in Rose, 2016, p.152). Banks and Zeitlyn (2015) recommend standing back from cultural experiences to 'interrogate them, [and] acquire a broader perspective' (p.7). Yet, influenced by both feminist and psycho-social principles, I do not see my position as biased, nor believe it possible to eliminate my subjectivities or fully identify what unconsciously affects me. Acknowledging my subjectivities as unconsciously shaped by cultural and social modalities, makes 'standing back' only partially effective.

The sensory experience of visual interpretation is therefore culturally located (Mannay, Staples, et al., 2017, p.346). *Unknowingly* drawn to particular elements of

mother-child interaction, by culturally formed subjectivities established in previous, repeat viewings of discursively positioned images (Rose, 2016), reflexivity suggests my visual focus on relational and embodied mothering may indicate a subjective understanding of mothers as carers which shaped my viewing. The videos' meanings are not externally fixed, and my interpretations exist subjectively in relation to what I see, making the image itself a site of meaning-making (Rose, 2016): what I 'see' in the videos influences my maternal subjectivities, whilst my existing subjectivities shape the meanings I 'see'. Embodied elements of the homework experience might not strike so forcefully a less culturally-situated individual, or non-mother. Disclosing this increases trust in my analysis.

However, visual images were not the only reason I emphasised relationality and embodiment. Researcher perception was shaped towards this framing in multiple ways: emotion and relation were strongly indicated in interviews, videos, stimulated reflections and holistic interpretations, supported by my subjectivities, my participants' subjective reflections, how their interview narratives were sketched, and perhaps via the technology itself. Video analysis was not simply a close viewing and categorisation exercise, but drew on various knowledges (Banks & Zeitlyn, 2015). These knowledges were situated, multiple and subjective, and coalesced within the video images and our shared reflective discussions.

4.7 Concluding remarks

My analytic interpretations are made in full knowledge that there is no single truth, but multiple truths, visible from various positions, seen through the prism of subjectivities, research approach and methodology. The following findings developed

from a reflexive approach, but are not considered the final word on the mothers' experiences. 'Pure' or 'real' representations are impossible; however much can be heard and understood (Mauthner & Doucet, 1998, p.140). My interpretive perspective, underpinned by matricentric feminism, portraiture and psycho-social principles like Gestalt and analytic free association, maintains that valid representations are 'framed through participants' individual (social, biographical, generational, etc.) standpoints' (Gabb, 2010, p.463), which produce 'dynamic, multifaceted and conflictual wholeness … [consistent with participants'] emotional, sensuous and embodied life' (Hollway, 2009, p.462). Interview, participant-filmed video, and stimulated reflections afforded access to the wholeness in interpretation which I sought. In the following chapters I present individual participant portraits, developed through the holistic analysis approach described, using words carefully to communicate the mothers' emotions and meanings, making connections across all available data, drawing from the social and psychological, and understanding these within the biographical context of each individual.

5 MATERNAL HOMEWORK CONSTRUCTIONS: LOSS AND ANXIETY

The following three chapters give an account of the research findings. Cumulatively, they demonstrate both the differences and patterns in maternal homework experiences, which, later, I theorise as the motherisation of homework: the ways that mothers' personal beliefs, contexts, and relational and emotional mothering shape how they support their children's learning. While Chapter 7 will focus on the visual data, Chapters 5 and 6 show this through detailed, participant portraits developed holistically from across each mother's data. Limited space means five out of eight portraits are included. Selections were made which avoided replication of narrative dimensions and dominant emotion drivers.

The two portraits in this chapter are paired because they share themes of home-school partnership, academic ambition, and high levels of maternal engagement, dimensions which are, however, contrastingly experienced. Together, they suggest that mothers' homework responses are shaped by emotion, in these cases the challenging emotions of loss and anxiety.[18] In the chapter's conclusion, I reflect on interviewing these mothers, illustrating how the methods used increased my understanding.

Each portrait includes a brief context description of the mother and her child's homework, followed by an in-depth interpretation. The removal of some identifying data protects anonymity (Squire, 2013), judged important because of the

[18] Each portrait highlights the mothers' principal emotion. However, multiple emotions shaped some mothers' support, and sometimes one emotion led to another (discussed in Chapter 8). Portrait 4 illustrates the interconnection of emotions particularly clearly.

fulsomeness of portraits. To avoid altering participant meaning, detailed interview extracts are used, including additional utterances, such as sighs and laughter. Where extracts have been unavoidably shortened, this is indicated. Punctuation marks signal pauses in speech, and do not suggest particular units of meaning:

,	short pause
…	longer pause
-	interruption (of self or other)
[…]	section omitted

5.1 Portrait 1: Anna and Maternal Loss – Homework for re-negotiating a mother's place

I interviewed Anna twice, 2 months apart, in an office at her workplace. The first interview lasted 77 minutes; the second lasted 84 minutes.

5.1.1 Context description

Anna, a white, 40-year-old professional, works fulltime as a consultant at a city hospital. Anna's home, a large semi-detached property, is in an established, affluent area of a neighbouring city. Anna has a medical degree, surgical qualifications and a Masters degree. Her husband, also a hospital consultant, undertakes more of the day-to-day childcare. Anna self-identifies as middle-class.

Anna's daughter, Izzy, aged 6, attends a nearby, 4-18 independent school. There are seventeen pupils in her Year 1 class. She receives a range of weekly homework, including: spellings; mental maths homework via an online package; one piece of topic related homework; three reading books; plus additional handwriting practice provided at Anna's request. Anna considers Izzy's extra-curricular violin, piano and music theory part of her homework because it is school-set, with similar expectations to the curriculum homework. Anna is highly involved in Izzy's homework, on

weekday evenings and at weekends, physically supporting many activities, sometimes alongside her husband. She engages with homework immediately on returning from work, foregoing other activities, until Izzy's bedtime.

5.1.2 PARENT-IN-PARTNERSHIP

Anna's view of homework initially appears inconsistent. She states '*I think the quantity is a lot'* before immediately claiming *'there's no pressure coming from the school.'* Fluctuating between highlighting the quantity and praising the variety and brief tasks (handwriting is *'five minutes so it's not a big deal'*), eventually Anna concludes *'it's not really a battle',* and *'we get through it and it's fine'.* The contradiction that homework is both *'a lot'* and simultaneously *'not a big deal'*, suggests Anna wants to justify homework as acceptable, despite underlying concerns. This is contextualised using wider detail because, compared to similar aged children in this study (see Portrait 2), Izzy's homework is substantial. The family spends considerable time engaged with homework, with much after-school and weekend time dedicated to school-set activities.

This holistic information contradicts Anna's claim of no school pressure. She has intentionally chosen a fee-paying school for its high expectations, claiming independent schools encourage greater achievement, invest more in pupils and challenge capable children by offering smaller classes. The school also makes recommendations for pupils' out-of-school time, such as no television on weekdays. Anna acknowledges *'an unspoken expectation'* that parents *should* be involved with homework, which she is *'happy to buy into'*. The question is, why she defends this pressure as acceptable, despite intimated concerns.

One explanation for Anna's insistence that expectations are reasonable, relates to a repeated theme within her data regarding home-school relations. Anna emphasises the school's good communication, willingness to engage, and welcoming environment (*'there's always a Head Teacher or a Deputy Head Teacher that's stood there who greets everybody … you get the impression you could go and speak to them if you wanted to'*). She demonstrates respect for the teachers as caring professionals (*'as far as I'm concerned they're experts in … you know what's good and healthy for children and I get nothing but the impression that they are … looking out for the children and trying to do the very best for them'*). This narrative of positive home-school partnership means Anna does not openly criticise school processes, including homework, which, later, she describes as *'well-constructed'*, accepting that *'we as parents have the responsibility to make sure [homework] gets done to support what the school is trying to achieve'*. Throughout, Anna presents herself as an engaged, motivated and supportive parent, in agreement with school expectations.

Normative homework engagement is recognisable in other comments. Anna is critical of parents who might not invest in homework, saying *'I don't resent it [the time given to homework], but I suspect some parents will find that really difficult that you know they don't get free time or they don't get to go out or they don't get to do an activity they'd like to do* ***because*** *they have to do that [homework]'.* She narrates an episode in which a child was denied a certificate because their parents did not help them. This, she deems *'slightly punishing'* for the child, concluding it's *'the parent that failed that child'*, singling out *their* negligence, rather than questioning the suitability of a homework task which could not be completed independently.

Parental responsibility for supporting school expectations underlines Anna's homework views.

Judgement of less involved parents does more than reinforce Anna as a supportive mother conscientiously engaged in appropriate mothering habits. It also defends her educational choices. Anna justifies her choice of selective education by creating positive mother-school relations and supporting the school's processes. Willingness to participate in homework develops because Anna chose *this* school, which results in her acceptance of *their* processes. To criticise homework practices would be to discredit an institution into which she invests, and through which she hopes her child will succeed. In other words, underlying her intellectual and practical support for homework, are Anna's parenting choices. Though instinctively responding that there is a lot of homework, Anna has taken particular parenting decisions which lead her to support her chosen educational institution by upholding their practices. Defending the homework load justifies her parenting choices: if homework is *'fine'* and without *'pressure'*, her parenting decisions are well-made.

Accordingly, after this initial inconsistency, Anna never again describes Izzy's homework as anything other than appropriate, commenting instead that *'we integrate it as an important thing […] not just like a token gesture of doing it for the sake of doing it, we always try to do it properly …'* Homework is done *'properly'* to actively support Izzy's school, making school-parent partnership a fundamental aim. Conceptualising homework as integrated with the school's goals, responsibilises Anna for carrying out school-set tasks, turning homework pressure into a positive: homework must be taken seriously, is integral to parent-school partnership, and

requires investment of time and presence. This results in intense, highly-focused maternal homework behaviours, which Anna both describes and visually displays. As she says, *'we've never **not** done it'*.[19]

5.1.3 QUALITY MOTHER-CHILD RELATIONAL TIME

Whilst Izzy's homework, and Anna's consequent time investment, are considerable, homework interactions are described as enjoyable and *'relaxed'*. Tensions arising from fulltime work, a long commute, and extended days away from home, with consequently limited mother-daughter time, situate homework as advantageous. In the following extract, Anna expands on why she does not resent homework involvement when other mothers might.

Extract A:

> ***Anna:*** *I'm not very much involved in- I didn't drop her at school this morning, it's quite rare for me to drop her at school or pick her up from school and she erm … she's often told her teacher I wish Mummy was at home and Daddy was at work, quite a few times, and she's gone through various phases where she's been you know quite negative towards my husband. So he's [slight laugh] providing so much care and looking after her all the time and it goes against him really cos she wants her Mummy to be around more erm and it's difficult cos it's more than an hour of commuting each way at the moment and a long day at work erm so for most of her weekday days I'm not around at all, maybe five minutes before I leave in the morning, maybe an hour at night before she goes to sleep and erm, I think it is really, really important for me that you know I don't just dump her at school and expect them to do everything, educate my child and then at 18 she'll be wonderful and you know I did the right thing for her. I think it's very much you know your childhood should be remembering times that you spent with your mum and your dad and that they were around and that they celebrated with you looked after you when things weren't quite perfect and made things as good as they could be for you. That's what my childhood was like as well.*

[19] This discourse of *consistent compliance* is common amongst the participants. Chapter 8 discusses what this demonstrates about mothers' constructions of their homework role, including associated ideas relating to judgement, competition and agency.

Rachel: *And homework can play into that?*

Anna: *Yeh, absolutely, it's erm, it's a, I suppose it's a formal way of making that part of your relationship with your child […] a straightforward part of life …*

(Interview 1)

Plentiful evidence of the impacts arising from her work begin with Anna's reflection *'I'm not very much involved*'. Consequently motivated to spend high quality time with her daughter and to demonstrate that, despite absences, she is as supportive as her own parents were, Anna concludes that, like her own recollections, *'your childhood should be remembering times that you spent with your mum and your dad'.* Thus, Anna balances the limits her employment places on mother-child time, with a desire to emulate her own memories of parental support. Homework participation offers Anna tangible involvement with, and support for, Izzy, despite work pressures. The importance of this is demonstrated by Anna's confident response to my probe for clarity: homework can *'absolutely'* be part of the supportive childhood she desires for Izzy, positioned centrally as *'a formal way of making that part of your relationship with your child …'* The simple *'that'* reflects all that Anna wants to mirror from her own upbringing: celebrating successes, solving difficulties, creating happy memories, and maternal presence. Having accepted homework as an official requirement of her chosen school, Anna uses this formal practice to generate close, informal interactions. Homework becomes embedded in, and a tool of, the mother-child relationship, a *'relaxed'*, *'straightforward'* activity. The conscious and unconscious ways Anna achieves this are visible in her video data, in which she creates physically close, supportive encounters (see Chapter 7).

This analysis demonstrates that problems arising from maternal workloads influence Anna's homework involvement, prompting high levels of engagement. Indeed, Anna presents herself as successfully able to negotiate homework within her busy life. Although recognising the difficult family dynamics homework can produce, Anna constructs her own family's experience as positive, with homework a tool for creating high quality interactions.

5.1.4 MATERNAL GUILT, MATERNAL GAINS AND GOOD MOTHERING

Anna presents homework as a positive relational tool. However, Extract A (above), also suggests another reason for her acceptance of a key homework supporter role. Having noted her lack of involvement in daily childcare, Anna reflects on the impact this has on Izzy (negativity towards her more present father; wanting Anna to *'be around more'*), acknowledging this is *'difficult'* because, due to work, she cannot be more available. The facts of their situation and the potentially negative impact on her daughter are followed by this contextualising statement: *'it is really, really important for me that you know I don't just dump her at school and expect them to do everything …'* An unspoken emotional guilt connecting these statements further explains Anna's deep involvement with homework. Homework support is not only a logical manifestation of the school system Anna embraces, nor simply an opportunity for positive interactions, but offers a practical way to rebalance her restricted maternal involvement and alleviate potential guilt through a visible, physical demonstration of support. Being highly involved rectifies the consequences of her employment decisions. Both her construction of homework's value, and her intense role within it, defend Anna against the burden of guilt arising from the effects of her work. Moreover, intense homework involvement also protects Anna from potential

outside judgement for *not* being a fulltime-at-home mum, working part-time, or seeking employment closer to home.

This interpretation is not a criticism of Anna's decisions. The theoretical positioning of this work recognises the social and moral pressures on mothers to be supplementary educators *and* fulltime workers, and seeks to discover how they experience and negotiate this in relation to homework processes. As a fulltime doctoral researcher with young children, I empathise with the maternal guilt arising when career decisions impact one's children's desire for one-to-one interaction, and the urgency in Anna's statement that her involvement is *'really, really important*'. We respond to this differently, and our individual motivation for homework involvement is likely unique, but as a fulltime mother-researcher analysing the narrative of another fulltime working mother, I recognise the emotional dilemma in her situation and do not make a social judgement.

Anna's narrative frequently contrasts her intense mothering presence with her physical absence during the working day. She says:

Extract B:

> ***Anna:*** *I like to do lots of things with Izzy, spend my time with her, I will* ***rarely*** *go out without Izzy because I won't enjoy it […] We feel she should be there or part of it and you know I think our relationship's absolutely fine because she's the centre of our relationship […] She's just part of everything.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Anna's close relationship with her daughter positions Izzy at the core of the family: *'the centre of our relationship' and 'part of everything'.* This counterbalances the problematic mother-child temporal separation. Extract B is an emotional response, given when reflecting on how homework fits with her mothering. It highlights how

Anna negotiates and resolves the tension between work separation and her desire to mother in close, present and intense ways. Just as she recalls her own childhood with *'very proactive parents who were always around'*, so Anna establishes Izzy's childhood as *'very much you know about doing things with her mum and dad'*. Thus, Anna's mothering mirrors her own childhood. Contextualised like this, homework practices which centre Anna's out-of-work time on Izzy, reinforce her identity as a present mother, emulating Anna's fond recollection of her own parents, and bringing her pleasure.

Anna gains from homework involvement. Reflecting on teacher feedback, amidst light-hearted giggles and jokes about doing her homework *'really well'*, she demonstrates satisfaction that her efforts are valued: *'Do I like getting the feedback? [starts to laugh] Yeh I like to get the feedback'*. As noted, homework affords Anna's interaction with a child she sees for limited time during the week, demonstrating her supportive, caring, engaged mothering. Homework's place within mothering discourses means external approval for shared homework is recognition of Anna's good mothering, justifying the time and energy invested and evidencing that homework is a worthwhile mothering tool. Extract C further demonstrates homework's value to Anna:

Extract C:

> ***Anna:*** *I enjoy the homework. You know I really am of the camp that says that homework is good for- for my child. It- it really is my way of knowing where she's at, helping her and being part of her education that's- it's really important to me. I'm a long time at work, I live in [city] commuting back and forth so her time spent with me, it's in that way and I learn about what she's doing and I can be enthusiastic about what's important to her which is where she's spent her whole day …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Homework participation is both *'good for my child'* and maintains Anna's involvement with Izzy's daily life, despite her own long working hours, because school is where Izzy spends her time. Conscious of their temporal and physical separation, Anna uses homework to re-establish mother-child connection, share in her child's experiences and demonstrate her interest. Guilt over their separation is partially overcome by practical involvement in educational activities. Extract C shows that it also brings pleasure and reassurance of her good mothering.

Homework allows Anna to centre herself within Izzy's education, just as she centres Izzy in her out-of-work time. The following passage illustrates how Izzy's gain from maternal homework support, in turn benefits Anna.

Extract D:

> ***Anna:*** *I think it's important that she knows that I'm interested in what she did all day when I wasn't with her and the homework is part of that you know … what she's doing, how she's progressing and I can see that progression for my own self, I don't have to wait til I get a report off Mrs [surname], I don't have to wait til erm … Parents' Evening to know that she's doing ok, so that's important to me …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

This not only highlights Anna's involved, supportive construction of the parental homework role, but also indicates gains which relate to her mothering: tracing Izzy's progress, but, also, more importantly, connecting to *'what she did all day when I wasn't with her'.* This phrase is critical to my interpretation of Anna, who once again subconsciously reveals that long absences drive her response to homework. By actively engaging in homework to bridge the gap caused by their time apart, Anna enacts her mothering. Positioning herself centrally in Izzy's out-of-school home learning, makes Anna both supplementary-educator and mother-carer.

This construction, however, risks problems when other commitments interfere with Anna's substantial involvement. Given her complex life and limited maternal time, I anticipate Anna might like to reduce the homework burden. Instead, when her participation is inhibited, Anna accepts homework guilt as a manifestation of her own insufficiencies. She comments:

Extract E:

> ***Anna:*** *… the guilt is how would you fit that in if you wanted to go out for dinner after work and not go home until late until beyond the point where that's possible and … erm and that is quite hard because I feel 'oh I've let you down a bit there because you could have done it if I'd come home or you could have done it better if I hadn't made you do it really late when we were tired' … so yes it does make me feel guilty and I do feel I've let her down on some of those occasions by making it harder for her to do it well or to achieve it …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

This reflection reveals the hidden burden on a working mother who constructs homework as both her responsibility, *and integral to her mothering*. Where external issues make homework unachievable, Anna internalises the problem, rather than locating it structurally, in a practice that assumes maternal input without recognising maternal time pressures. Anna has *'let [Izzy] down'* and made it *'harder'* for her. This underlines the emotional impact of an apparently school-related activity which, on the surface, appears unconnected to a mother's dedication. On the contrary, because homework is embedded in Anna's sense of herself as a supportive mother and used as a tool of her mothering, when it appears to 'fail,' Anna's emotionally-driven self-critique implies maternal inadequacy.

5.1.5 GETTING A 'LITTLE BIT' BACK: REDEFINING THE MATERNAL ROLE THROUGH HOMEWORK

Having outlined Anna's construction of homework and her support role, a holistic analysis further indicates the emotional prompt holding Anna's narrative together, illustrating the importance of adopting a biographical and psycho-social lens. During our second conversation, I suggest to Anna that homework might be understood as a school-constructed activity which crosses an invisible boundary into the home. Disputing this, Anna describes the home-school relationship as *'fluid'*, claiming homework *'bridges that gap'* between two institutions. She then deviates into a long narrative concerning her feelings about Izzy going to nursery at 12 months old. The change from being solely responsible for all decisions about Izzy's welfare to trusting other people's judgments was, she reveals, uncomfortable. *'I found it really hard sending her to nursery and thinking as maybe many people do that somebody else would look after her in any respect as good as what I looked after her'* she comments, and *'those decisions get less don't they, they go to school and this is how it will be, this is what we will do'.* The unconscious connection from homework to this story reveals an important dimension to Anna's mothering: despite no longer managing Izzy's daily experiences, Anna still desires an essential role in her life. Her reflections suggest the changing maternal role is experienced as loss. Correspondingly, of the home-school distinction I raise, Anna says:

Extract F:

> ***Anna:*** *I don't see it as two separate entities and when you've gone from being mother of a very small child but then that child goes to nursery and you have such a period of time away from them and then they go to school and I remember somebody, one of my friends, said to me and she's like 'oh well that's it now, he belongs to society and doesn't belong to me anymore' and I'll never forget her saying that cos I'd never thought about it …*
> *(Interview 2)*

This emotional reflection contextualises my interpretation of Anna's mothering narrative and her responses to homework. It indicates the perceived loss of her maternal role, which leads, later, to its re-negotiation through shared home-school practices. An analytic focus on content about homework only would overlook such underlying prompts. Instead, recognising that her child's move away from sole maternal protection was difficult, enables a reading of Anna's homework support which understands it as integral to the reimagined maternal role she forges. Supporting homework maintains Anna's maternal connection to Izzy which is otherwise weakened through the natural progression of a child into external institutions. In raising these memories as a response to a question about the home-school boundary, Anna unconsciously discloses that this shift was, and remains, difficult, but hints that homework partnership provides reconnection.

This interpretation explains much of what shapes Anna's mothering for schooling. As shown, she seeks out, and frames, the home-school relationship as partnership (section 5.1.2). To position school as a separate body, behind a boundary, is to relinquish all control to an outside institution and accept a diminished maternal role. Anna values home-school connections because these maintain her presence in the realm of Izzy's life from which she is physically separated. Whilst outwardly accepting school's major influence in her daughter's life, Anna pursues, negotiates and practices a sustained role for herself, which she finds in homework support. Thus, her intense homework involvement does not challenge school authority, but establishes her position within a home-school partnership, in a way which extends her reduced mothering.

As demonstrated, Anna uses homework, rather than non-school activities (games, trips, hobbies), for close, enjoyable, one-to-one interactions. Her deliberate maternal re-positioning means that mother-child interactions are homework-based *because* this offers Anna entry into the place to which Izzy has, in a sense, departed. Homework's importance is as a tool to connect with the slice of Izzy's life from which, otherwise, Anna is detached. The full meaning of Anna's comment in Extract D (above) that '*it's important that she knows that I'm interested in what she did all day* ***when I wasn't with her*** *and the homework is part of that [my emphasis]'* becomes apparent from analysing this data whilst holding other knowledge in mind: not just the difficulties caused by long working hours, but also Anna's emotional connection to her child; her sense of maternal loss as this connection physically weakens; and her desire to locate new forms of engagement which interact with Izzy's outside-the-home life. Homework support reinstates Anna's maternal role through permitted home-school partnership. As she reflects in Interview 2, *'maybe it's [homework] the school's way of giving you a little bit of that, you know, enjoy learning this with your child.'* Anna gratefully grasps the *'little bit'* that homework involvement gives her.[20]

Anna's construction of homework is of an invited activity, with which she engages, in part, for maternal gain. This contrasts with other mothers in the sample who experience homework as a burden or challenge. However, consistent with an interpretation of Anna as a mother experiencing loss over her changing role, using homework to regenerate her maternal position and remain integral to her

[20] The reference to homework giving parents *'a little bit'* back is made in both of Anna's interviews. Repetition underlines its significance (see also p.211).

daughter's life, Anna's view of homework's purpose makes sense: *'to me it is very very much about **being part of** her learning and helping her and knowing that when she grows up that she knows that we sat down with her, enjoyed it, or sat down with her supported her ... [my emphasis]'.* Shaping this response is her motivation to be involved, with homework a mechanism of her mothering. Underpinning this are Anna's unspoken, uncomfortable, maternal emotions rooted in the systemic departure of her daughter from her embrace, through both contemporary education and work practices. What is important in the school-parent partnership Anna recounts is what it affords her, personally. Partnership is less about assenting to school demands, but is constructed, and experienced, as a means to regain maternal relevance. The supplementary educator role offers maternal significance in her child's life. Homework therefore cements Anna within Izzy's daily world, a counterbalance to the emotional distress they *both* experience from mother-child separation. Homework is elevated to a vital mothering activity through psycho-social feelings of maternal loss formed by Anna's socio-biographical experiences.

5.1.6 IN BALANCE: HOME AND SCHOOL, TEACHER AND MOTHER

Anna's use of partnership and balance connects two institutions (home and school) that are, for some mothers, experienced in tension (see Portrait 2). Anna locates herself and Izzy's teachers as working in mutually supportive ways, with both her daughter, and her mothering, at the heart of home-school processes. This partnership affords homework actions which allow Anna to renegotiate her maternal place. In the following passage, Anna shares her impression of Izzy's teachers.

Extract G:

> ***Anna:*** *[T]hey have a reasonably motherly kind of approach … erm, and they are both quite fun people they're quite you know outgoing chatty people with a motherly kind of attitude […] and I like that I like that she's six year's old and she gets a bit mothered at school because she's quite erm a cuddly child she quite likes this, she doesn't like not having contact erm and I think she needs a little bit of being looked after as well.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

This reflection reinforces dimensions I have already explored: Anna's feelings about the move from maternal care into formal education; the active placing of Izzy at the centre of her life; and a mothering approach formulated around one-to-one experiences which contrast long hours of separation. Anna is positive about the teachers' *'motherly'* approach, concluding that for her young daughter, being mothered *and* educated is beneficial. Valuing teachers' substitute mothering behaviours frames them not just as educational experts, but as partners in Izzy's wellbeing. This supports Anna to emotionally overcome the noted guilt arising from her working hours. School-home balance, which Anna describes as *'partnership'* makes teacher and mother *mutually responsible* for supporting the child. Acceptance of teacher homework directions make sense if both parties are accountable for education *and* wellbeing. Thus, homework is not viewed as disrupting childhood, nor as painful or problematic, but as holding home and school in advantageous balance. This integration of roles (Anna is a mother yet supports Izzy's education; the school staff are teachers with motherly skills) underpins Anna's consistent support for homework. Homework connects teacher and mother in fluid responsibility, making it easier to accept her own changing role by affording and cementing a new place in Izzy's life.

5.1.7 Concluding Anna's Portrait: a construction of homework shaped by loss

Although emotionally motivated by loss and some guilt, Anna's homework experience is positive. She has constructed a role which supports the maternal position she desires. Fundamental to this construction is Anna's status as a working mother. Work takes Anna away from her daughter for long hours, contrasting with Anna's childhood memories of her parents' presence, resulting in unvoiced maternal guilt. Alongside conflicted feelings about her child's move away from the home setting into education institutions, Anna is motivated to adopt homework as a mechanism of maternal care, giving her opportunity to maintain an instrumental role in Izzy's life. As such, Anna disputes that homework transgresses a boundary. Reflecting on what homework offers *her*, as a window on her daughter's world, she reveals the reason for her intense homework engagement. Anna develops a dialogue in which home and school are not *'separate entities'*; gives heartfelt reflection on mother-child separation caused by nursery / school attendance; and discusses the interactions, accessibility and partnership she finds in home-school relations. This response speaks to the intensity of this mother's relationship with school practices that invite her in and give her a new, longed-for place. In Anna's words, when children start school and maternal autonomy is lost, *'homework gives you a little bit of that back […] This isn't school, you're at home and we just do what we do and you do what you do, erm I think they've got quite a good balance.'* This perceived mother-teacher balance, this sought and found partnership, is enacted through homework involvement, thus explaining Anna's participation.

Underlying Anna's construct of homework as important, the time she devotes to it, and her homework beliefs and practices, are emotional responses to lifestyle and social structures which draw her as a career-minded woman into intense employment, and her child into a particular kind of competitive, purchased education, both of which separate them. Anna's emotion reactions to this division in the mother-child relationship, the possibility that judgement may accrue for her mothering decisions, and the need to create a childhood, *and a motherhood*, which reflects the supportive encounters she recalls from her own upbringing, ultimately mean Anna constructs homework not as a burden, but as a beacon of her good mothering, through which she negotiates a place that supports her maternal identity. Influenced by emotions pertaining to: loss (of her child from the maternal embrace), guilt (for working), and potential judgement (for working fulltime and accessing an exclusive education), Anna desires close home-school partnership, into which homework and homework support fits.

Anna's homework behaviours support her mothering. Running deeply through her narrative is a desire to be an *involved* mother, prompted by both historic and current feelings of maternal loss. Homework is not, simply, an educational tool, but a mothering emotion practice, giving Anna intense participation in her daughter's development. Homework support is, therefore, a product of the mother-child relationship and what this mother wants the relationship to be.

5.2 Portrait 2: Helen and Maternal Anxiety – Homework as a shared investment in the child

I interviewed Helen twice, in her home, 4 months apart. The interviews present strikingly different views of her son's school and teachers. In this portrait, I try to

understand this contradiction and what it reveals, firstly, about Helen's view of homework and, secondly, about how she constructs her homework role. Our first conversation lasted 73 minutes and included a break at Helen's request. The second lasted 60 minutes.

5.2.1 CONTEXT DESCRIPTION

Helen, the youngest mother in the study, at 29, is a white, married, radiographer, working part-time. However, in the week of our first meeting she was promoted to a fulltime role. Helen's husband is a kitchen manager in a pub, working long, varied shifts, including evenings and weekends. Helen lives in an economically-disadvantaged area of a city, although she and her husband own their terraced property. Declining to identify with any particular social class, Helen lives in a working-class locality and likely had a working-class upbringing, but her current professional status and homeownership complicate this. Both classed positions are significant to Helen's construction and negotiation of homework.

Helen has a daughter in pre-school and a 6-year-old son, Corey, who was the focus of our conversations. Corey attends the local primary school, which has previously been categorised as 'requiring improvement,' although Helen thinks this is no longer the case. Around 30% of the pupils have English as an additional language and 48% receive free school meals.

Helen describes Corey as keen to learn. He receives little formal homework, usually a one-page worksheet approximately once per fortnight, varying by subject. However, Helen purchases extra, school-style workbooks to supplement the school provision.

Helen went to Parents' Evening the night before her second interview. What she discovered at this meeting aids in interpreting her feelings about homework.

5.2.2 'PUSHING ON': HELEN'S FATHER AND PERSONAL BETTERMENT

Helen, like other mothers in this study, can be viewed as an education success story. A holistic picture suggests she experienced a working-class upbringing, and a local culture where academic success was uncommon. Helen's father is key to understanding how and why she progressed successfully through the school system, eventually attending university and qualifying as a radiographer, a professional, academically-underpinned career. Her belief in homework is shaped by his actions and the impact they had on her:

Extract H:

> ***Helen:*** *When I was at primary school and at secondary school my dad used to really push on us. Every evening we'd sit down and do half an hour of … some sort of extra, additional book that he'd, he'd gone off and found from- god knows where he'd got them from [slight laugh] just used to appear with them um and we'd sit and do it and there'd be English problems, Maths problems, Science um, that helped me massively at school. It sort of pushed me ahead and I found that I was doing things that weren't expected of me til two or three years later and then when I did come round to doing it then I'd got on more advanced things at that stage and I think that really helped me through the school erm to get to university […] even when I'm at work now I look to do extra stuff […] I can't just not do anything and it sort of reaffirmed that thing that you've constantly got to be doing something, erm bettering yourself, learning more. There's always something else that you can learn and yeh I think it all comes from that, from my dad, and I obviously want that, to instil that in both the kids that they come home but you've not finished learning, there's still more bits you can do.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

This is Helen's experience of parental support for schooling. She implies a direct relationship between this nightly ritual and her eventual progression to university, using the terms *'really push on us'* and *'pushed me ahead'* to describe her father's

behaviours and their impact. The idea of 'pushing on' as challenge, is returned to repeatedly across Helen's interviews. She reflects that some children fail in key subjects because they have not received additional support, commenting, *'if they'd just put that extra bit of effort in, the school had pushed maths homework a little bit more it might have helped'.* Later, in criticising the school homework, she reflects *'you want something that's gonna push [Corey] and challenge him, not something that'll take him ten minutes to do'*. Framing her homework role as teacherly, Helen repeats this imagery, reporting, *'we do try and push him on and we find like if he is comfortable doing addition or whatever we'll just right ok we'll do it, take it up a notch almost …'*

Helen returns to the theme of push and challenge when complaining that schools do not provide suitable homework for all learners, noting:

Extract I:

> ***Helen:*** *… you could have a basic homework for kids that are struggling and then it can be based on the same stuff just make it that little bit harder add a little extra level to it for the kids that are- need some pushing and challenging. I do find that schools just do the bare minimum to get the kids through and if you are high up in the class and doing well they just leave you to it. They don't- they're sort of 'fine- well you're fine, you're doing well, we're gonna focus on this lot to get them through' which is great for those kids lower down but the kids higher up erm it's very frustrating it really is and that's sort of why we do extra stuff for Corey to push him, and his Grandad helps occasionally as well cos obviously he's- he pushed me so he loves that Corey's off and away with it all …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

In describing her desire to accelerate Corey's learning through challenging homework, Helen reveals a significant underlying concern – that Corey might not receive input while teachers focus on struggling pupils. I return to Helen's anxiety

around insufficient input in section 5.2.6, illustrating this as a critical factor in shaping her homework practices. Supplementary work was Helen's childhood experience and, having attended university, she equates extra schoolwork with academic accomplishment. Extract I underlines her father's role in this, both historically and currently.

Her father's ongoing involvement is made clear when Helen describes Corey regularly surprising her with his knowledge: *'You ask him where he got it from, it's "oh Grandad", so […] we do have that back up almost, that wi' m'Dad he's equally as keen to get him doing things, and I know m'Dad has bought him a textbook actually that he does do with him on occasion …'* Helen's respect for her father and his ability to impart learning is clear. He is her *'back up'*, ensuring Corey achieves academic success, just as she did. His approach to additional schoolwork and pushing children beyond basic requirements has strongly shaped Helen's views.

The terminology used to describe both mother's and grandfather's input is noteworthy: they 'push on', rather than supporting, helping or guiding. 'Push on' confers a sense of criticality or urgency to the additional schoolwork, consistent with Helen's view of homework's purpose: work completed outside school, whether teacher-set or maternally-led, is fundamental to Corey's future. Her father's input and own consequent success in 'bettering' herself through education demonstrates homework's value.

Betterment is an attitude across Helen's life, shaping her approach to both compulsory education and employment. As noted in Extract H (above), Helen *'can't just not do anything'* because *'you've constantly got to be doing something erm*

bettering yourself, learning more'. Bettering yourself, for Helen, derives from hard work and lifelong learning and is key to understanding why she both values homework, yet is disappointed by what Corey receives. In Interview 1, Helen repeatedly describes the school's homework approach as *'frustrating'*. She wants to teach her children that learning continues outside the classroom, and to *'instil'* that *'you come home, but you've not finished learning'*. In the context of industriousness, betterment and personal educational responsibility, Helen's disappointment with Corey's homework is understandable: it is sparse, intermittent and, she believes, unchallenging. Helen's emphasis on supplementary learning which will advance her son's life trajectory, means the homework is insufficient. Personal progression matters to Helen. Even as we chat while I set up my interview equipment, having only just met, she delightedly shares her recent promotion. Faith in personal betterment may even, in part, explain Helen's discomfort with class labels, since her identity is constructed around having successfully moved on from where she started out.

5.2.3 A TRADITIONAL CONSTRUCTION OF EDUCATION

Helen's habitual reference to the importance of supplementary learning has significance for how she raises her children and imagines their futures. However, the kind of learning Helen means, is very precise. Some participants in this study conceptualise education broadly, valuing their children's involvement in a range of activities (see Portrait 5). Helen constructs learning specifically around formal, school-related tasks, thus directly linking her educational support to school qualifications and future success.

Extract J:

> *I want to get involved because I want to show Corey how important it is and sort of stress how important your education is um, without an education you're not going to get very far you know, you've just got to get through sixteen, even, even if you stop at GCSEs if you have good GCSE grades that'll set you up for life, you know there's not a job that's not gonna look for them and that's the thing that they need to understand, that you need to have these good grades [inhale] …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

For Helen, active input in Corey's homework, beyond simple encouragement or basic expectations, teaches the importance of education. Although she later expresses hope that both children will attend university, here Helen underlines the employment value of school qualifications. Her language reinforces the urgency noted in section 5.2.2: she wants to *'stress'* the importance of education. In the double *'need'* (they *need* to understand the importance of qualifications and they *need* to attain good ones) Helen reveals a belief in the value of formal, academic qualifications, dismissing those who do not achieve these with *'you're not going to get very far'*. Helen fears for her children if they do not achieve well academically. Her emphasis on additional learning, positioned as integral to educational success, and frustration at Corey's minimal homework is therefore logical.

In Interview 2, I enquire whether Helen values homework *'to get ahead at school'* which appears to encapsulate her 'pushing on' narrative. However, Helen draws a distinction between competition and the personal betterment already outlined. Helen is focused on good exam results and a decent job or university place, not pushing on for child-to-child competition. The connection between traditional school learning and life chances is visible across Helen's data, confirming why she positions homework as a vital activity. Indeed, Helen makes no reference to other

developmental or extracurricular activities during our conversations, whilst other participants discussed these at length, framing them as supportive of children's development. Focused on traditional academic learning, Helen even criticises homework which is not recognisably English, Maths or Science. Positioning traditional educational activities as quintessentially bound to future achievement elevates homework to an essential practice.

5.2.4 Avoiding failure and difficulty: Helen's husband's story

Although Helen holds a professional qualification, her husband's employment and their home location suggest a precarious financial situation. Kitchen work is notoriously poorly paid and, until at least the time of Interview 1, Helen worked part-time. Furthermore, her husband's story offers a deeper understanding of Helen's insistence on academic success. Following Helen's reflection on school qualifications (Extract J, above), she switches focus to her husband's situation, offering an immediate contrast to the benefits of working hard academically.

Extract K:

> ***Helen:*** *Yes if you do fail you can go off and do [sigh] other things erm … My husband's a good example of that [slight laugh] he didn't get the best GCSE grades and things but he's doing well now but it's almost like you've got to take the longer way around to get there and … obviously you want your kids to go off and do well and get somewhere they're comfortable and happy with that's gonna provide them with a good life sooner rather than later. It's sort of took my husband a good [thinking noise] a good 5 extra years sort of to work up right from the bottom of the company […] if he did have better grades and things it would have helped him, he could have started higher up and … yeh … cos I think doing the homework with [Corey] shows how important it is, if I'm dedicating that time to it, it must be important …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Her husband's experience epitomises Helen's fears for Corey if he is not diligent with additional schoolwork. Although in a responsible, kitchen management position now, he began at the bottom of the ladder. Helen respects his current position (*'he's doing well now'*) but describes arduous career progress. In contrast, in the following sentence, Helen hopes her children achieve success *'sooner rather than later'*. Her narrative of what you must do *'if you do fail'* reminds Helen of her husband's employment difficulties, for which she blames his low qualifications. Lengthy efforts required for him to achieve a *'good life'* underline why supporting Corey's homework is critical. Therefore, Helen's personal engagement with homework is twofold. It provides Corey with the supplementary educational activities she believes are critical to achieving success and avoiding her husband's predicament, whilst simultaneously demonstrating, through her dedication, that homework is important: *'if I'm dedicating that time to it, it must be important'*. Involvement with Corey's home learning is both practical and symbolic.

5.2.5 A GENDER BINARY: THE FATHER BREADWINNER AND THE MOTHER CHILD-CARER

Helen's positioning of her husband is informative in other ways too. Helen holds professional qualifications whilst her husband, though experienced, performs unskilled work; as such, she could be the family's main wage-earner. However, in her interviews, she draws on a male breadwinner discourse, and social expectations that child-related tasks are a mother's responsibility:

Extract L:

> ***Helen:*** *I think because it's associated with children that it's sort of assumed that that falls under your remit as well and I think it's- for men their, their expectations, so from society are you go out you earn the money you come*

home that's it you're the breadwinner that's what you do … and the fact that they don't do chores they don't do the homework they don't do much [laughs] is sort of that's ok almost because the woman's supposed to pick everything else up. The husband comes in sits down puts his slippers on all that sort of thing, that's sort of what's generally expected erm not in all households but I think in a majority men … erm do help but it's still- it's there in the background that it's more your responsibility almost as a woman.

(Interview 1)

In cautiously identifying men's social position as breadwinners and thereby accepting homework as her responsibility, Helen implies tolerance of gendered family labour. The traditional binary of men as breadwinners, women as homemakers, associated with working-class communities, is *'there in the background'*, remaining an influencing factor in her own family. Although aspiring to a different situation, Helen also appears resigned to gendered responsibilities. She comments:

Extract M:

Helen: *It's something that obviously I would really hope to change over the next few years and you know when my daughter goes off and gets married I hope her husband [slight laugh] has more assertiveness and gets on with these things but, I think it's just the way society is really that … there's that expectation of women still unfortunately to run the house sort the kids out and organise the whole family and so I'll sort the kids out then I'll sort the husband out and then we'll go and do whatever we're doing, it's yeh [slight laugh] it's frustrating but … that's just the norm nowadays …*

(Interview 1)

In choosing the word *'assertiveness'*, Helen implies fathers lack initiative to undertake some of the workload. Her previous image of men putting up their feet and not contributing (Extract L) suggests modern fathers are lazy about family duties. Likening her husband, in Extract M, to an extra child, Helen almost infantilises fathers for their failure to contribute domestically. Her critique of fathers' absent educational work is implicit, but she feels the impact strongly. The *'norm'* of assuming mothers will undertake all child-related tasks is *'frustrating'* but she cannot

see how to modify it. This is expressed clearly in the following passage, where Helen considers what might happen if her husband took over homework support.

Extract N:

> ***Rachel:*** *If your husband did take on the homework role, can you describe what you think might happen or what it would be like?*
>
> ***Helen:*** *[laughs]*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *You're laughing [laughs]*
>
> ***Helen:*** *[voice contains humour] I can imagine it would be very chaotic [laughs]. He erm … [tuts] yeh [laughter] I can't imagine it going down very well with Corey to be honest.*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *Ok*
>
> ***Helen:*** *Because he sees Mum as the one that does it. I think if Dad started to do it he'd get confused a little bit himself [slight laugh] and I think Dad [intake of breath; sigh] he's not really … used to almost that teaching role with him, he more … they're more friends than anything, he doesn't even discipline the kids that much that's left to me as well …*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *Uh-huh*
>
> ***Helen:*** *Erm so I can see them starting it but not really finishing it cos they'd probably get distracted talking football stats or something knowing them. I don't think he'd have that ability to focus on it and get it completed unfortunately.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Peppering her response with laughter and other non-verbal indicators demonstrates that my suggestion is not considered a serious possibility. Imagining the likely chaos amuses Helen, even though she hopes her daughter's experience will be different (Extract M). This passage reveals how embedded gendered parenting labour is in Helen's family.

Helen's homework role is fundamentally integrated with her social role as a mother, bound to the traditional binary mother-father constructions she and her husband live by. As mother-carer she is centred within Corey's education. This is socially-

constructed, but also psychically experienced, because whilst hypothetically desiring educational tasks to be more fairly distributed, Helen does not consider it a real possibility, believing her husband lacks the skills, motivation and focus to conduct the kind of support she does. Helen is positioned in the homework supporter role, but in her laughter and prediction of failed homework, she also claims it.

This interpretation of Helen's maternal acceptance of homework labour is supported by an earlier passage where I enquire whether homework is a 'burden'.

Extract O:

> ***Helen:*** *Oh I don't see homework as a burden er it's just it's … I wouldn't say necessity it's, something that has to be done and it is important that it is done but it does add that extra pressure on, that extra job that you've got to do amongst the thousand other things that we've got to do every day … But it is a very important thing to make the time for to have that protected time every evening to sit down and do something and, even if it's just reading the books through with him or let him read the books, it's something that we need to make the time for and it's- often it is just a battle as to prioritising it amongst everything else.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Acknowledging the practical difficulty of fitting homework into family life, Helen is convinced that this compromise is important. Homework is *not* a burden, despite the *'pressure'* and *'battle'* of accommodating it. Having embraced the value of additional schoolwork, and established, through both social expectations and greater skill, her gendered role within that, Helen must dedicate time, effort and focus to the task, or see the benefits she ascribes to homework lost through ineffective fatherly input.

Helen's investment in Corey's future is clear, placing great emphasis on the success she hopes he will achieve if she gives sufficient time and focus to his homework.

Therefore, despite all homework labour falling to her, Helen rejects the construction of homework as a 'burden', instead accepting, and driving, homework duties.

5.2.6 Understanding changing constructions: seeking a mutual home-school endeavour

Between her interviews, Helen's view changes dramatically. Initially, whilst highly involved in homework, Helen criticises the school's offering and purchases additional workbooks to supplement gaps she sees in Corey's homework. One of Helen's final comments in Interview 1 is *'if … it felt she [the teacher] was giving … erm a level of homework that was challenging to Corey and she consistently did it, I might back off a little bit … because I'd know that he's being pushed at school. At the minute I* ***don't*** *think he's being pushed that's why I'm stepping in more …'*

In contrast, in Interview 2, following Parents' Evening the night before, Helen explains:

Extract P:

> ***Helen:*** *So [slight laugh] I'm quite happy at the minute now with the school to be honest. They are pushing Corey a lot. Erm obviously they've got their SATs coming up this month or next month erm and they are taking him aside […] and doing one-on-one work with him to get the greater depth of understanding that will push him up a level and I didn't realise they're doing this and yeh I'm absolutely thrilled to bits that they are cos it's something they never did at my old school that you- you were all at set level, they left you there, got the rest of the class up. So to see that they're actually taking an interest in taking him aside and pushing him forwards I'm quite happy with that.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

I wonder whether, in consciously constructing a less critical narrative about the school, Helen regrets her previous honesty. Or whether, at Parents' Evening, the school has persuaded Helen of their approach. She describes how *'they talk to you*

and they lay it out how they're doing it' and *'it makes sense, absolutely fine, I'm happy with it'.* However, a holistic analysis of Helen's whole data, which reveals deep anxiety about Corey's academic progress and the importance of his teachers being equally invested, provides a more coherent explanation for Helen's altered stance.

Helen's previously identified concern, urgency, even anxiety that Corey complete supplementary learning at home (section 5.2.2), contrasts with the relief demonstrated in Extract P: she is *'absolutely thrilled'* to discover the school's additional support. This recontextualises earlier criticisms of the school homework, suggesting this was more than simple disappointment over type or quantity. Key dimensions of Helen's narrative (the critical importance of supplementary work; the more challenging tasks her father provided; her career success compared to her husband's school failure) combine to explain holistically that Helen wants teachers to invest *as much* in her child's progress as she does. Limited, intermittent, low-challenge homework is experienced as lack of teacher investment because *supplementary* learning is inextricably entwined with Corey's future. Thus, when the teachers explain their additional work with Corey, an anxiety-relief adjustment occurs. The root of Helen's frustration is exposed when she contrasts the lack of input from her own school: investment in supplementary work is so fundamental to Helen's conceptualisation of how educational success is achieved, that where it is not offered explicitly and intensely by school, she believes the child is being failed. Helen's resultant anxiety drives her commitment to providing and supporting supplementary homework, but also explains her changing attitude towards the school.

Discovering the teachers will also *'push him on'* soothes Helen's anxiety. Towards the end of Interview 2, she explicitly compares her commitment to Corey with his teachers': the discovery of their shared dedication is hugely significant, and emotional.

Extract Q:

> ***Helen:*** *I'm obviously quite invested in his learning for him and especially after talking to the teachers last night, they're as invested in it as are- as much as I am cos they can see he's got a lot of potential as well and they want to push him as much as he's capable of which, until we've had this conversation with the teacher you don't quite realise but they are, really, they want him to do well and [slight laugh] had teacher in tears last year* cos they were sort of like 'he's doing so well' and they were so emotionally involved in him and getting him- they want him to do well. I do think they are, they're almost, as pretty much as involved as we are with it, [unclear] yeh. It, it took me by surprise when the teacher was crying. I was like 'woah, you really do care about the kids' which is great, it's great to see that they are that involved with it.*
>
> ** a likely mis-speak for 'last night'*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Helen's surprise that teachers care and that *'you don't quite realise but they are [committed to Corey]'* suggests that until Parents' Evening (eight months into the school year) she has borne a profound anxiety that the only person truly committed to Corey's success, is herself. Assumptions, based on Helen's past experiences and Corey's infrequent homework, that teachers are not interested in developing his potential, produce feelings of abandonment by school and a belief that, in practical terms (and through gendered parenting), only *she* will invest sufficiently in Corey's learning to enable his future success. Engaging with homework tasks even when the educational value is unclear to her, she states, *'I don't like not doing it, no matter what it is. You need to do it. You need to get it done'*.

Holistic analysis of Helen's data, in which contradictions are explored, and the biographical and psycho-social factors which shape Helen's beliefs are consciously held in mind, exposes her strength of feeling about homework's importance. Whilst it is clear that Helen believes in homework and strives to support it, only by unwinding the complexity of her experiences is it revealed that an absence of challenging homework is experienced as insufficient teacher-investment in Corey.

Helen's anxiety is, in part, magnified by inadequate school communication. Immediately following her Extract Q comments Helen laments *'It's just a shame that they don't often communicate that [additional input] to us so we don't … we don't know'*. I ponder whether her sense of abandonment and limited interaction with teachers (which could have alleviated her anxiety earlier) are bound to social class position. As a mother in a working-class community, questions arise about how the school staff position her, their (un)awareness of her intense involvement and investment in Corey's education, and their apparently limited communication with families. Helen has not sought information from school or shared her anxieties, a form of social capital seen in other participants. Middle-class Anna (Portrait 1) constructs, and experiences, homework as explicitly invited mother-teacher partnership. Her construction only makes sense because she has access to multiple moments of interaction with school staff. In contrast, Helen's experience of parent-school partnership is minimal, visible only at a yearly Parents' Evening. The result is deep anxiety.

5.2.7 Concluding Helen's Portrait: a construction of homework shaped by anxiety

This portrait reveals what homework signifies to Helen, how she experienced supplementary learning in her own childhood, and what she seeks, and initially fails to find, in the school's practices, all of which results in a construction of homework shaped by maternal anxiety. Biographical, socio-biographical and psychological elements are all important in understanding Helen's homework construction and the emphasis she places on her role. Helen's narrative demonstrates homework's importance to a mother who has succeeded educationally from a working-class background, principally through her father's determined supplementary input. Her grounding in 'pushing on' and self-betterment through additional learning, contrasts with her husband's low attainment and arduous progress up the employment ladder, shaping Helen's view of homework and the parental support role. Compounded by underdeveloped home-school communication, Helen experiences Corey's minimal homework as inadequate teacher investment in her son, meaning Corey cannot be successful without *her* additional input, a vital responsibility framed by traditionally-gendered domestic roles. Helen's focus on supplementary learning is therefore logical.

This critical role in homework support falls to Helen through multiple means and is constructed around her mothering identity. Her biographical experiences have taught her to value out-of-school, supplementary learning, her gendered social position in a predominantly working-class culture makes her responsible for all childcare, while fundamentally, the school's apparent lack of investment in her son causes deep anxiety. Resulting from the convergence of these biographical, social

and psychological threads, anxiety prompts Helen to drive additional homework. A holistic analysis of Helen's changing viewpoint between interviews points to the importance of her anxiety, what prompts it, and how it is eventually partially alleviated.

5.3 Concluding remarks

The mothers in these portraits demonstrate homework constructions shaped by a complex mix of biographical experience, social situation and emotion response. Their intense homework involvement is driven by emotion reactions embedded in their maternal position and built on psycho-socio-biographical dimensions. For Anna, professionally successful, financially secure, purchasing a private education, and recalling supportive parenting, her homework support is rooted in an emerging mother-child disconnect as her daughter moves away from the maternal embrace into external institutions. Feelings of loss lead Anna to develop a new maternal position, by constructing homework as a tool of home-school partnership which rebuilds mother-daughter closeness. Helen experiences homework differently, as a lost opportunity and indicator of minimal school investment in her son, but is also shaped by biographical experiences and emotion responses. Anxiety that her son is being abandoned leads Helen to supplement school-set homework with additional learning activities. Both mothers are emotionally driven to intense involvement, but they represent opposite sides of the coin. Anna constructs a place in homework which comforts her maternal loss *because* she experiences homework as a partnership, whereas in experiencing inadequate partnership, Helen's resulting anxiety encourages her to construct a compensatory homework approach. In both constructions, maternal involvement is key.

Neither interpretation was straightforward. In developing Portrait 2, Helen's apparently contradictory interview positions initially puzzled me. Had I not studied her data holistically and analysed her initial interview *in the light of* her second interview, my interpretation may have insufficiently understood Helen's anxiety and how this prompts her homework involvement. In developing Portrait 1, an unconscious associations lens raised unexpected questions, such as why, when discussing primary homework, Anna referenced her daughter's time at nursery, and what this might reveal about her homework practices? This unveiled the story of Anna's emotional loss and its significance to her construction of maternal homework support.

This chapter demonstrates the methodological advantage of emotion as an analytic tool. An interpretation of either Anna or Helen which did not facilitate my understanding of them *as mothers*, and their maternal emotions, would have produced analytically lighter findings. Interviewing these women began as a purely practical exercise. I was not initially drawn to either narrative as unusually enlightening. My own emotions were not provoked by hearing their narratives first-hand, as occurred when interviewing Ruth and Fiona (Chapter 6), viewing both women as research participants, not mothers with whom I related. Anna's participation in the independent school sector distanced us because both my maternal and professional experiences are within the state school system, though our interview encounters were friendly and sometimes light-hearted. Her articulate delivery and professional confidence suggested a consciously constructed narrative, which initially hindered deeper understanding. In contrast, Helen's nervousness, particularly in Interview 1, and the differences between our world experiences, were

noticeable. Helen sometimes seemed unsure when I probed for detail, and, in Interview 1, sought a break. Offering me a drink, I requested a cup of tea. Helen responded that she did not have tea. I replied that a hot water would be fine. She explained that she did not own a kettle. I accepted a glass of water. This momentary exchange was uncomfortable for highlighting my assumptions about what is meant by, and possible in, such social exchanges, which exposed sociocultural differences. I can only imagine how Helen experienced the moment in reverse.

However, I view these mothers differently following my discovery of an interpretation that makes sense of their responses to homework, *as mothers*. The emotionally-shaped position their narratives reveal affords far greater understanding of their homework constructions, practices and narratives. Their portraits position them as mothers, with responses and choices made in relation to homework, not just as a school practice, but as an integrated dimension of their mothering. Developing these interpretations brought me closer to Anna and Helen, both as participants who I strive to represent faithfully, and as mothers. The emotional resonance established in these portraits validates my interpretations.

6 MATERNAL HOMEWORK CONSTRUCTIONS: PROTECTION AND DEVOTION

As in Chapter 5, this chapter continues to evidence the diversity and patterning of maternal homework support. The two principal portraits are paired because they demonstrate the intense temporal, cognitive management and emotional burden of homework support. As before, the contextual and personal influences, or psycho-socio-biographical roots, shaping the mothers' homework constructions are revealed. The maternal emotions protection, devotion and guilt are highlighted for their influence. A final supplementary portrait nuances this exploration of maternal homework constructions, by introducing a contrasting mother who explicitly rejects gendered homework responsibility, yet who, despite this, enacts similar practices to those witnessed across the sample. In the conclusion, I reflect on the personal impact of these portraits, discussing the effect my own emotional responses had on analysis.

Transcription of quotations follows the logic outlined in Chapter 5.

6.1 PORTRAIT 3: RUTH AND THE URGE TO PROTECT – PROTECTIVE HOMEWORK SUPPORT TO RESOLVE PERSONAL EXPERIENCES

I interviewed Ruth twice, 2 months apart, in a university meeting room. The first interview lasted 76 minutes and the second lasted 63 minutes.

6.1.1 CONTEXT DESCRIPTION

Ruth works as a hospital health care assistant. She is 33, white and married. Ruth's carpenter-joiner husband works part-time as a caretaker whilst she undertakes nursing training. They live with their two children in an inner-city council property they hope to buy in the future. Their locality comprises three council estates, with

high unemployment and teenage pregnancy rates. Ruth describes their immediate neighbourhood as predominantly white, mostly semi-detached housing plus shops, and positioned between two undesirable areas. Asked whether she identifies with any particular social class, Ruth describes herself as 'just normal' but notes that watching television makes her feel in 'the poorer class'.

Ruth has a teenage son and primary-aged daughter, Lois, aged 7 (Year 3). Lois attends an ethnically-mixed Catholic school, 20-minutes' walk away, which reflects Ruth's childhood religion. Lois receives extensive weekly homework, including spellings, formal maths and formal English. She must read five times, with a prize for reading seven times, and complete 30-minutes online maths (sometimes expected nightly). Ruth also describes a significant holiday homework load.

Ruth is highly supportive of Lois's homework, being heavily involved, although this is challenging due to her own studies, shift work and domestic duties. Ruth struggled at school, and has recently received a diagnosis for her difficulties. Her homework memories are negative. These biographical factors shape her approach.

6.1.2 HOMEWORK EMBEDDED IN GOOD MOTHERING

Ruth positions herself as a good mother, accepts maternal responsibility for homework support and manages family life to meet homework expectations. Early in our first meeting, Ruth says:

Extract A:

> ***Ruth:*** *Me personally, I feel that it's my responsibility to make sure she's done it cos she's the age she's at yeh whereas my son's thirteen, he can understand now that you don't do your homework you get your detention and unfortunately he had to have that to make him realise that although I can help you with homework and I will, ultimately it's your responsibility now.*

Whereas Lois … at this moment I suppose if she's not told 'right we need to sit down and do it' it will be sat there in her bag until hand in time so actually personally I feel that it's ***my*** *responsibility to make sure that she's getting on with it.*

(Interview 1)

Lois's age makes Ruth accept homework as her duty, in contrast holding her teenage son accountable. When asked *why* she feels responsible, Ruth merges educational support with the maternal role:

Extract B:

Rachel: *Do they tie in together [maternal identity and homework]?*

Ruth: *Yeh I think they do cos what are we there for if we're not helping them and a mothers' role is to, you know … make them flourish and … I don't know, it's not something you know I've ever sat down and- it's just 'oh I have to do it, I'm her mum' so that's the need to do that.*

Rachel: *Where do we as mums get that … notion?*

Ruth: *I don't know. I just think it's like built in. It's one of the jobs we have to do … to be a mum. Homework's mother's job. Everybody you know it's very 'oh fathers don't do homework' you know it's … I suppose it's back to the old women wash the pots and do the cleaning and stay at home when actually that's not how it is now so I suppose attitudes should change and I should go 'right husband you're doing it' but I dunno.*

(Interview 1)

This passage evidences thorough embedding of homework support into Ruth's maternal identity. Although indicating alignment with the traditionally gendered domestic narratives Helen adopts (Portrait 2), Ruth also claims that a mother's very purpose is to *'make them [children] flourish'*, that this is *'built in'* to the maternal role. Naming homework as *'a mother's job',* frames it as a natural dimension of mothering, reinforced by the statement *'I* ***have to*** *do it, I'm her mum so that's* ***the need***' and the rhetorical question *'****what are we there for if*** *we're not helping them?*' Pondering whether homework practices should alter to account for changing

maternal employment, Ruth's final *'I dunno'* implies scepticism. Her views are thus entwined in essentialist discourses about mothers as carers, accountable for children's development.

Ruth claims homework compliance several times. In a long passage complaining about homework, she compares different schools' practices, alleging that homework is a battle, and offering a generally negative air towards the practice. Yet, she concludes, *'to be fair I don't think there's ever been a time when she's not handed her homework in so we've always got round it in some way'.* Pressure on good mothers to support homework means Ruth asserts, alongside grumbles, her dedication to fulfilling expectations, thus presenting herself as a conscientious mother, working hard to manage and support homework, despite challenges.

An unspoken connection in the following passage emphasises Ruth's positioning of homework support as important *principally* for being a maternal responsibility.

Extract C:

> ***Ruth:*** *So, for me it is still the caring of wanting her to excel and her to learn erm that I want to do it … but again if she didn't- if they didn't send homework home I wouldn't do it, and I wouldn't feel the need to like go out and learn something that she's been doing in school.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Curiously, on one hand Ruth supports homework because she cares about Lois's educational progress, yet on the other hand admits she would not seek supplementary work were it not set. This contrasts with Helen (Portrait 2) who purchases additional workbooks to enhance limited homework, and Anna (Portrait 1) who requested additional handwriting homework. Although Ruth lists a number of homework's benefits and purposes, its educational value is not the principal

motivating factor. This is not to imply Ruth does not want Lois to achieve, but suggests homework is not considered educationally essential. Her motivation lies in between the statements in Extract C: whilst she cares that Lois progresses, she would not seek homework were it not set. The *expectation* to support homework, arising from her good mother position, therefore appears more critical than its educational benefits. Ruth supports homework *because it is expected*.

Ruth has internalised homework support as a demonstration, private and public, of good mothering. To this end, she applies high standards. When I enquire whether homework would still function without her intense involvement, Ruth answers:

Extract D:

> ***Ruth:*** *Mmm … so for me, it would be a bit of anxiety … personally erm … for Lois she'd probably be quite happy to go and do it on her own … but I would still have to check after … so … I don't know. I don't want to say control in a wrong way ... I don't want to say it in like, overpowering I've got to control everything I'm a control freak, it's more … if we're gonna do it once we might as well do it and have it done instead of having to repeat things ...*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

According to Ruth, homework should be completed properly, thus triggering her involvement and, as she alludes, control. Internalising her role as critical, results in anxiety when not engaged. This is not because Ruth worries about educational failure without homework (unlike Helen in Portrait 2), because she would not seek homework were it not available. Rather, homework's demonstration of her good mothering, makes Ruth anxious not to be actively involved. This is deeply embedded.

When I ask Ruth to consider what might happen without her participation, she responds:

Extract E:

> ***Ruth:*** *I don't know, I don't … [long pause] … [tut] if I left Lois to do it on her own I'd be worried until the minute she came back and brought it to me but then maybe that's* ***me****, that's nothing to do with her, that's just how I … do things I suppose […] Maybe I just need to let her have that rein and have a cup of tea in the kitchen on my own and not do it, I don't know, I don't think I'd be able to cope with that though.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

The long pause and repeated *'I don't know'* demonstrate reflection on an uncomfortable idea. This reinforces homework's importance to Ruth personally, by exposing her anxiety about not being involved. Participation is underpinned by Ruth's own needs, seen in her admission: *'I don't think I'd be able to cope with that'.* Homework involvement is profoundly embedded in Ruth's maternal identity and mothering behaviours, underlining the strength of the good mothering discourse in which she is invested.

Further illustration of the integration of homework support with mothering comes when Ruth critiques parents who are not similarly engaged, asking *'why should we bother doing it if it's not a consensus?'* She also criticises parents who cheat the system, by *'not sticking to deadlines'.* Ruth implies that homework is simultaneously an element of good mothering and a demonstration of that mothering and is consequently annoyed by those who flout the unwritten script. Ruth works hard to maintain compliance, despite knowing others do not. Homework involvement is therefore not an isolated act of parental choice to support her child's learning, but is embedded in Ruth's mothering and viewed as a demonstration of maternal care. Those who do not support homework let down the mothering *'consensus'*. Many of

Ruth's homework rules are inherited from her parents (see section 6.1.5), but they are also social expectations which she embraces as dimensions of mothering.

6.1.3 A BURDEN ON THE GOOD MOTHER

Although invested in good mothering, homework burdens Ruth, both practically and emotionally. In the following passage, she describes how her diligent approach causes problems in family life.

Extract F:

> ***Ruth:*** *They don't specify how much they want […] she's 8 so what are they expecting, are they expecting a simple paragraph or are they wanting a page of work and- she is quite good she's really enthusiastic about her homework and she does want to do it but then sometimes lots of things get in the way and we like to sit with her to make sure she's understanding it not doing it wrong and then she gets frustrated cos she's got to do it again cos she's done it wrong […] it might be a simple piece but actually it can take a long time in the family so during the holidays it's like you're constantly thinking of the homework she's got to do and how we're gonna fit that in instead of enjoying the holiday …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Homework is not a straightforward task. With unclear expectations, yet maternal responsibility to *'make sure she's understanding it not doing it wrong'*, simple homework becomes time-consuming. Ruth describes the impact of lengthy, exasperating homework on her family and herself: even outside term time, it dominates her thoughts *'instead of enjoying the holiday'.* Whilst Extract F implicitly critiques structural problems (unclear expectations; homework quantity), this implicates Ruth, as homework manager, in additional work and the predicament of insufficient time. Homework completion dominates not just Lois's time, but Ruth's too. Managing homework is burdensome. Ruth resents that this mental labour affects holidays, elsewhere explaining that reading expectations even impact

Christmas Day. With homework responsibility fundamental to Ruth's mothering, whenever there is pressure to undertake it, mental and physical effort is required.

Yet this practical and emotional burden, is also a burden Ruth accepts. Whilst insistence on constant presence burdens her, Ruth frames it as a preference. The phrase *'we like to sit with her'* underlines this, hinting both at the level of Ruth's in-person support and her views about parental input versus child independence. In 6.1.5, I will show that, for Ruth, homework independence symbolises lack of parental support. Intriguingly, Ruth's husband is rarely involved, yet she often uses 'we' to describe homework practices, perhaps suggesting that an image of unified parental homework support is significant in how she presents her family publicly.

Ruth balances sole management of homework against other pressures on her time: as a health care assistant, Ruth works twelve-hour shifts; as a fulltime student, she completes evening study; as a mother, she has family and domestic duties. Although Ruth's husband has changed jobs to undertake more childcare while she studies, his homework input is minimal. The burden of accommodating homework expectations falls to Ruth. She talks of *'juggling'* homework and describes how she manages this.

Extract G:

> ***Ruth:*** *Before she has telly on homework needs to be done and if she's gonna go to her friends then and if we've got homework to do let's do that first because I think if you try and do it as soon as it comes in you're not worrying about it you're not getting to the day before where you're thinking 'ooh I've got to do that' […] I suppose I'm contradicting myself because I'm saying then if we're going out to go and see family or like Nana or Great-Nana then actually ok that [homework] can wait and we will go and do that first … because to me they're more important than going out to friends, or, you know, watching TV so in that sense the balance can change…*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *So things you have to pay for come up here [indicates high hand] and family comes up here [indicates high hand] and homework jogs its way down?*

> ***Ruth:*** *Yeh but we get it done so … I don't think there's actually been ever a week where she's not handed her homework in so we're doing something right some way but juggling it and changing it but my main rule is it has to be done before Monday morning because the stress of I don't know what I'm going to be doing Monday and Tuesday depending on Uni and stuff and placements so actually if it's done before then I haven't got to worry that I've got to come in really tired on the Tuesday night to do homework.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Responsibility for physically managing homework creates a mental burden, since Ruth must structure a family timetable to ensure completion. This extract shows not only the maternal labour involved but Ruth's skill in balancing homework amid other pressures: constantly decision-making, responding to task importance, re-ordering activities according to her inner compass. Ruth exemplifies the range of responsibilities working mothers manage, and the sophisticated way they weave expectations to ensure their family operates effectively. Homework is part of this wider mothering organisation. Despite complex juggling, Ruth concludes: *'I don't think there's actually been ever a week where she's not handed her homework in so we're doing something right some way'*, again highlighting the absorption of homework into her maternal role. In *'doing something right in some way'* Ruth successfully meets the good mothering she aligns with. Good mothering depends on effective management, so the burden of homework is negotiated to minimise stress: homework *must* be completed before Monday morning; not to achieve this would further burden Ruth, an outcome which she cannot allow.

Unspoken in this reflection are the gendered expectations framing Ruth's family. Omitting her husband from this explanation of homework organisation, shows that despite working part-time while Ruth balances long shifts and study, his fathering does not incorporate homework support. Elsewhere, Ruth claims her husband lacks

the skills and motivation to support homework to her standards. This remains her default position: whilst she struggles, through rules and routines, to juggle homework, her husband's involvement is not considered a solution because only she, as mother, can manage homework successfully.[21] Thus, despite describing homework's burdens and stresses, in absenting her husband from participation, Ruth confirms complete acceptance of homework responsibility.

Yet this practical management produces emotional strain:

Extract H:

> ***Ruth:*** *When I'm doing it with my son- he's got specific learning difficulties and sometimes it's frustrating because he can't get something and it's not his fault but then it makes me like 'oh God [unclear]!' going into doing the next piece of homework feels like a battle before you've even got there. Whereas Lois, the frustration is I know she can do it erm but for me it's battling everything, well if we're going to struggle to do that I've actually got twenty million things that I need to do at home whether it be Uni work washing pots cleaning anything dinner you know and we're gonna sit here and have an argument over it and I'd rather not have that argument to be fair …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Negative homework interactions bring tension, by adding to Ruth's existing pressures, making her feel she is *'battling'* on various fronts. Homework, more than a practical burden, causes emotional strain when challenges add to the multiple pressures on Ruth's time, energy and attention.

6.1.4 … AND A PLEASURE: THE ADVANTAGE OF ONE-TO-ONE TIME

Strains and burdens are integral to Ruth's homework role. However, to present her experience as purely negative is inaccurate, because engaging with Lois's homework affords Ruth benefits beyond duty, simultaneously bringing her pleasure.

[21] Echoing Helen in Portrait 2, Fiona in Portrait 4, and discussed further in Chapter 8.

Extract I:

> ***Ruth:*** *I like the element of sitting with her, having time with her […] sitting with her and doing it, I do […] Overall it's really nice. Cos sometimes days can be so busy erm and so what she does when she comes out of school cos she has fifteen minutes before her brother comes out of school, she sits and reads to her Dad where normally she would be reading to me, but because that's an empty time where she's just sat in the car waiting, actually it's a good thing to read to him, so obviously I've lost that bit as well so actually doing the homework is … like taking over the reading bit as well, so it's having my time with her.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Contextualising this comment is Ruth's habitual narrative about time. Balancing study and employment restricts opportunity for mother-child interaction. As a chance to engage with Lois when external pressures limit this, Ruth acknowledges that, *'overall it's really nice'*. A passage in Interview 1 mirrors this temporal theme:

Extract J:

> *For me though it's the spending time with her as well cos sometimes it's so busy and we might- she might get in and she's had dinner and she's doing something else and by that time it's bedtime and actually I've not spent no time with her so- and especially if I'm doing twelve-hour shifts I might not see them for a few days. So again that's like mine and her time to sit down and do it.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

The apparent inconsistency between homework as a negative burden and homework as a positive experience is understood by distinguishing between *managing* homework pressures (fitting it into a crammed schedule) and *spending time* with her child, by stepping outside domestic and professional burdens. Biographic details suggest Ruth is time poor, yet she wants to provide, and enjoy, positive parental engagement. Seen through this lens, homework justifies spending quality time with Lois, when a catalogue of other pressures inhibit this.

An interpretation of homework as simultaneously a burden and pleasure re-contextualises observations about Ruth's apparent control of the task. Entangled with maternal responsibility and good mothering, and narratives of her husband's lesser capability and her own time pressures, homework support becomes a justified form of close, mother-child interaction. Where this can be managed around practical challenges, homework is an opportunity to spend time with her daughter. Thus, Ruth is disappointed when reading support passes to her husband (Extract I, above). Enjoyable homework interactions are achieved through organisational and practical control. Homework affords Ruth dimensions of mothering, like individual attention and support, which are constrained by wider circumstances and responsibilities. It therefore bridges burden and pleasure.

6.1.5 HOMEWORK MEMORIES: PROTECTIVE PRACTICES AND CARE-BY-CONTROL

One of Ruth's most revealing biographical details concerns her own homework experiences. Having found schoolwork challenging, Ruth has recently received diagnoses for her difficulties and is establishing a new relationship with learning through a nursing degree. However, her emotional responses to past school experiences and her parents' homework expectations drive Ruth's intense support for Lois's learning.

In Interview 1, Ruth describes struggling with homework, often being unsure what to do, but not receiving corresponding parental support. Simultaneously, her father established strict homework rules. The following extracts illustrate the homework environment Ruth experienced, with homework both expected, yet made her sole responsibility. Asked whether her parents helped, she says:

Extract K:

> ***Ruth:*** *To be fair no … Mum and Dad were never- they were just like 'do it' and you had to sit there and do it whether you were doing it or just looking like you were doing it and saying you was doing it I don't know. But to be fair my Dad was quite strict so it was one of them things you just did it, you didn't question, but actually looking back at it no they didn't really help you with homework at all. That's probably why I'm overburdening Lois though, putting too much on it instead of actually letting her free …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Yet, reflecting on why homework is important, she comments:

Extract L:

> ***Ruth:*** *I've been brought up with homework […] when we were younger we literally came in, you would get changed […] [voice becomes firm and instructional] 'we get in, you get changed, you sit at a table, you do your homework before dinner' [returns to usual, softer voice] That's how it was in our house ...*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

The regimented way Ruth and her siblings were expected to 'do' homework without parental assistance was challenging, partly because Ruth found the work hard, but more specifically because she lacked support in an environment where following homework rules was important. This left Ruth with negative memories of apparently insufficient support.

In Extract K (above) Ruth speculates that historic lack of assistance explains her current intense support, which may *'overburden'* Lois. Indeed, she references the impact of inadequate support on her current approach in both of her interviews:

Extract M:

> ***Ruth:*** *I'm wanting to help her I suppose. I'm wanting to make sure she gets things right because … when I was younger … nobody helped me and I have actually been diagnosed [recently, with specific educational difficulties] and obviously I know I've had a problem throughout my whole school and erm … and my Mum and Dad … have said there's something not right but never done*

anything about it so I could have got help a long time ago and I've kind of struggled all the way through so I don't really want her to do that […] I just think cos I didn't have it I want to make sure that we sit down and we do the things together erm … yeh I don't know, it's hard when I've come from somewhere where I've had no help and had to struggle and I really just don't want her to struggle, with anything.

(Interview 1)

Extract N:

Ruth: *I suppose back to my own childhood nobody really said 'oh that's good'. I had a twin that I was always compared to you know so it's never … [long pause] … I can't- I don't think I can actually remember anything other than one incident at school when I got a book because I'd wrote a really good essay or something, so I think for [Lois] it's encouragement as well, if she thinks she's doing well just to tell her that, it's not hard to say you know 'really well done on that'…*

(Interview 2)

These extracts suggest Ruth's homework practices are shaped by her childhood memories. The distressing phrase *'nobody helped me'* is juxtaposed with her maternal urge *'I'm wanting to help her'* (Extract M). Similarly, she explains the praise peppering her video by contrasting this with her recollection that *'nobody really said "oh that's good"'* (Extract N). Both passages suggest a deep connection between Ruth's own homework experiences and how she intends her children to experience homework, expressed clearly in her repetition of the word *'struggle'* and goal that Lois must not struggle *'with anything'* (Extract M). In her assertion that, *'cos I didn't have it [support] I want to make sure that we sit down and we do the things together'*, Ruth's desire for Lois's experience to be different is revealed. In other words, Ruth's intense support is designed to protect Lois from the painful experience she herself recalls. Responding to biographical, psycho-social experiences, Ruth's emotional desire is to protect her child from similar negativity. The intensity of Ruth's one-to-one support and the warm, care-filled homework interactions of her

videos (see Chapter 7), illustrate her intention to offer Lois a very different experience. Consciously supportive interactions, designed to protect Lois, contrast Ruth's chosen mode of mothering with her own parenting, resolving problematic experiences and memories through new approaches. The emotional protection emphasised in these habitual references, is therefore central to Ruth's intense involvement with homework.

Ruth's homework input is significant and intense. She manages homework both in the moment and by complex family organisation, claiming her husband's support as ineffective. However, her apparent control is contextualised and shaped by feelings of maternal protection and care, resulting in what can be termed 'care-by-control'. Ruth's actions originate in the idea that child-related activities belong within a mother's caring responsibilities. Homework control is thus underpinned by maternal care. Ruth understands her management positively, considering it not as wresting independence from others, but as supportively protecting her children. Indeed, she specifically frames homework autonomy as an absence of parental support, shaped by personal experience that limited parental input left her struggling with undiagnosed learning difficulties. Ruth views independence as ineffective and risky, equating successful homework with shared mother-child activity. Holistically, Ruth's biographical details, social position and emotional responses suggest that her high degree of homework control is a form of maternal care. An intention to perform good mothering, for all the reasons discussed, thus results in close homework involvement as an embodied example of protective, care-by-control.

6.1.6 Concluding Ruth's Portrait: a construction of homework shaped by protection

Two key dimensions shape Ruth's approach. Firstly, Ruth is highly influenced by good mothering expectations. She embeds homework responsibility into the maternal role and adopts homework support as a public and private demonstration of her mothering. The complex way Ruth manages both her time and her children's time, results in practical and emotional pressures. However, whilst homework is burdensome, some of its value lies in establishing Ruth's maternal legitimacy as a good mother, whilst also affording justified experiences of enjoyable mother-child interaction which external demands otherwise inhibit.

Secondly, and connected to point one, Ruth's memories of homework, raised by parents who emphasised homework rules but offered limited assistance, shape her intentional investment in caring, supportive, one-to-one, intense interactions, focused around maternal input. Although this appears controlling, understanding Ruth's narrative and experiences holistically suggests this close management is more accurately interpreted as a desire to protect and support her children, or, as I have framed it, to 'care-by-control'.

Homework is not followed as purely, or even principally, an educational exercise. Ruth's feelings are complex, and many of her homework views derive not from opinions about homework per se, but from motivations within, and impacted by, her maternal identity and biographical experiences. Through a socially *and personally* shaped good mothering discourse, Ruth negotiates, constructs, experiences and defends her position on homework. Understanding Ruth as holistically shaped by both biographical experiences and social discourses is important, offering a richer

analysis of her data. This portrait is not simply Ruth's 'view' of primary homework, but demonstrates how mothering protectively through homework support, arises from her individual biographical and psycho-social experiences.

6.2 Portrait 4: Fiona and Maternal Devotion – Homework as an Emotional Investment

Fiona originally participated in a pilot interview and was re-interviewed as a full participant 11 months later. Both interviews took place remotely: the first by telephone (45 minutes) and the second by video call (83 minutes).

6.2.1 Context description

Fiona is a 43-year-old, white mother, married to a software developer, with two primary-aged children. Having worked intermittently during their childhoods, for the period prior to Interview 1, Fiona was a 'fulltime-at-home' mother.[22] Between interviews, Fiona regained fulltime employment as a Human Resources advisor.

Fiona lives in a small town, in an economically-disadvantaged, agricultural region. Some residents, including Fiona and her husband, commute to regional cities for work. The town's population is almost exclusively white and UK-born. Fiona grew up here and her parents still live here, providing regular childcare. Fiona does not identify with any particular social class. Like others in the sample, her adult class position likely contrasts with her childhood, having attained a degree, homeownership, and a middle-class 'lifestyle'.

[22] I use this term rather than 'stay-at-home mother' to distance myself from historic and ideological discourses which demand mothers focus on raising children, and from current stigmatisation of mothers who are not engaged in paid employment, because these social directives and judgements encourage women's oppression. I acknowledge instead that mothers have complex, individual reasons for taking up this position and suggest this alternative term recognises that mothering at home, through *either* choice *or* necessity, is fulltime labour.

Sam, on whom Fiona focuses, attends the local, two-form entry primary school. During the pilot study, he was 9 (Year 4); his sister was in Reception. By Interview 2, Sam is 10 (Year 5). His weekly homework consists of 60-minutes online maths practice, plus reading and spellings. Each fortnight, he must also choose four short projects on the class topic, presenting each differently (poster, model, PowerPoint presentation, drawing etc.)

Fiona describes Sam as well-behaved and interested in nature and the outdoors. However, she believes the school system views him as 'failing' and by Interview 2 he has received a Special Educational Needs assessment. Events between the interviews change Fiona's relationship with school, altering her view of Sam's teachers.

6.2.2 HOMEWORK COMPLIANCE AND MUTUAL MOTHER-CHILD SUFFERING

Fiona believes homework is important, repeatedly highlighting this. Her very first comment is, *'I'm, you know, a hundred percent behind and you know fully support any homework that comes home'*. Other endorsements include *'I would never not do it'*, '*I do think it's important'* and *'I'm fully supportive of a small, of a reasonable amount of homework'*. Fiona consistently positions herself as a dutiful mother, compliant with, and supportive of, homework requirements. Aligning with the principle that homework is worthwhile, Fiona frames it as a basic aspect of schooling and parenting: she would *'never not do it'.* Fiona's dedication appears almost devout. In her opening comments, she states, *'I'm not opposed to homework at all, you know, and I fully support it. We do it erm religiously day in day out'.* This linguistic choice, adopting the imagery of religious fervour, essentialises homework as a fundamental enterprise, deeply embedded in Fiona's maternal role.

Fiona, like Ruth (Portrait 3), accepts homework support as a modern mothering expectation. Comparing her educational input with her own mother's, she concludes:

Extract O:

> ***Fiona:*** *Well nowhere near, nowhere near as much as what I do for Sam, nowhere near, like I remember my mum … er, listening to me read, going through my spellings and that was it. But, saying that, there was no other expectation for me to do any more than that, or for my mum to do any more than that, you know, so I think maybe … the mindset of the whole education [system] has changed, erm, you know, there is this expectation that, you know, that children do have to do homework and you do need to support and … there is kind of like there isn't much choice, you either support them or you don't. That's how I see it.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Implying a substantial current maternal homework load, Fiona emphasises difference through repetition: *'nowhere near, nowhere near as much as what I do for Sam, nowhere near …'* Fiona is close to her mother, respectful of her childrearing, and her children are minded by their grandmother regularly, so this exaggerated language is not a criticism of her mother but a recognition of vastly altered expectations between the generations. Referred to as *'the mindset'* of education, changing school practices have increased expectations of mothers, which Fiona experiences as an inescapable fact. The education system assumes maternal homework engagement and because a good mother supports her children, Fiona complies.

However, as entrenched as her story of compliance, is a narrative of intense discomfort in the daily reality of homework. Fiona describes Sam's aversion to, resistance towards, and inherent difficulties with homework. It is protracted, challenging, and a significant burden for them both, and Fiona adopts complex and skilled practices to maintain Sam's engagement.

Extract P:

> ***Fiona:*** *I'm always the one thinking ahead, thinking right he's got a project we need to research, or I need to research it. I think … that's where I find it a bit frustrating is that before Sam can do these projects I need to kind of do some research and then once I know what to kind of research, you know, key words to research on the laptop… then I can sit down with Sam and he can kind of research it, d'you know what I mean? […] you can't expect him to sit down with me for an hour just to research a project, erm because, you know, he would just lose focus.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

This passage discloses the significant background labour required to help Sam access the work. Like many of the mothers, Fiona manages the homework timetable, but she also examines task requirements, makes adaptations, and plans Sam's route to completion. Homework always necessitates Fiona's substantial support. This additional labour, probably unanticipated by the teacher, is extra to the time spent supporting the activity itself. Yet, despite this detailed preparatory work, success is limited. Several times Fiona compares Sam's efforts with his classmates' more sophisticated outcomes, saying, *'one child could do a massive PowerPoint presentation, Sam might do a drawing […] you know, his homework might be more visual and basic'.* Demonstrating acute awareness of Sam's lower ability throughout, Fiona undertakes a heavy load to maintain her commitment to compliance.

Homework's burden is felt mutually by Fiona and Sam, with both mother and son expending significant emotional effort. This is evident in Fiona's thirty-minute video and in Extract Q, in which the mutual stress arising from homework is profoundly revealed.

Extract Q:

> ***Fiona:*** *… there are times when Sam goes 'I don't wanna do it, I don't wanna do it' and I do have to get quite firm with him and I'm just like 'you've got to*

do it, let's sit down and do it, come on, let's get on with it' you know and then there are other times where, you know, I can tell he's absolutely shattered, you know, and he may burst into tears and [sigh] he's saying 'my head hurts, I've been doing tests all day and I don't want to' you know and that is when the motherly instinct kicks in and I'm like 'ok let's just have time out' or … erm, you know 'let's get a snack, let's go outside, let's have a hug, and, you know, let's not worry about it' and … you know, hopefully, even though I am quite … firm with Sam, and that, you know, he has to do it, you know even if he's crying I'm kind of like 'we'll have a breather, we'll have a break,' and I'll say 'look even though you know you don't want to do it, I don't want to do it, but we've got to do it Sam, so let's just do it and then, you know, you can have a treat at the end, or, you know, you can do whatever you want to do.'

(Interview 1)

There is discernible desperation in Fiona's description of homework. Both Sam, through crying and begging to be released, and his mother, by navigating his trauma, intensely experience the practice. These recollections suggest some encounters reflect negativity more than learning. Fiona shifts between teacher-like firmness to comply and more motherly emotional reactions (offering a break, snacks, demonstrations of love and soothing words), cycling through a range of responses to ease Sam's distress. Clearly moved by, and responsive to, Sam's anguish, Fiona's maternal care is visible. The intensity of this narrative demonstrates how both parties feel wretched about homework. Fiona's final plea to Sam's compliance acknowledges their joint dislike of the task: *'you don't want to do it, I don't want to do it'*, she says, in recognition of their mutual suffering. However, despite the high stress, extreme negativity and eventual admission of shared aversion, Fiona maintains her conviction that Sam must complete the work: *'we've got to do it Sam, so let's just do it'*. Fiona is dedicated to homework, the pressure of which has considerable influence over how she mothers Sam.

6.2.3 INDISPENSABLE MATERNAL SUPPORT: THE CHILD WITH ADDITIONAL NEEDS

Fiona's insistence that homework is critical is in such tension with the extreme unhappiness described, that a deeper explanation for this conflicted position is needed. Something else underlies Fiona's determination that *'we absolutely do it even though, you know, neither of us like doing it, we do it and we get it done'* because general support for homework appears an insufficient explanation. The answer to this conundrum lies partly in Fiona's understanding of Sam as a struggling learner in an education system demanding high achievement. Teacher reassurance that her exhausting efforts are valuable, reinforces this. (However, note the fracture in the parent-teacher relationship described in section 6.2.4, after which Fiona redoubles, rather than reduces, her efforts; simple partnership does not, therefore, explain her engagement).

Fiona is motivated by Sam's difficulties. Although his problems have not been specifically identified, Fiona has known Sam struggles throughout primary school. Interview 1 is punctuated with such references. This portrait began by outlining Fiona's confirmed support for homework, but this support is qualified, because she openly critiques how homework operates for Sam:

Extract R:

> ***Fiona:*** *I'm, you know, a hundred percent behind, you know, and fully support any homework that comes home, for Sam or [daughter] … but I think depending on the child and depending how easy they find learning … I think sometimes the homework that they set especially for Sam a) it's just too much and b) it's … its too, too high level for Sam for how he learns, you know, so I'm not opposed to homework at all, you know, and I fully support it we do it erm religiously day in day out erm but I think the amount of homework erm that Sam gets I think for him, is is too much erm, you know, because he does struggle to learn. Maybe for probably 50 or 60% of the class who … pick things up quite quickly, erm, you know, probably the level of homework and the flow*

of homework is probably fine for them but I think for children like Sam who struggle to learn, struggle to grasp, struggle to remember things … it's a lot lot harder for them […] Sometimes I worry about- that Sam isn't even achieving the basics before they're moving on to something else … which is not Sam's fault, it's not the teacher's fault, it's just, it's just how the curriculum is set up ...

(Interview 1)

Contrasting with Fiona's support for homework, are the problems it causes her son. Beginning with general qualifiers, *'depending on the child',* Fiona quickly segues into referencing Sam directly, explaining that, for him, the homework is too difficult. This illustrates the tension in Fiona's narrative: she supports homework generally, whilst disapproving of its impact on her child. Fiona is careful not to criticise teachers, instead blaming the system, which expects too much and demands quick curriculum coverage.

Extract S:

Fiona: *At the end of the day he's never going to be an 'A star' student which is absolutely fine by me, erm, I just wish the education system could … be ok with that and that's what I find frustrating is that they just want all these little robots, you know, to tick all the boxes and they're all achieving at the same level … and, you know, that's just not reality at the end of the day and- and I think I feel more disappointed with the education system than erm, the teachers. You know, the teachers are just carrying out what they have to do and, they're just as frustrated about it as I am, you know, so I think that's probably where that little bit of judgement comes from is that, in the school system Sam is seen as, he is failing …*

(Interview 1)

Expanding further, Fiona describes the changes necessary for Sam's needs to be met:

Extract T:

Fiona: *I just wished, or wish, they could look out of [laughing] look out of their blinkered box a bit, you know, because that's just how I feel that the curriculum that the teachers are having to kind of drum in to them - it just does not fit with children who find it difficult to learn, or they need a longer space of time to be able to take things in, erm, or they need more of a*

practical way of learning but there just isn't that time or scope or resource I don't think in the system at the moment… to allow that to happen, erm, so I think that's what I find frustrating and- you know, at the end of the day, I think I'm just doing all I can … with, you know … to help him as much as I can to fit in with the system that's in place at the moment … erm, because there's no other choice ...

(Interview 1)

Extracts R-T cumulatively demonstrate that, initially, Fiona is critical of the education system, but not of individual teachers who, she believes, are also burdened by overwhelming expectations. Sam's difficulties, the system's demands, a sense that teachers also find the curriculum inappropriate, combined with basic acceptance of maternal responsibility, lead Fiona to willingly endure a challenging process. Systemic problems in *'time, scope or resource'*, and unreasonable expectations, make problematic a practice Fiona basically supports.

Determination to prevail against these difficulties is fuelled by Fiona's belief that she and Sam's teachers have a shared concern. Indeed, she asserts that teachers value her labour:

Extract U:

Fiona: *Even some of Sam's teachers erm, you know, that I've spoken to recently, they have kind of erm … implied that the amount of work that they have to try and get through, they are literally working to the last minute of the day and they said that what you do at home, I mean the only thing that gives me a bit of reassurance is they kind of said what you do at home with him does make a difference even though, you know, she said, I totally agree with you that … there is just too much to cram in especially for children like Sam who find it difficult … erm but, she said the reading you do every night, you know, the Maths-Whizz, the projects … Sam needs a lot of overlearning as they put it, so he needs to learn things over and over and over and over again […] Sometimes it's quite overwhelming the amount of stuff he's got to do … and the time we've got to do it in.*

(Interview 1)

Later, Fiona jokes *'I'm like a part-time Teaching Assistant'*.

Although she chuckles, this comparison is apt, reinforcing Fiona's time investment, but also indicating that her role goes beyond simple monitoring. Fiona often describes the practical measures employed, resources purchased and mental burden experienced to ensure Sam can access, and understand, homework tasks. However, Extract U evidences a key sentiment: she is reassured that her labour is considered valuable. Fiona's work is laborious, overwhelming and stressful, but she maintains her dedication, not just because she understands the discrepancy between educational expectations and Sam's abilities, but also because she perceives a mother-teacher partnership in support of Sam.

Fiona's relationship with school is close. She attends meetings, discusses Sam's needs with his teachers and is reassured that her input is appreciated. Teacher validation is important. Without these home-school interactions Fiona would be alone in her battle to support Sam, possibly questioning her effectiveness amid limited progress. Confirming the value of her input via teacher-mother discussions, rationalises Fiona's effort, validates her support and centralises her involvement in Sam's progress. This is most clearly expressed in Fiona's later remark: *'they just haven't got the time support or resources to dedicate to Sam soo that kind of overflows into me … at home, it's got to be done so … I'm the person who's got to do it'.* Thus, dedication to Sam's homework, despite significant challenges, is justified: the school's difficulty in providing for Sam must *'overflow'* into the person most willing to help – his mother.

Critical to understanding Fiona's construction of homework support is her comment: *'I just think, you know, he's only got one childhood and we've got to get it right for*

him…' This expression, which mixes maternal care, underlying desperation and future-facing reflections, locates the homework problem centrally with Fiona. Fiona's belief that, as Sam's mother, she must secure his one educational chance, shapes and substantiates her tiger-like devotion to schoolwork, evidenced in the maternal labour narrative of Interview 1 and a later assertiveness in Interview 2.

Central to Fiona's identity, mothering is an emotional investment requiring devotion. She cannot relinquish or reject homework, nor minimise its impact:

Extract V:

> ***Fiona:*** *Some parents would say well just don't do it, just don't do it […] but … I just can't, I just cannot let him go to … school knowing he hasn't done his homework because he will get penalised for that, you know, because they give out stickers for children that have achieved their homework and, you know, who would want to let their children not do it and not get the reward they deserve, so … erm … so we absolutely do it even though, you know, neither of us like doing it, we do it and we get it done.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

This holistic reading of Fiona's data suggests her homework support role has become indispensable, given her belief in homework's importance, knowledge of Sam's difficulties, and the inappropriateness of the system. This interpretation explains Fiona's conflicted position: balanced between what homework *means to her* and what it *requires of her*.

6.2.4 A FISSURE BETWEEN MOTHER AND SCHOOL: PARTNERSHIP BREAKDOWN

Between interviews, Fiona gains fulltime employment an hour's commute from home and pressures on her time increase. During the eleven-month interlude in our conversation, Fiona requests more school help, but feels frustrated by teacher inaction. Consequently, although Sam has finally received a Special Educational

Needs assessment, the relationship between Fiona and the school is fractured. Fiona has become a less compliant, teacher-directed mother. Critical of experts, willing to complain when Sam's needs are not met, and no longer believing the school supports him effectively, Fiona is frustrated by staff failure to enact promised support. Reflecting on this change, Fiona comments:

Extract W:

> ***Fiona:*** *I think if I* ***hadn't*** *had those conversations then nothing would have been done. I think, in a way they were [slight laugh] they were probably* ***waiting*** *for me, it felt like they were* ***waiting*** *for me to say something, like they were* ***aware*** *of his struggles but I don't know whether they needed me to kind of give them a bit of a kick to put something into place for him.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Questionable school effort, in comparison with Fiona's own significant labours, is reinforced when I ask the following question:

Extract X:

> ***Rachel:*** *Do you see the dialogue you have and the conversations with them as a kind of partnership between you? Or do you see it as them leading, as experts, and you following on from what they've suggested?*
>
> ***Fiona:*** *Erm … [long pause] … not necessarily. I wouldn't call it a partnership. It felt more one way in the respect that I was having to push quite a lot … I just kind of got the impression a little bit that it was kind of like 'oh no, you know, what more workload are we gonna have to put in place?' and you know that was kind of like, a little bit the impression I got erm but I think it just got to a point where I had to say something you know something had to be done so erm so I … I'd say it's not, it's not a partnership I wouldn't call it, I would say I'm monitoring them [laughs] to make sure that they're keeping you know to what they said they would do … so I do feel that it's me kind of doing the pushing erm to get these things in place for him.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

A long pause follows my question. However, Fiona's eventual opinion is clear. She is no longer reassured by conversations with the school which, previously, have sustained her persistence through difficult, emotionally-draining, homework

interactions. In losing trust in the professionals, Fiona changes from compliant mother, reassured by teacher experts, to one who will not accept compromise. In her words: *'it just got to a point where I had to say something [and] something had to be done'*.

Fiona's construction of her maternal identity signposts the driver to her more forthright behaviours. Referring to heavy teacher workloads, Fiona comments, *'that's not my problem,* ***my problem is Sam***' [my emphasis]. Centrally defining herself through the maternal relationship, means mothering tasks outweigh external considerations. Her child is fundamentally her *'problem'* or responsibility, and she must *'get it right for him'*. Similarly, countering a view that her homework engagement might be over-zealous, Fiona clarifies, *'they're* ***my children*** *at the end of the day and* ***I'll do what I think is right****' [my emphasis].* Homework may be stressful, emotionally and physically taxing, unreasonably time-consuming, and now poorly supported by school, but maternal devotion guides Fiona's mothering and she will not compromise her efforts. Because she ***'****would do absolutely anything for him'*, Fiona cannot begrudge or denounce homework, whatever its problems, but must always support, protect, provide for, and invest in Sam, despite the school apparently abandoning a partnership approach.

6.2.5 Public and moral homework support

In Interview 2, Fiona reflects on being a good, intensely supportive mother, experiencing pressure from current school processes:

Extract Y:

> ***Fiona:*** *I can't imagine any self-respecting parent wants their child to go into school without their bit of homework to hand in you know, you just don't*

want them to feel that embarrassment humiliation or … feeling frightened of getting told off.

(Interview 2)

Fiona's devotional desire to support contains a moral component, hinted at in the phrase *'any self-respecting parent'*. Although never criticising other mothers personally, this phrase suggests Fiona ascribes particular behaviours to morally upright parents: *not* supporting homework, and thereby facilitating teacher criticism, is discredited, because a *'self-respecting parent'* protects and nurtures their child. Homework support is therefore categorised under moral norms of maternal protection. Resisting these norms implies lack of parental integrity and care.

This moral facet makes homework a public practice, judged outside the home setting, despite its framing as a private, family activity. The public assessment of her child via homework shapes the moral positioning of Fiona's own support. Her morally-framed, emotional investment in her children explains the depth of Fiona's willingness to support Sam's homework. This moral devotion is so emotionally powerful, it results in Fiona swapping one form of potential distress (public humiliation for missed homework) for the more private distress outlined, in which mother and son mutually struggle with overwhelming, inappropriate activities.

Fiona suggests pressure to comply with homework is conveyed in moralistic messages embedded in school processes. School meetings,[23] for example, implicitly invoke parental responsibility:

[23] Sam's school supplements general curriculum events with half-termly, parent-teacher, 'Assertive Mentoring' meetings, in which personalised learning targets are set. These daytime meetings are, as in Fiona's case, often attended by mothers not fathers.

Extract Z:

> ***Fiona:*** *The teachers are very much putting the onus on- I guess like the overflow onto the parents so 'this is what the children are learning, this is what is expected, this is what we expect' erm and, they obviously don't say it outright but it certainly, a hundred percent implies that* ***we are expecting you*** *as parents to carry this on at home …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

An image from Interview 1 is reused to illustrate the impact of school expectations. In the earlier example, *'overflow'* evidenced how excessive curriculum demands force Fiona to supplement gaps in Sam's learning. Here, the metaphor indicates how pressure to conform transfers work to mothers via school briefings. The accompanying term *'onus'* adds duty to the implied burden of *'overflow'*. Both general and targeted school events therefore introduce moral obligations for homework support. Fiona embraces the unspoken, moral inference generated by these interactions, as a *'hundred percent'* expectation to support Sam's learning at home. Maternal devotion is layered with public and school-promoted moral accountability. However, when problems arise, the strain on a mother who considers herself morally responsible is significant.

6.2.6 GUILT, REPROACH AND DOUBT

Strands of maternal devotion, emotional investment and moralised mothering buttress Fiona's homework supporter role, and are displayed across her data, surfacing as heartfelt self-critiques of her intimate engagement in Sam's struggles. Interpreting this dimension of Fiona's narrative is difficult due to our existing friendship (see also concluding reflections in 6.4). The sense of personal guilt arising from difficult homework experiences and slow progress, is tangible. Throughout her

interviews Fiona continually questions her level of fault as the mother of a struggling learner. In Extract AA, self-doubt and guilt pour forth.

Extract AA:

> ***Fiona:*** *I think it's because Sam is not at the standard, is not at an average level for his age and I think that that reflects on- I feel that that reflects on me personally. I feel terribly guilty every day thinking that I should have, maybe brought Sam up differently in some way, is it something that I've done erm, you know, and …. I don't think it is, but, you know, when I go to his little meetings* and to hear every time that 'Sam's a really good boy and, you know, he does as he's told but,' there's always a but, 'but he's, you know, he really struggles over this and he really struggles over this and he's really behind in this area,' you know? As a parent I don't think you can help but feel guilty hearing that, erm … so I think that's probably perhaps where that tiny bit of judgement comes from, in that Sam is not at the level that he should be for his age, so – I do take that a bit personally and, you know, I do feel guilty that maybe I should have … [intake of breath] I don't know, maybe brought him up a little bit differently and I think that's why I do invest in him so much because he does struggle a lot and I just think, you know, he's only got one childhood and we've got to get it right for him […] so I think that's probably where that little bit of judgement comes from is that, in the school system Sam is seen as, he is failing … and, as his mummy, or as his mum, I, you know, I obviously take that on board and- and you do feel guilty about that.*
>
> ** the Assertive Mentoring consultations*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

The constant labelling of her son as failing makes Fiona question her mothering. Despite knowing her own efforts, Fiona's feelings of guilt are substantial; Sam's struggles shape her self-reproach. Although her husband is hands-on in other aspects of parenting, Fiona's concerns about academic progress are deeply personalised. A moral duty to support Sam's learning, the potential for public judgement, a maternal devotion requiring involvement, and the aforementioned framing of *'only one childhood'*, intensifies Fiona's guilt. With mothering central to Fiona's identity, in particularly intense ways during the period of fulltime-at-home-mothering around this interview, Sam's difficulties and regular teacher references to his weaknesses are

experienced as judgement on Fiona personally, prompting self-doubt in the devotional acts to which she attaches the substance of her mothering.

Despite guilt and self-doubt, instead of abandoning Sam's learning, Fiona embeds herself deeply into painful homework scenarios. Battling to overturn his failed learning, and later recognising the lack of school input, Fiona redoubles her personal efforts – practically, temporally, physically and mentally, underpinned by emotional investment in Sam. Her statement: *'that's why I do invest in him so much, he's only got one childhood and we've got to get it right for him'* encapsulates her approach: shaped by emotional investment, morally-defined good mothering, self-judgement, and a self-construct as maternally devoted.

6.2.7 IN CONTROL YET TRAPPED

Attempts to counteract feelings of guilt prompt Fiona to assume excessive homework involvement *and* control, being ever-present in Sam's homework: preparing beforehand, supporting during and ensuring completion. Several times Fiona speaks of *'control'*. Indeed, asked to reflect on how homework might differ under her husband, she rejects the idea, saying:

Extract BB:

> ***Fiona:*** *See, I wouldn't like that, Rachel [laughs for some seconds]. Probably as much as I find it frustrating and, you know, exhausting, I really wouldn't want [husband] to take on that role… because I would, I know I would be sitting [slight laugh] there going 'well you haven't thought of that and you haven't thought of that and [laughing] you haven't thought of that' …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

Despite the heavy emotional and practical load, Fiona frames personal responsibility as the preferred situation. Like many participants, Fiona does not accept the

proposition of her partner conducting homework. In suggesting he could not navigate homework's complexities, she claims the role as her own. Encouraged to reflect further, Fiona eventually embraces both maternal control and responsibility:

Extract CC:

> ***Fiona:*** *I guess also some of it is probably a certain level of control that I like to know what the kids have got to do erm and … you know, part of me doesn't want to give that up, so some of that [gendered homework support] is probably my fault anyway but that's my choice.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*
>
> ***Fiona:*** *I think it's more of a control thing, I think because, maybe I feel that I can do it better than [husband] [laughing] […] I think I feel more responsible and as his Mummy that I should be … I guess maybe I should be the one to do it […] The thought of handing it over to [husband] now- I, no, no I wouldn't [smile in her voice] I wouldn't, couldn't, wouldn't want to do that …*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

In these passages Fiona searches for justification for her uncompromising stance. Considering the shared distress, emotional burden, public judgement and failure narrative, it would be understandable if Fiona wanted her partner to take over. However, in both demonstrating maternal devotion and being morally expected, Fiona cannot relinquish homework support. Even though it is difficult and excessive, the judgement to which Fiona holds herself means she will not renege the role. For this reason, Fiona does not, and likely never will, perceive any real choice over homework engagement. As proof of her emotional investment, maternal devotion, and moral responsibility, her homework support is necessary. She therefore claims control, precariously balanced between homework as failure and potential success, experiencing a burden she cannot renounce. As Fiona declares, *'there isn't much choice, you either support them or you don't'* (Extract O, above). Homework is

embedded into Fiona's mothering. She is *'doing all I can […] because there's no other choice …'*

6.2.8 Concluding Fiona's Portrait: a construction of homework shaped by devotion

Fiona's data produces a complex interpretation, containing tensions. She is both invested in and troubled by homework, conflicted between valuing it and living it as a time-consuming, sometimes distressing interaction. Fiona's early satisfaction that teachers appreciate her homework participation initially sustains her through difficult circumstances, but this fails when she realises in-school support does not mirror her efforts.

Being highly emotionally invested in her child binds Fiona to homework involvement. Aligning her mothering practices and homework beliefs with her self-positioning as a devoted mother leaves Fiona with no option but to comply with an activity she and her child find deeply unpleasant. Her maternal emotions leave her tied to, and simultaneously pained by, homework. Although burdened in emotional, temporal, practical and intellectual ways, Fiona cannot relinquish involvement, maintaining that homework is integral to her mothering.

As a morally-guided, devotional, responsible mother, Fiona experiences personal guilt for Sam's difficulties, whilst also viewing her mothering as the only solution. Labouring to support Sam, invest in his learning and control his homework, Fiona rejects both teacher and paternal involvement as inadequate. Where a mother constructs herself as devotional and morally responsible, homework engagement becomes essential even when homework itself is problematic. Thus, despite their

mutual suffering, Fiona's emotional response will always be certainty that continued dedication to homework is necessary.

6.3 Comparative Portrait 5: Jenny – Separating homework from maternal identity

The following condensed portrait concentrates on dimensions which contrast with earlier participants, necessarily omitting other narrative strands. Initially, Jenny and I conversed via 62-minute video call. Four months later, I visited Jenny's home for a 72-minute interview.

6.3.1 Context description

Jenny is a white, 41-year-old family therapist, currently undertaking a PhD alongside her employment. She and her husband, a senior manager in the charity sector, live in a detached cottage, in a rural village. Jenny describes the family as *'firmly middle-class'*. Two of her three children are primary-aged. High-achieving, 10-year-old Claire (Year 6), spotlighted during the interviews, has an acquired brain injury, resulting in auditory memory problems. She attends the village school, which has 35 pupils on roll, divided between two classes. Jenny is Chair of the school's Governing Body.

Claire's limited homework includes spellings and reading, with occasional maths and holiday projects. Jenny accepts homework as necessary but has little involvement.

6.3.2 Homework is *not* a maternal responsibility

From the outset, Jenny challenges the notion that homework support is a maternal responsibility. Whilst my flyer sought mothers who 'find themselves the most involved in homework', Jenny declares in both interviews that homework support is not a sole maternal activity: *'**absolutely** I see it as a joint **parental** responsibility, not*

like the mother's responsibility'. Previously, Jenny took a conscious decision to absolve herself from automatic child-related duties, saying *'when I started working fulltime … I resigned as she who knows all the stuff about where everything is and what has to be in on what day and you know [giggling] it's been quite liberating.'* Jenny acknowledges this significant biographical change as unusual and hard to sustain because gendered processes mean schools principally communicate with mothers. Rejecting homework responsibility indicates not just that Jenny's *homework view* contrasts with other participants, but that her construction of the *maternal role* is also different.

Jenny takes a determined stance, apparently at odds with mothers' social positioning. For example, she rejects the way some mothers compete through homework:

Extract DD:

> ***Jenny:*** *Oh wow … Oh God … [exhales] I just would* ***not*** *engage with it [sigh] no. If I felt any [mother-to-mother competition] from somebody I would no longer be their friend […] I'm kind of horrified at that thought. That's, that's about it being about* ***you****, you know? That's sort of identifying like my child's homework says something about* ***me*** *and I completely reject that.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

In denying that homework *'says something about* ***me****'*, Jenny positions herself not just outside gendered homework support, but outside homework completely. Whilst other mothers gain from homework participation rendering them good, devoted or invested mothers, Jenny denies any relationship between her children's homework and herself.

This resolute rejection suggests Jenny's self-worth is derived from other dimensions. When I ponder, as an explanation for maternal participation, that homework is not a private exercise and that any 'failures' are witnessed externally (by teachers, children, other parents), Jenny claims a personal, parenting confidence which separates these issues, but suggests:

Extract EE:

> ***Jenny:*** *Maybe if as a parent you're not feeling very confident, maybe you see it [homework] more as a reflection on yourself? So I don't think that if my child fails their spelling test and gets them all wrong, I don't think her teachers are going to think 'oh her Mum must be thick' […] But I wonder if for some parents it does feel like a reflection on them, you know, they're sending something of themselves in … And it would* ***never*** *occur to me … I don't see it as remotely a reflection of me …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Homework is therefore framed as a representation of her child, not her mothering.

Multiple biographical and social dimensions give Jenny considerable cultural capital. She is *'firmly middle-class'*, has progressed to doctoral level, has professional standing in her field, but also has teacher friends and educational knowledge gained through her governor role. This bestows confidence, knowledge and experience relevant to school issues. Jenny even recognises herself as *'a bit rebellious'* over homework, which *'comes from a place of privilege'*. Jenny's self-identity is built on factors outside the maternal relationship with her children's education and is not framed by a mothering model oriented towards homework support. She resists the mother-supplementary educator connection which impacts other participants.

6.3.3 A HOMEWORK APPROACH BUILT ON MOTHERING PRINCIPLES AND KNOWLEDGE: RESISTING DIRECTIVES

Despite rejecting homework responsibility, Jenny's responses to homework support reflect her mothering. This is seen in a dispute over Claire's reading diary. Jenny feels the daily log is inappropriate for Claire, whose acquired brain injury causes memory difficulties. Jenny asserts her opinion with the teacher, justifies her view using knowledge of Claire and ultimately ignores the teacher's insistence on compliance: *'I just said to Claire "just don't do it and tell them I told you you shouldn't have to".'* This episode indicates Jenny's privilege to question teachers, disregard their instructions and direct Claire to do likewise. She is not concerned how the teacher will view her decision to flout homework rules, nor does she position the teacher as expert in Claire's development. Educational confidence and privilege give Jenny the self-assurance to trust her mothering instincts and resist school policy. Jenny contends, *'yes I get your policy meets the majority of children's needs but it doesn't meet my child's needs',* concluding that *'as a parent I suppose I feel I have a more refined understanding of what my child needs …'* This distinction between what school and home can know frames Jenny's decisions.

This example of using her mothering knowledge to resist expectations, suggests Jenny's mothering style, rather than socially normative expectations, shapes her homework behaviours. Jenny believes that both mothering and school practices should be *'totally child-centred'.* In Interview 1, she argues for individually tailored homework: believing her eldest daughter needs more challenge, Jenny supplements homework with music lessons, whereas she dislikes structured homework for Claire, preferring her to *'chill and build something out of chicken wire'*. Instead of Jenny's

maternal role being moulded in relation to homework, the reverse is true: her mothering beliefs shape her homework expectations.

Despite rejecting homework *responsibility*, Jenny still engages with Claire's learning, crafting her approach using knowledge of what might aid Claire, according to character, ability and needs. Jenny's maternal identity is not bound to homework compliance, yet her mothering *is* a tool in how she responds to and manages homework expectations. Even in matters considered a teacher's specialism, Jenny is certain her maternal assessment of Claire's needs is correct and uses this knowledge to override teacher directives. Whilst not integrating her identity with homework support, Jenny's mothering knowledge individualises homework.

6.3.4 DRIVE-BY MOTHERING

During Interview 1, Jenny describes her mothering: *'Me and my friend have a joke that we're drive-by parents',*[24] elaborating this as follows:

Extract FF:

> ***Jenny:*** *I think it's really important to be sort of warm, loving, interested, consistent, but I do step back, my kids are very independent and … I try and give them a sense of responsibility and a sense of ownership for their choices erm and they don't- I think if they look to me, if they say 'what shall I do I'm bored?' you know, I see a lot of my friends say 'oh do this, do this' and I'm like 'I dunno, what you gonna do, you're bored' [slight laugh] you know [laughter] 'I dunno, not my problem' [slight laugh] I do give them a high level of independence, I don't see it as my role to structure their time […] I do spend time with them but it tends to be short bursts of quality time […] I'm not emotionally distant.*
>
> *(Interview 1)*

[24] Word play on the widely understood term 'helicopter parents' whereby parents micromanage their child's time.

Jenny describes a balanced position: emotionally connected, providing warm, responsive, consistent mothering, whilst encouraging independence, responsibility and choice. Instead of structuring, monitoring or directing her children's time, she mothers in *'short bursts of quality time'*. Articulating her approach as *'proper present attention',* favouring *'no attention'* with periods of *'real present attention'*, over more continuous *'low attention'*, Jenny thus creates the drive-by mother: one who gives focused attention for limited periods. This drive-by mothering style, physically detached yet emotionally connected, is mirrored in Jenny's homework approach. In her video, Claire works independently whilst Jenny undertakes unrelated chores, occasionally engaging to demonstrate or make suggestions, never sitting beside Claire. Homework is constructed, and enacted, as Claire's responsibility, although assistance is given willingly through time-limited, tailored support.

Constructing her homework practices to fit her parenting beliefs, Jenny aims for attentive mother-child encounters. However, she does not elevate homework; it remains one of many activities for which the same approach applies: *'It doesn't stand out as a separate category of thing […] I'm not trying to set the agenda for how the attention happens, it's just whatever they are doing I will try and occasionally sort of tune into it and be present'.* Jenny's mothering does not include a deliberate homework support role, but homework, amongst many tasks, affords opportunity for maternal engagement. Homework support is therefore a by-product of Jenny's mothering.

Jenny's mothering is not led by homework expectations. On the contrary, her homework approach derives from her child-centred, drive-by mothering. Jenny

manages homework based on detailed knowledge of her children, which is the bedrock of her parenting. Thus, whilst she is steadfastly against homework as a *gendered* responsibility, Jenny still engages with homework when required, in facilitative, supportive and focused ways.

6.3.5 Concluding Jenny's Portrait: a construction of homework grounded in mothering, but not a maternal responsibility

Contrasting much social framing, Jenny is clear homework is not her maternal responsibility and separates it from her maternal self. This does not mean mothering is unimportant to Jenny, but shows that homework is not subsumed into her maternal identity as it is for other mothers. Narrating herself as largely uninvolved, a construction of the *'drive-by parent'* reveals that Jenny intentionally adopts child-led mothering, using nuanced knowledge of each daughter in focused mother-child interactions, including homework activities. Therefore, despite rejecting maternal responsibility for homework, Jenny willingly engages with it. Her mothering directly shapes her response, and her support functions in unity with her mothering.

Whilst Jenny's mothering *leads* her homework involvement, her maternal identity is not unsettled by homework expectations as happens for other mothers. Drawing a boundary around herself, Jenny resists homework's integration into her maternal identity, her social, biographical and psycho-social background forming a sense of self outside the mother-school connection. Jenny is empowered to dispute the socially implicated maternal position in homework support and to locate homework as *not hers*. However, her engagement is shaped by her mothering style, and maternal skills remain central to her homework support.

6.4 Concluding remarks

This chapter suggests that maternal constructions of homework are grounded in a complex mix of biographical experience, social situation and emotional motivation. In Portrait 3, I proposed that Ruth's intense emotional response to homework derives from a desire to protect Lois from remembered negative experiences. In Portrait 4, Fiona constructs herself as a devoted mother, leading to intense homework support because Sam struggles. Both mothers are burdened by homework through their emotional response to it as an important dimension of their mothering. Ruth believes only *her* care-by-control homework support will protect and nurture Lois, while Fiona, trapped in a cycle of overwhelming emotional, practical and cognitive labour, feels simultaneously guilty for Sam's predicament and devotedly responsible for solving it.

However, emotion was not only present in Ruth and Fiona's narratives. I experienced emotional reactions to their stories. Following data collection, I was drawn to analyse Ruth's data first, despite the social, biographical, psycho-social and professional differences between us. In my Reflexive Diary, I noted that Ruth's interview felt like a genuine, participant-researcher, co-constructed narrative, pondering whether this was due to subconscious attempts to counter class differences between us. Equally, I recognised elements of Ruth's homework support (close mother-child proximity; emotional intensity; mother framed as integral to success). Consequently, I grasped Ruth's position more quickly than with mothers who situated themselves differently. Furthermore, a holistic analysis approach thrust the emotive elements of Ruth's narrative forward, resulting in an emotional response to her account of painful childhood experiences which her homework approach aims to resolve. An

empathetic researcher reaction cannot be ignored for its likely role in focusing attention on Ruth's emotional motivators.

My response to Fiona's habitual narrative of homework stress should also be recognised. Our existing friendship meant I was invested in Fiona before gathering data, already knew of Sam's struggles and had been, occasionally, a sounding board for her concerns. However, I was not prepared for the intense experiences revealed in Fiona's first interview. Her willingness to divulge difficult experiences and the traumatic homework accounts themselves were moving. Heartfelt descriptions of guilt and self-reproach were hard to hear, and I was troubled to discover Fiona internalises Sam's problems and judges her own mothering so harshly. I would have been drawn to this case without our established relationship, however knowing her made the narrative particularly affecting. That Fiona's experience could shock me, despite knowing of her difficulties, emphasises the power of her portrait.

It was also disconcerting to hear the depth of internalised guilt caused by a system of which I am a part. Identifying that a commonplace, teacher-directed process produces regular maternal stress, self-judgement and underserved guilt, is powerful, particularly when contrasted with my own experiences. When I first interviewed Fiona, my older child was also in primary school. She did not struggle with learning and, though engaged and supportive, I did not spend long hours in morally-induced attempts to help. Yet it is Fiona whose mothering is judged harshly by homework requirements. Emotional response is critical throughout this chapter, not only for what it divulges of mothers' constructions and experiences of homework support, but also for deepening understanding of the participants' narratives.

The final, contrasting portrait demonstrated that some mothers reject gendered homework responsibility. However, this portrait, whilst illustrating socio-biographical details which enable resistance to maternalised homework duty, nevertheless reinforced the constant interaction between homework support and mothering. Whilst not outwardly constructing her maternal identity around homework support, nor engaging in burdens, battles, or emotional reactions which embed the practice, Jenny's response to homework remains bound to her mothering self and is shaped accordingly. Thus, whether a mother positions homework inside or outside her responsibility, the nature of relational mothering results in homework support rooted in her mothering.

7 MOTHER-CHILD HOMEWORK INTERACTIONS

In Chapters 5 and 6, five maternal portraits revealed homework approaches shaped by emotion and the integration of social, biographical and psycho-social factors. This chapter focuses on all participants' filmed interactions and stimulated reflections.[25] It explores how mothering and homework converge to create mothers' physical homework practices. The participants' reflections on their video data are integrated with my analysis, a technique significant in bringing the researcher and reader empathetically closer to the participants' experiences (Pink et al., 2017). Connections between narrative and stimulated reflection are also discussed.

7.1 EMBODIED MOTHERING BEHAVIOUR

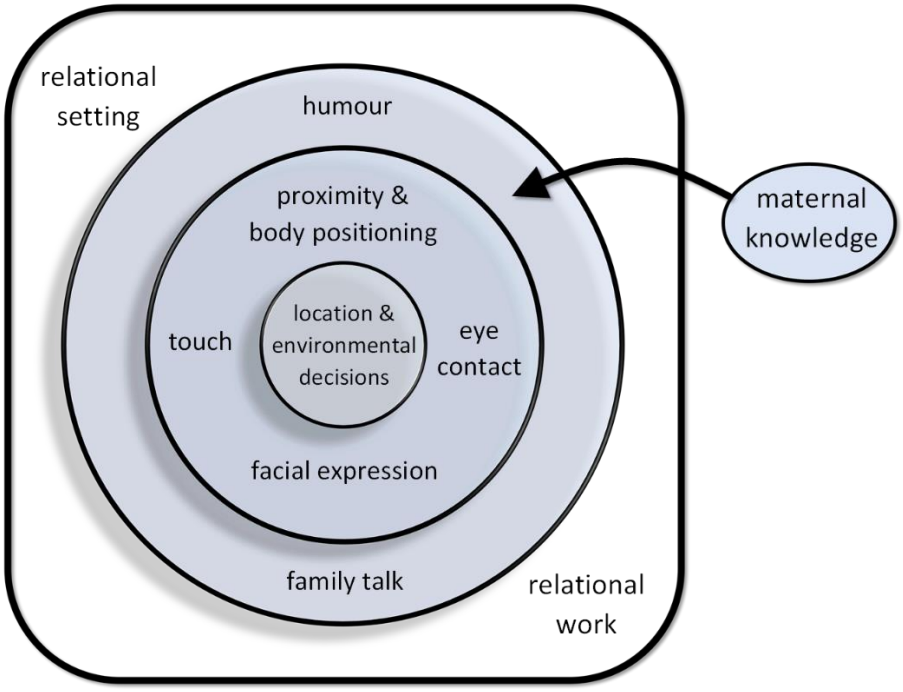


Figure 5: Mothering practices during homework

Participant videos make visible the embodied mothering of homework interactions, based in conscious and unconscious decisions. *Figure 5* illustrates the complex

[25] Appendix C contains context descriptions for the additional three participants.

interaction between the various dimensions. Overlapping circles reflect the different layers of embodiment and embodied decision-making the mothers demonstrate during homework, beginning with location and environmental choices, progressing through embodied actions such as body positioning, touch, eye contact and facial expressions, and finally including verbal constructions such as humour and family talk. This outer layer is often shaped by deep maternal knowledge. Critically, both embodied practices, and the factors influencing them, are situated within existing mother-child relationships. The relationship itself thus prompts the relational work of embodied practices visible in homework interactions. These embodiments therefore suggest homework behaviours are rooted in mothering.

7.1.1 Location, environment and informality

Embodied mothering in homework interactions begins with environmental choices made in the act of situating homework physically within the home. These decisions contribute to a sense of atmosphere which can be interpreted by the observer. Ruth's video is illustrative.

Figure 6 shows Ruth and Lois seated on a sofa, sharing a laptop, a blanket over their legs, as they focus on an online maths task. The lighting is low. This combination of factors makes this encounter appear warm and supportive. The atmosphere, created by Ruth's choices, is maintained throughout, and enhanced by body proximity, touch and voice. Environmental decisions which produce a homely, comfortable, relaxed atmosphere contrasting with formal learning settings, reflect Ruth's construction of homework support and signal her approach. When I first viewed Ruth's video, the

atmosphere created was visually striking and surprising. My reactions are discussed in this chapter's conclusion.

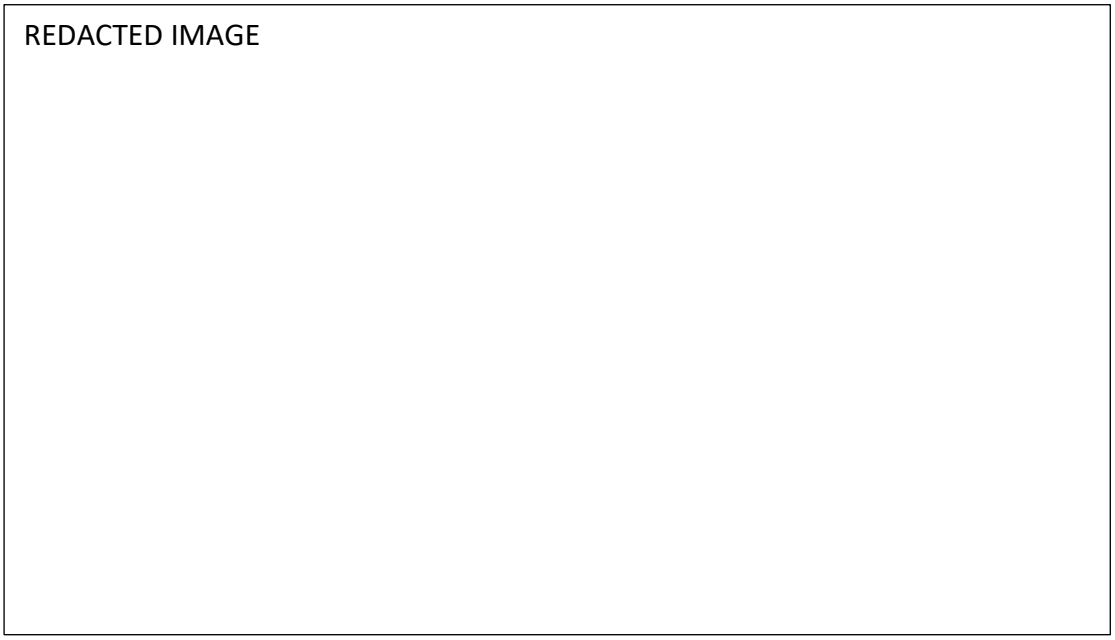


Figure 6: Ruth and Lois (42 seconds into 15.5-minute video)

Anna also creates mood through environmental choices. Her decisions indicate whether homework is formal and school-like, or informal. In *figure 7*, Izzy sits at a low desk in Anna's study, while Anna reads a list of words for Izzy to spell. Anna sits to the side, on an armchair, her feet curled beneath her. Locating the activity in the study, at a desk, indicates a degree of formality, but this is tempered by Anna's more casual seating position. Low lighting softens the mood further, making a formal homework task less school-like.

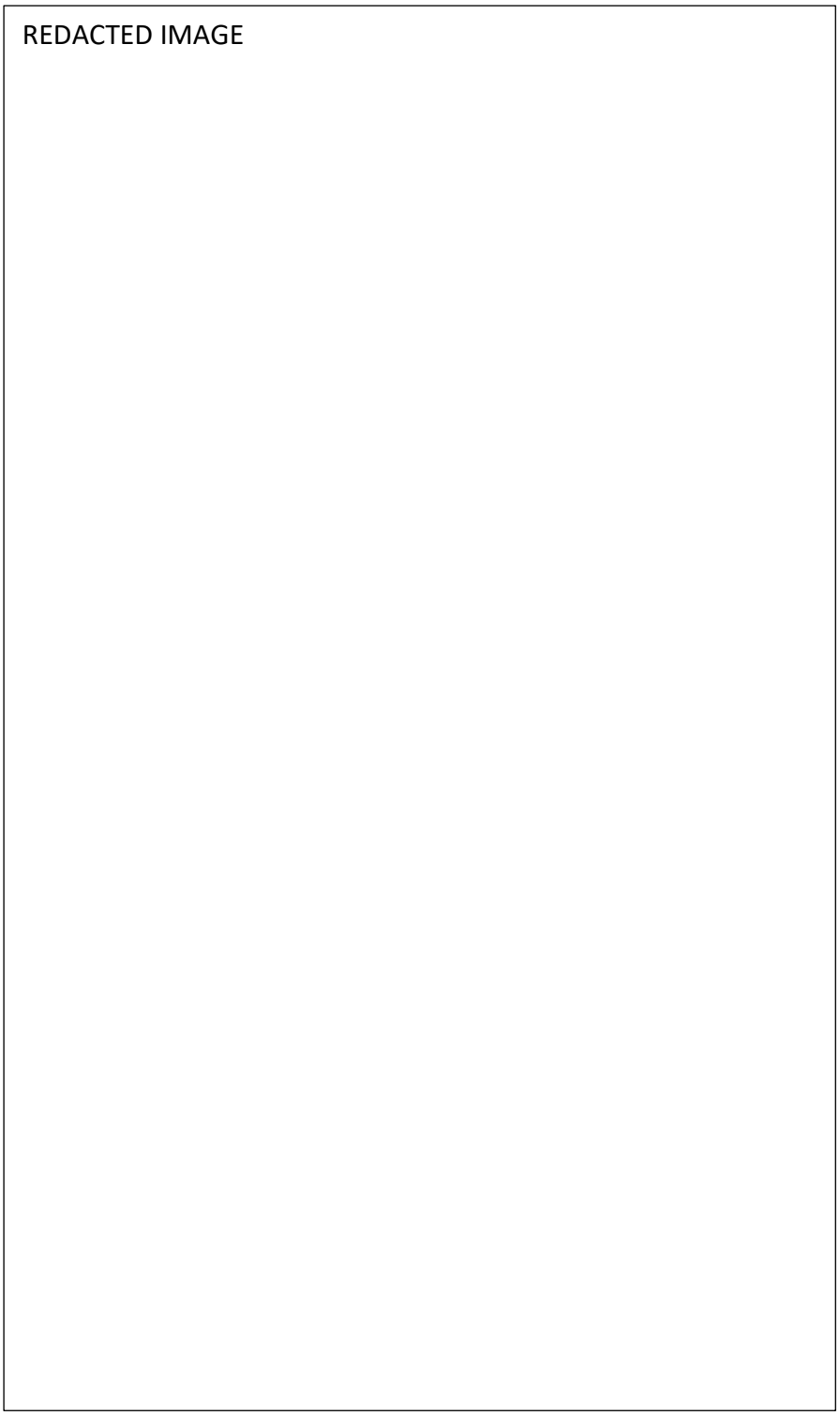


Figure 7: Anna and Izzy (9 seconds into 8.5-minute video)

In a second video *(figure 8)*, Anna supports Izzy to practise counting in 2s, 5s and 10s. In her reflection, Anna notes this as an *'informal requirement'* practised *'very regularly'*. As such:

Extract A:

> ***Anna:*** *We'll sit on a chair sometimes to do something like um a bit of reading a bit of something like this, so I'm tryinga make it I guess quite informal here but she still knows this is our study and this is where we do our work so she knows it's work time as opposed to play time. There's no toys in there and … I'm tryinga make it just a relaxed environment I think where … she's just gonna recite it to me whilst getting a bit of a cuddle, maybe?*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

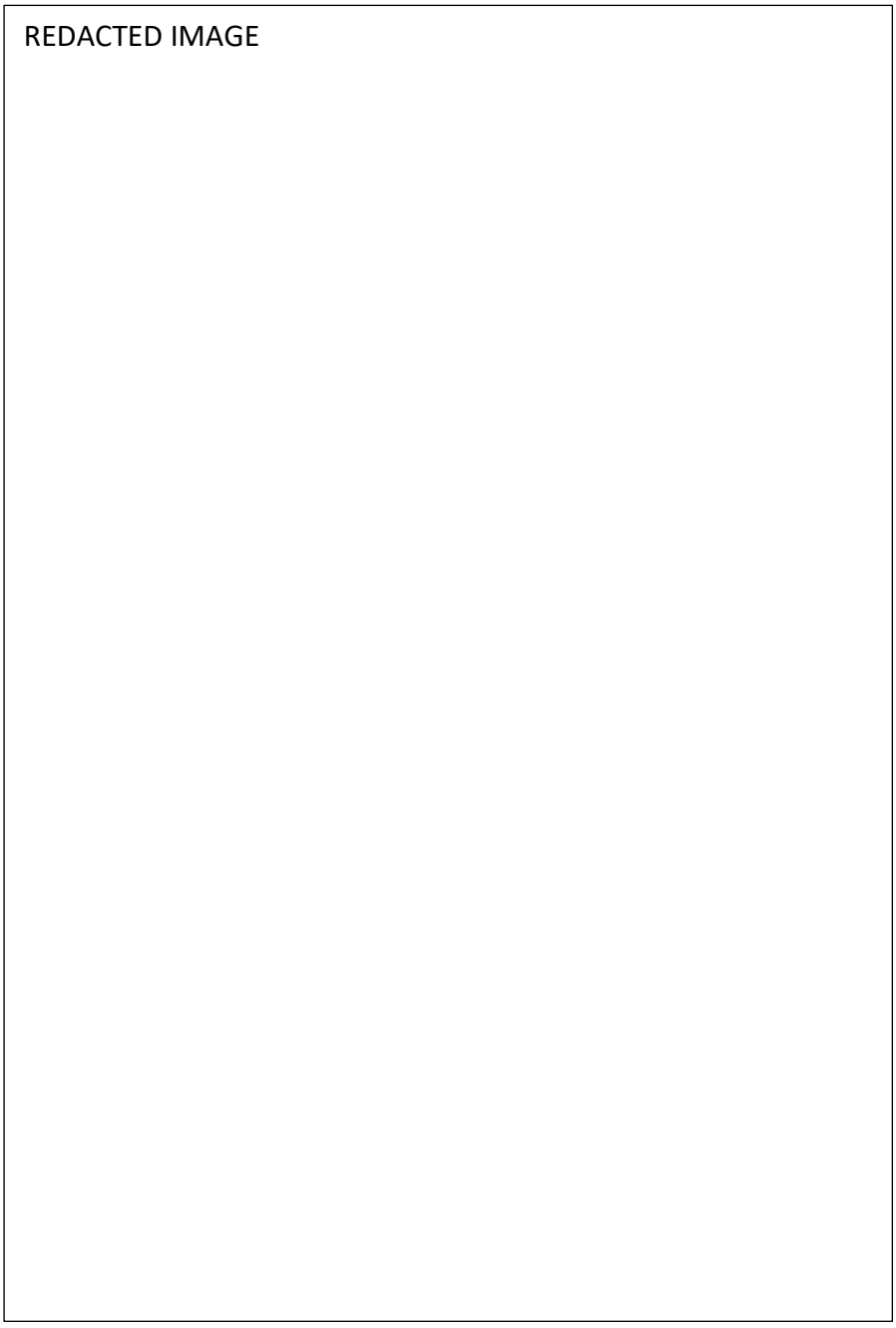


Figure 8: Anna and Izzy (opening of 6-minute video)

This reflection suggests Anna balances homework's formality as a school-set activity, with its place in the parent-child relationship. This dual framing means Anna can increase informality according to the task. In the counting exercise, they sit together on a comfortable chair *(figure 8)*, their physical positions mirrored, with feet curled up. Lighting, seating and positioning all indicate an informal, relaxed exercise, affording mother-child connection (see 7.1.3; discussion of touch). Nevertheless, the study location simultaneously preserves the sense that homework is educationally important work, not play. Anna's embodied environmental choices therefore indicate to Izzy how the homework should be understood and experienced.

Other mothers also informalise the atmosphere through their actions. Fiona's video opens with an Easter egg on the table, beside a laptop and paper. As the recording starts, Fiona opens the chocolate egg, dispensing a chunk to Sam. While she explains the task, Sam eats chocolate, giving only assenting 'uh-huh' noises for the next thirty seconds. As the homework ends, Fiona offers more chocolate. Similarly, Leah and Jack's homework is interrupted when he fetches raisins, on which he munches as they discuss ideas. The sharing of food, bookending Sam's homework and interspersed through Jack's, demonstrates the creation of a home-style, casual experience inside the bounds of a school-set activity.

Environmental decisions, integrated into mothers' homework support, emphasise or modify homework's formality, transforming a school-set activity into a maternally-led exercise, marking it as different to classroom work.

7.1.2 PROXIMITY AND BODY POSITIONING

As hinted, body positioning is part of the mothers' homework support. I noted, in *figure 8*, Anna and Izzy's similar seating positions: side-by-side, with their feet tucked up on the chair. Side-by-side seating is common. Those who do not sit immediately beside their child have older children (Sian, Leah and Jenny) but even Sian and Leah spend considerable time sitting *with* their child. Leah, sitting at the shared table, remains present throughout her thirty-one-minute video, only leaving when the cognitive work is complete and Jack is copying finished sentences into his book. *Figure 9* illustrates Leah and Jack's closeness, their heads bowed together as they focus on Jack's work.



Figure 9: Leah and Jack (10 minutes 36 seconds into 31-minute video)

The only mother not choosing proximal seating is Jenny, the participant who situates herself outside the discourse of maternal responsibility and moulds her approach to her child's needs rather than to her own social positioning. Jenny remains largely out

of shot, completing unrelated tasks whilst Claire undertakes a craft project. She answers questions from a distance, only approaching the table when Claire seeks practical assistance.

Figure 6 (p.278), already referenced in relation to environmental decisions and homework atmosphere, also reveals mother-child proximity, as Ruth and Lois curl together on the sofa. Ruth's stimulated reflection adds detail:

Extract B:

> ***Ruth:*** *Normally like I say we're sat there like that doing her homework erm, if she's writing on a piece of paper, actually we'd be doing the same, she'd just have something hard underneath so that she can write on it and I think that's nice cause that's our time, doing it and so it's just that little bit more engagement between us […] I just think that's really nice when we sit like that.*
>
> ***Rachel:*** *I did too, it is really nice, it's lovely to watch. Although earlier I asked you whether you thought some of your approaches and techniques were teacher-like, at the same time you've got this, visually, a really close relationship. The fact that you're doing homework within that mother-child bond – homework fits into it doesn't it?*
>
> ***Ruth:*** *Whereas thinking about it sometimes we might sit at the table … but we still sit very close together, like she'll sit on my knee on the chair, whereas we was talking about obviously Dad's role in things, he would just sit at the table he wouldn't sit next to her and he'd be doing whatever he's doing and then just checking …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Shared consideration of the image prompts Ruth to reflect that mother-child proximity is *'really nice'*. She recognises that her physical construction of homework support increases their *'engagement'*. The image, a physically close, intense construction of embodied homework, is mirrored in Ruth's description of homework as *'**our** time'*. Contrasting with Ruth's narrative of apparently teacherly elements of

her support (rules; expectations), *figure 6* highlights the *embodied* differences with teacher-child work, emphasising the mother-child relationship.

These images, combined with Ruth's self-reflection, reveal greater detail about how she constructs homework support and its connection to her mothering. Wherever homework takes place, proximity is integral to Ruth's interactions, which are constructed differently to her husband's support. He sits *at* the table, but not *beside* Lois, suggesting a more separate, monitoring role, embodied by physical distancing and engagement with other tasks. This contrasts with Ruth's more connected, maternal approach.

7.1.3 Touch

Touch is also a dimension of embodied mothering found in the observed homework support. In *figure 6* (p.278), Ruth and Lois remain physically connected throughout. Although focused on the task, their bodies unite: Lois leans into the crook of Ruth's arm, which is wrapped around her daughter, her chin resting in Lois's hair. In this snapshot of continuous physical attachment, both appear relaxed and apparently unconscious of their connection. Lois's maths task does not require maternal presence, still less actual touch. Bodily connection results from the established relationship within which homework sits, a function of this rather than a condition of the educational exercise. However, physically embodying their relationship in homework behaviours reflects a construction of homework as an informal, if intense, relational activity. Embodying their emotional connection physically, Ruth enjoys the mother-child interaction.

Anna also demonstrates touch, specifically during informal homework.

REDACTED IMAGE

Figure 10: Anna and Izzy (41 seconds into 6-minute video)

Curled up together, unconscious touch pervades the activity, naturally progressing through a series of physical contacts, which, at times, become integrated with the educational activity. When Izzy self-corrects a mistake, silently, Anna nods in agreement and casually moves her hand onto Izzy's leg (*figure 10*). This natural,

possibly subconscious movement of validation and reassurance, increases their contact. The moment of touch is embedded in their relationship which, being maternal, is grounded both physically and emotionally.

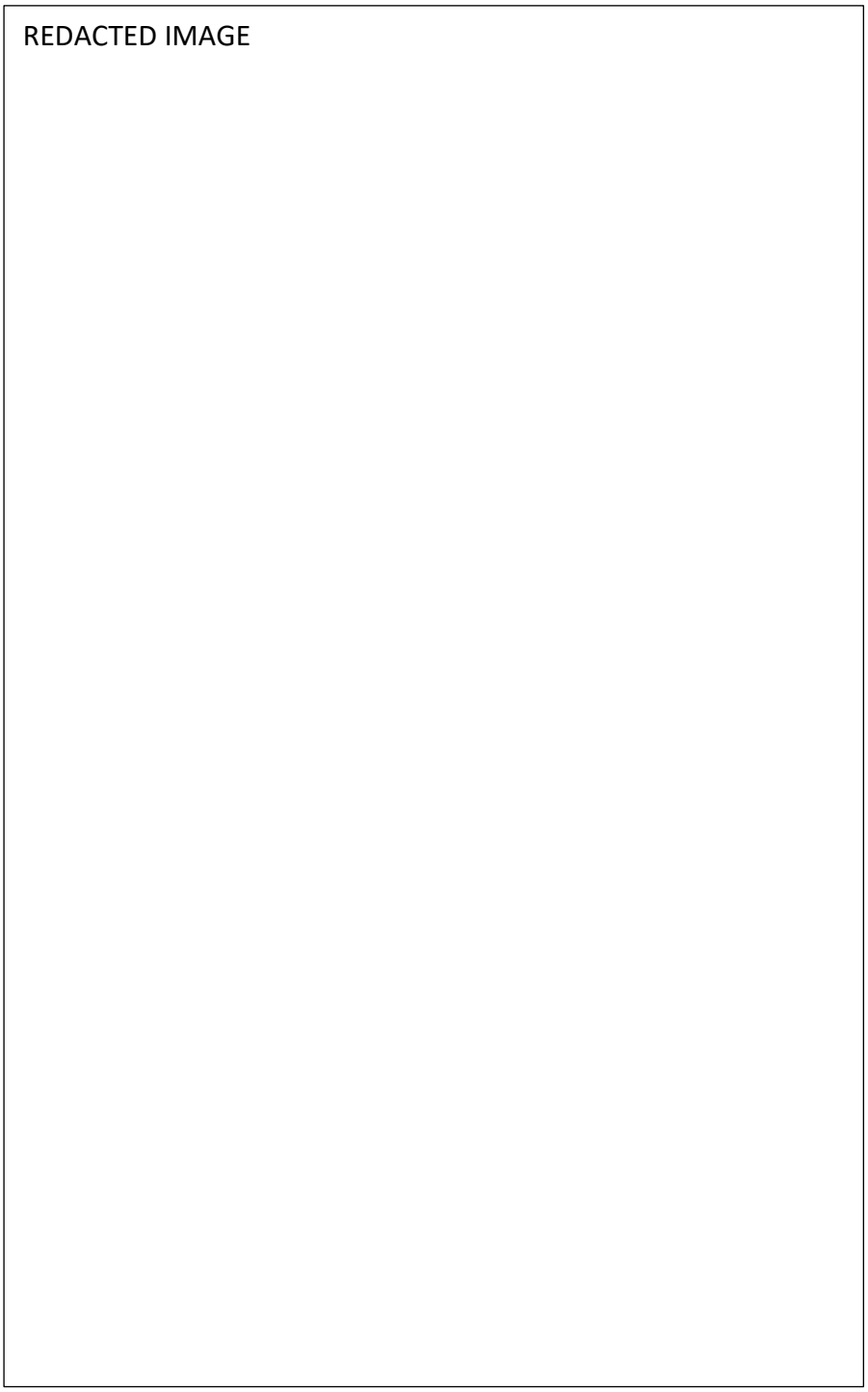


Figure 11: Anna and Izzy (45 seconds into 6-minute video)

After stroking the side of Izzy's leg with her thumb, and in response to Izzy raising her hand slightly, Anna takes her daughter's hand in her own (*figure 11*). Forty-five seconds into the activity, whilst maintaining focus on homework, Anna has connected to Izzy through handholding, a physical expression associated with love, care and protection in parent-child relationships. This physical connection then embeds into the learning task, as Anna bounces their joined hands on her own leg, providing a beat to Izzy's counting. After nine seconds, Izzy subconsciously breaks hold to place her finger in her mouth whilst thinking. However, touch is only momentarily fractured, before Anna returns to stroking Izzy's knee with her thumb (*figure 12*).

Focused on the recitation, Anna begins to tap her thumb against Izzy's knee, again mirroring the child's counting through touch. When Izzy pauses, Anna's finger-pulsing pauses too. At one minute eight seconds, Anna's hand relaxes and rests on Izzy's knee, remaining there for one minute thirty-eight seconds; sometimes thumb or fingers stroke and flex on Izzy's knee, or lightly tap against Izzy's leg. As Izzy finishes counting, she relaxes her hand, bringing it to rest atop her mother's; they both smile. When Anna challenges her daughter to count a new sequence, Izzy grasps her mother's thumb, using it to beat the rhythm of counting on her own leg, mimicking Anna's actions from moments before. This passage, from a longer video, reveals a progression of natural, subconscious, physical interactions. Despite having limited relevance to the educational purpose of the homework, the touch does, at times, support the rhythm of the counting, therefore embedding into *and* reflecting the nature of the task, whilst being rooted in, and sustaining, mother-child physical connection. This underlines how mothers' embodied behaviours shape

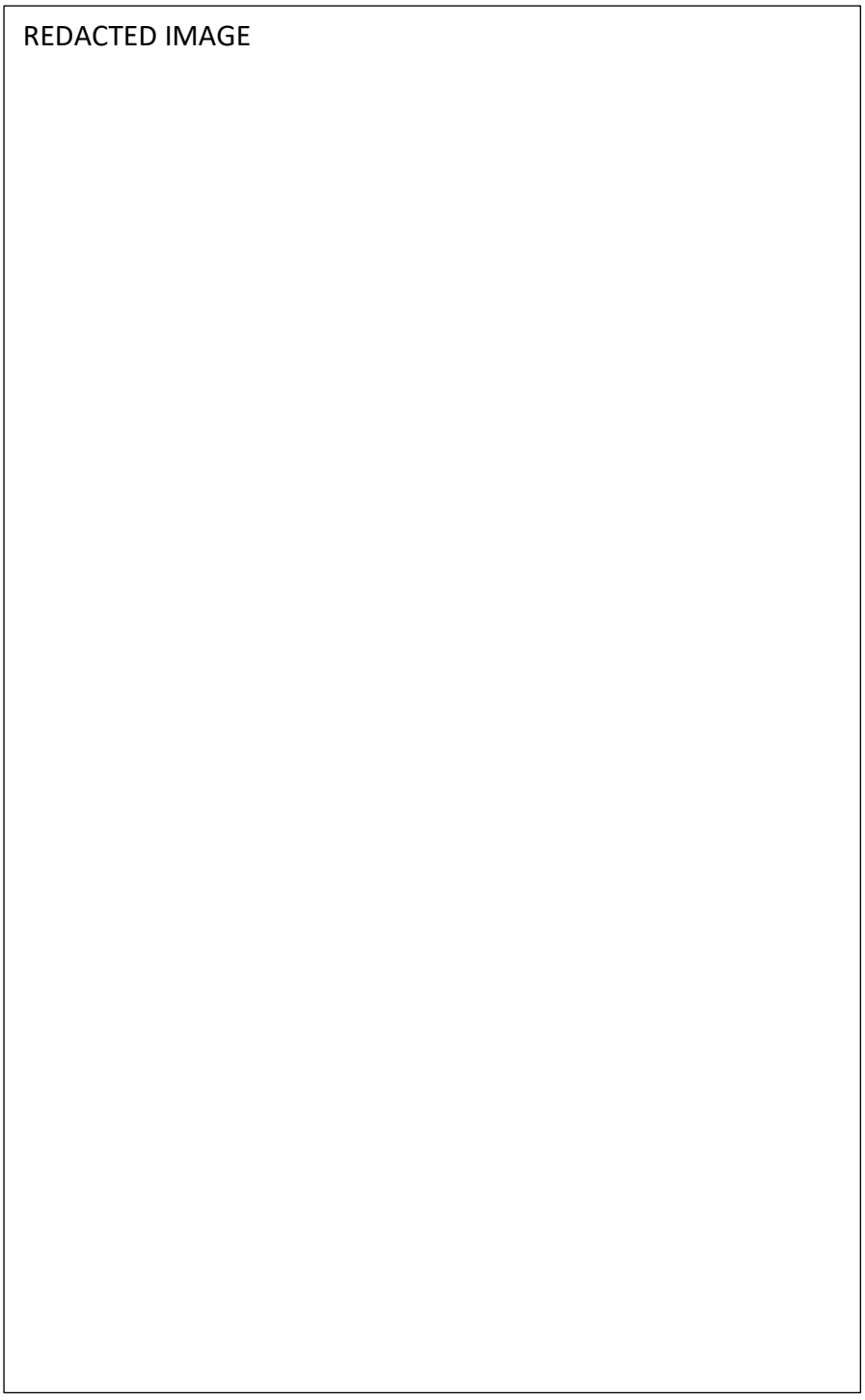


Figure 12: Anna and Izzy (57 seconds into 6-minute video)

school-devised tasks, drawing homework into existing, close relationships. As the counting practice ends, Izzy leans into her mother and Anna brushes her lips to her daughter's head, in an expression of love (*figure 13*).

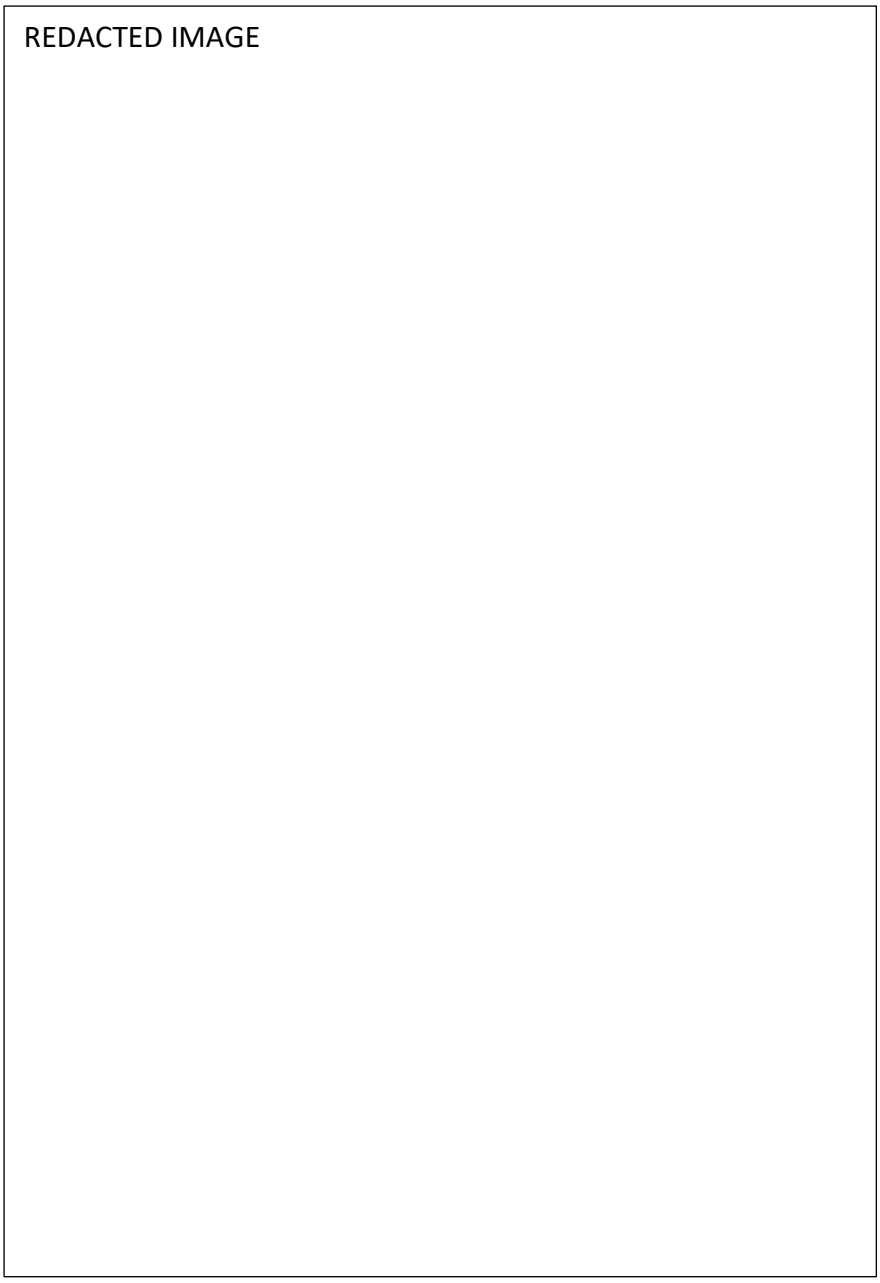


Figure 13: Anna and Izzy (5 minutes 44 seconds into 6-minute video)

The cases highlighted are mothers with younger children, but examples with older children occur too. Leah congratulates ten-year-old Jack with *'good work, high five'*, holding her hand up for physical connection, although, aware of the camera, Jack modifies his response (*figure 14*).

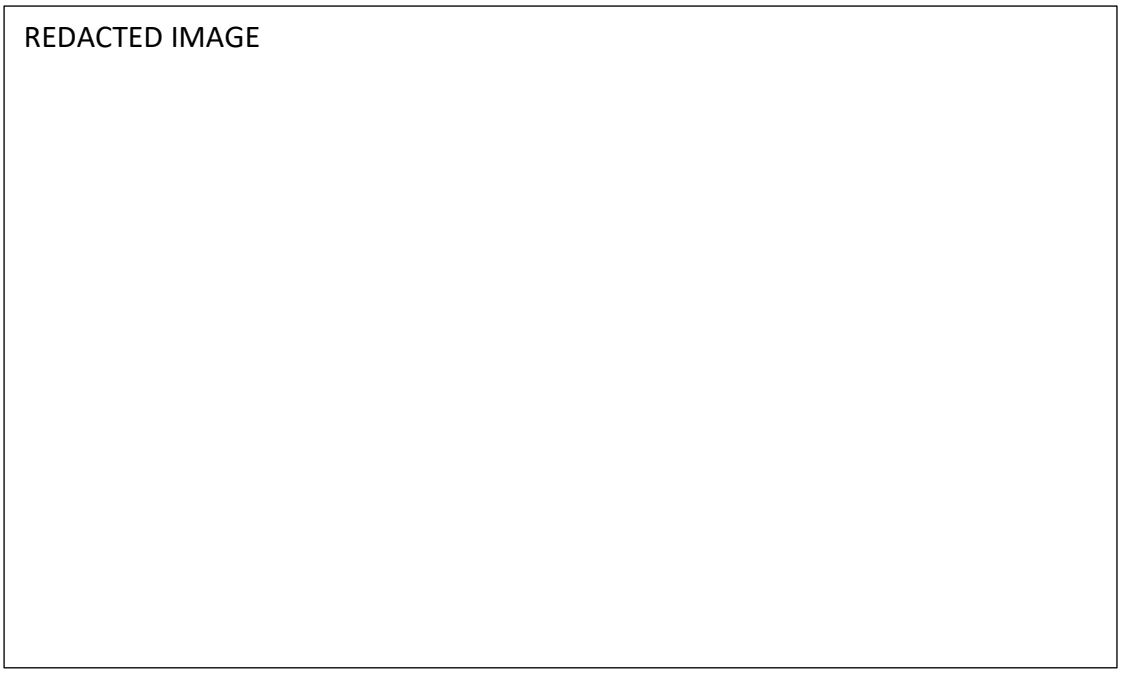


Figure 14: Leah and Jack (10 minutes 48 seconds into 31-minute video)

Physical connection is thus embedded in the homework interactions, particularly where mothers create informal practices which afford proximus positioning and occasions of mother-child touch.

7.1.4 EYE CONTACT AND FACIAL EXPRESSION

Both eye contact and facial expressions are used in the mothers' homework support, often in response to the child turning towards, or looking up at them.

Fiona and Sam are conducting web research on the Roman Empire, in preparation for a series of tasks. In *figure 15*, Fiona has just read aloud that Hadrian's wall was a garrison for soldiers. Delighted that he had mentioned soldiers previously, Sam calls out *'yeh I knew I was right!'* and turns to look at his mother. Fiona mirrors Sam's excitement by raising her eyebrows and widening her eyes, in a spontaneous response to Sam's excitement and interaction with the task.

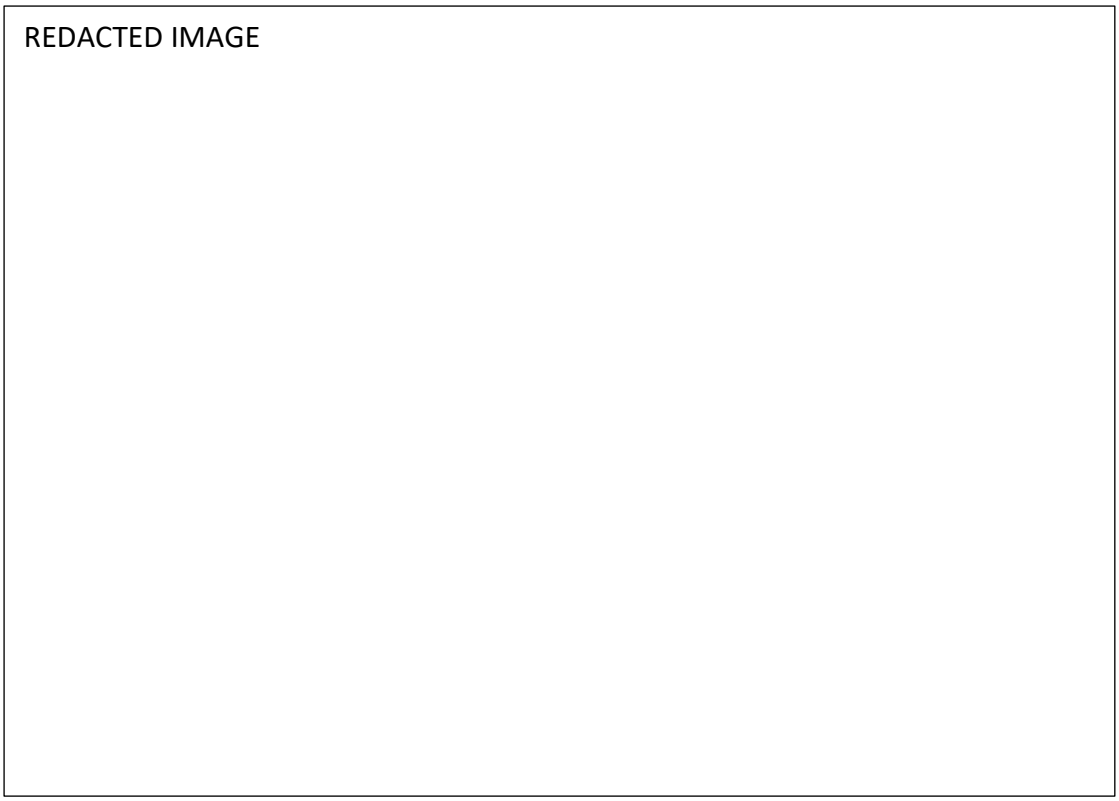


Figure 15: Fiona and Sam (12 minutes 3 seconds into 32-minute video)

Nell responds to her daughter with a similar expression. Lucy is circling the answers to some maths clues, on a 100 square. When she looks to her mother for

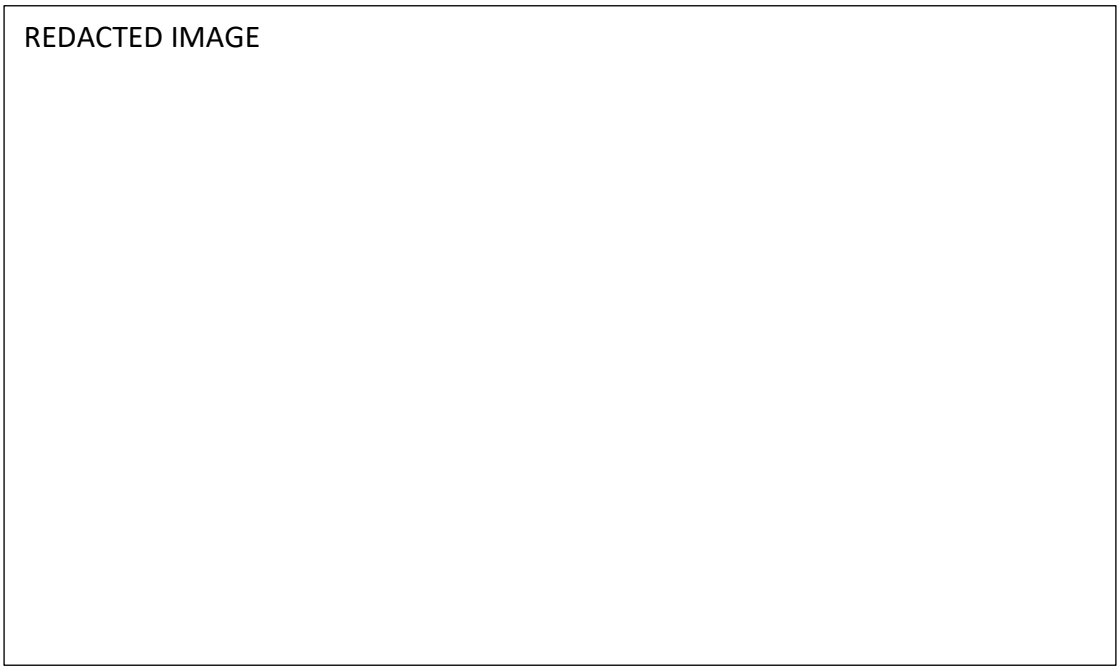


Figure 16: Nell and Lucy (2 minutes 42 seconds into 17-minute video)

confirmation of a correct answer before marking the sheet, Nell reacts non-verbally, nodding slightly and widening her eyes in admiration (*figure 16*), before giving a confirmatory *'mm-hm'.* Caught in this image, Nell's expression could be misinterpreted as a warning sign. However, in video context, Nell's embodied response is understood as appreciation for Lucy's thinking.

When later reflecting on her use of humour, Nell adds detail to this interpretation of her facial expressions:

Extract C:

> ***Rachel:*** *I just wondered whether you could reflect on whether this is a* ***conscious*** *thing that you do: ok homework could be a bit boring I'm going to make it a bit fun for Lucy, or whether that's just a reflection of your natural mothering?*
>
> ***Nell:*** *Erm I think it's a bit of both so I um, so I'm conscious that Lucy has a real thing of- not liking people saying nice things about her, so she doesn't like it if you say to her 'oh you were brilliant at swimming tonight, your front crawl was amazing'. She hates it. Whereas actually if it's more something like I'd say 'boom' to her a lot or like we fist bump or do high fives cos she's much more comfortable with that as an expression of 'you've done well' than you know sort of real praise …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

This answer contextualises many of Nell's facial expressions, moments of eye contact, nods and other non-verbal cues. These embodiments recognise Lucy's preference for non-verbal encouragement and recognition. Facial expressions and eye contact are not only embedded in homework, but draw on established, embedded mothering techniques.

7.1.5 HUMOUR

Humour emerged as a component in the homework interactions. I hinted, above, that Nell incorporates humour, using different voices, accents and phrases, smiling

animatedly (*figure 17*), and laughing when Lucy strays from the task (chuckling *'just do the questions!'* in mock annoyance).

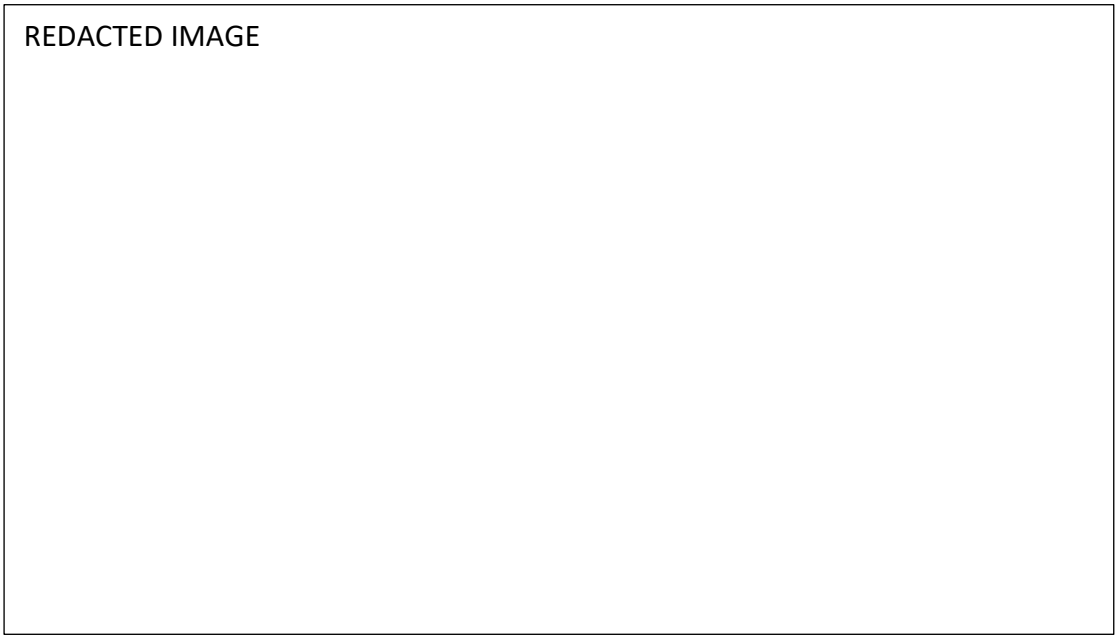


Figure 17: Nell and Lucy (14 minutes 31 seconds into 17-minute video)

Humour is also a tool for addressing mistakes. When Lucy accidentally circles the wrong answer, Nell reacts with *'whaaaat?'* (*figure 18*), humorously drawing attention to the error. Reminding Lucy of the correct answer, Nell softens the

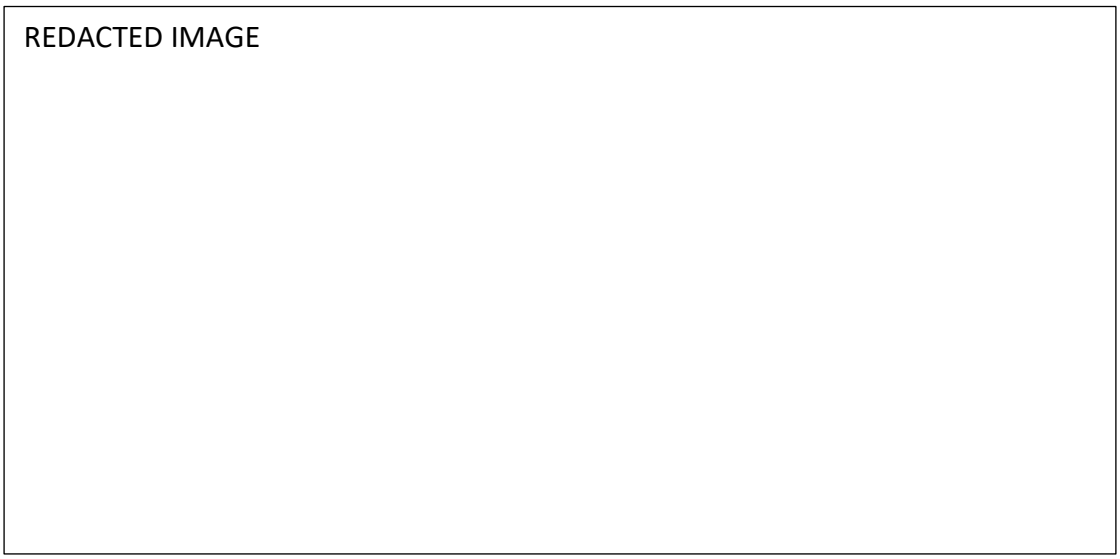


Figure 18: Nell and Lucy (8 minutes 40 seconds into 17-minute video)

moment further with laughter. When Lucy declares she will write a note to the teacher, explaining her mistake, Nell giggles *'that's **two** sentences to write'*, teasing Lucy about an earlier error, suggesting she writes *'my brain went [noise made by tongue flicking fast against lip]'.* This humour indicates that neither mother nor teacher find mistakes problematic. Thus, gentle humour maintains a positive atmosphere, whilst still addressing errors.

Sian's video is also peppered with humour. The film, in which Emma completes an English task, opens with shared laughter, immediately demonstrating a light-hearted atmosphere (*figure 19*). Sian expects hard work and accuracy, but situates the

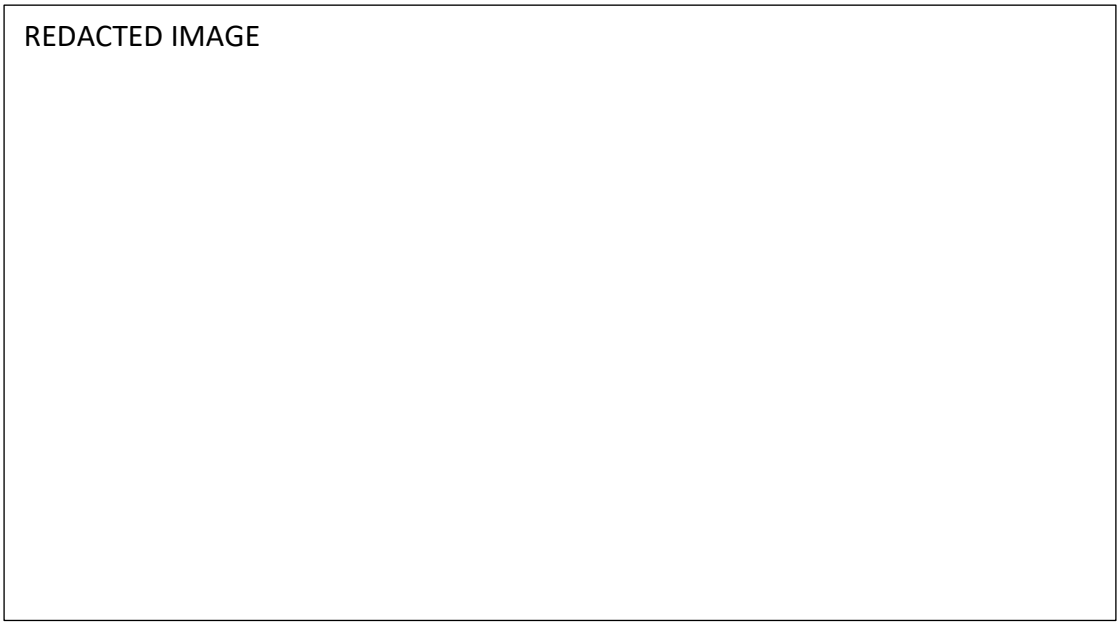


Figure 19: Sian and Emma (opening of 28-minute video)

activity within an informal atmosphere, where laughter is acceptable. This mood is maintained, despite both finding the task frustrating. Struggling to sentence-match correctly, they giggle at Emma's suggestions, for example her inverted answer *'It was raining because we went inside'* (*figure 20*).

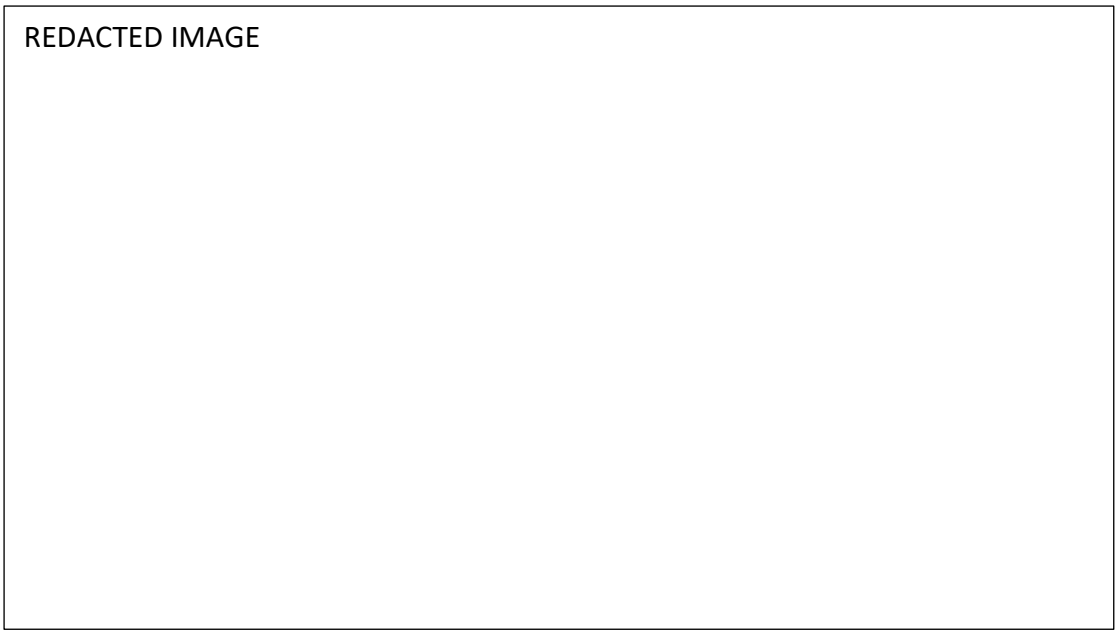


Figure 20: Sian and Emma (3 minutes 10 seconds into 28-minute video)

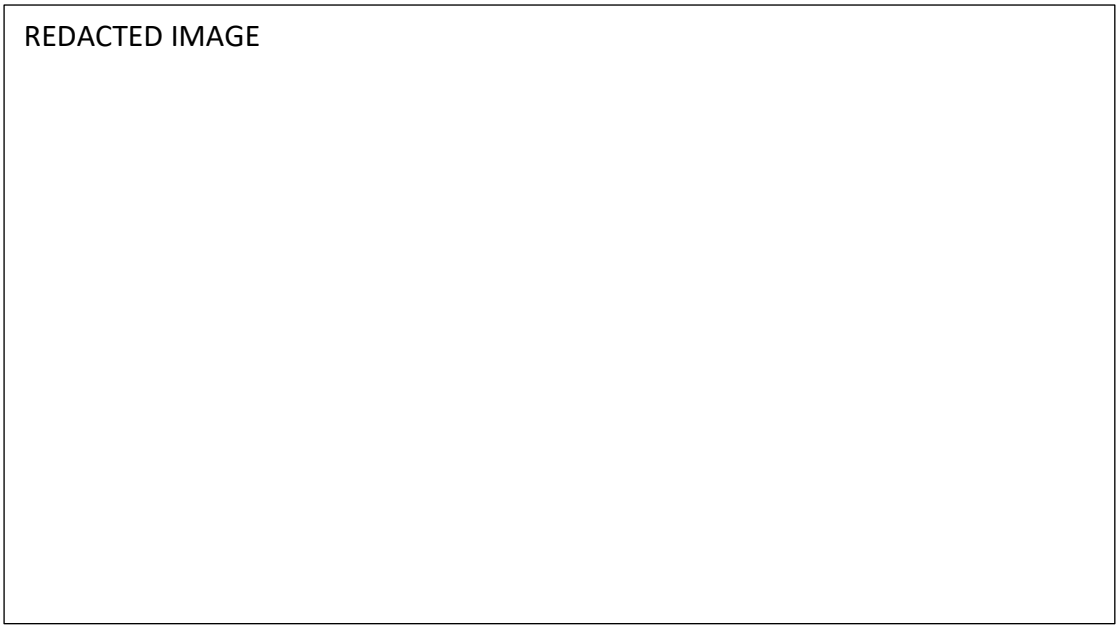


Figure 21: Sian and Emma (7 minutes into 28-minute video)

In another example, when Emma collapses into giggles after suggesting *'Billy ate a packet of biscuits then he was violently sick'*, Sian mirrors the laughter with her own amused expression (*figure 21*). Completing work amid raucous laughter is likely much less acceptable in a classroom setting. A successful strategy for persisting through a challenging task, humour also reflected this mother-child relationship.

Humour operates differently in Helen's video. When Corey is unsure how to answer a comprehension question about *The Lion and the Mouse* story, he digresses into an account of his own ideas about lions. This makes Helen giggle. Understood in the context of her narrative, this response is not unkind, instead illustrating Helen's enjoyment of Corey's company. Reflecting on this interaction, Helen describes Corey's imagination as a wonderful, individual flair, albeit problematic when specific answers are expected.

Extract D:

> ***Helen:*** *I sort of remember thinking that he- he was going off at a bit of a tangent with it, which he does, but [exhales] I knew that he knows that answer becau- it's just a case of often just focusing him on it to get what they're specifically looking for, cos I know past experience of things that they're looking for set, keyword answers and what he's saying is great and I don't wanna [exhales] stop him thinking like that and going off and having this great imagination but at the same time I know from school they're looking for very set answers and it's a case of trying to get him focused on what they're looking for […] he's got such an imagination for his age, it's really great, it's- the stories he comes up with are amazing to read and I don't want him to lose that by forcing him into this almost little box that they have to be in, so it's a bit of a balance to … still let him have that but still make sure he's getting the marks that he'll need to be getting for his exams.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Respecting Corey's individuality is important to Helen. She negotiates an approach which preserves his imaginative streak, whilst still meeting homework requirements. Her laughter when he gives unexpected answers is therefore not *at* him, negatively, but indicates enjoyment of his imagination, and validation for his unique personality.

Humour in maternal homework can be a tool of the activity, a sensitive strategy for addressing mistakes and supporting perseverance, or can signify the mother-child relationship and enjoyment of time spent together.

7.1.6 'FAMILY TALK'

One dimension of humour which stretches beyond laughter or mutual amusement, concerns the mothers' use of family oracy and shared expressions. Some verbalisations make sense to the participants in the interaction and draw on their shared history, but are instances of non-task-related language, serving other purposes.

Many of Nell's humorous interjections draw on family phrases. She begins by addressing Lucy with *'Right then Missus …'* This adult title is cheeky and informal. Nell names the coloured pens Lucy uses, for example *'yellow peril'* and *'Barry blue'.* She declares *'boom!'* to award praise, and when the task is complete, calls *'Finito! Finito!'* These casual expressions are interspersed throughout the video. Without comment, Lucy accepts the language as an unremarkable element of their conversation. Coded 'family talk' like this, which is mutually understood, constructs homework as part of an existing relationship. Schoolwork in a home setting does not mirror classroom learning, but is situated within family practices, including linguistic expressions.

Anna's first video exhibits how mother-child oracy in the homework context develops over time. Extract E occurs while Anna reads out Izzy's spellings:

Extract E:

> ***Anna:*** *sunset*
>
> ***Izzy:*** *Oh that's easy! [leans down and writes]*
>
> ***Anna:*** *[quietly] Only if you know it.*
>
> ***Izzy:*** *Yep! [writing in book … looks at Anna] Yah! [confirmatory nod]*
>
> ***Anna:*** *holiday*

Izzy: *[as she starts to write] Ah that's easy as well but 'only if you know it!' … [looks up at Anna]*

Anna: *string*

Izzy: *[goes to write, then looks back at Anna, nodding] now that is* ***literally*** *easy, but 'only if you know it!'*

Anna: Exactly

(Video)

Noticing the repeating phrase *'only if you know* it', I did not initially understand its significance. The development of this expression as a homework tool was revealed in Anna's later reflection. Concerned that Izzy's tendency to claim all tasks are easy causes problems when challenges arise, Anna developed the cautionary phrase *'only if you know it'* to remind Izzy that sometimes tasks are harder than they appear. *'Only if you know it'* has become a regular refrain during homework, carrying shared meaning established in past experiences. Anna uses the phrase almost inaudibly in Extract E (I listened several times to distinguish the words). Contextualised by Anna's reflection, I understood the whisper as an established tool which gently reminds Izzy of previous conversations. Injected casually, it is playfully echoed between the pair, but demonstrates thoughtful maternal strategising which sustains positive homework practices. That Izzy does not question the meaning, but immediately adopts the phrase, indicates both their mutual understanding and its effectiveness. Short-hand, family talk therefore operates as a linguistic tool in homework.

7.1.7 Concluding embodiment

The embodied mothering visible in the videos serves demonstrable purposes. The behaviours, sometimes specific strategies which aid the homework interaction, are always situated within the mother-child relationship. Layering embodied behaviour

over homework, individualises practices. Embodied mothering is therefore embedded within each dyad's homework. Its particularities vary pair-to-pair, but homework is never divorced from its relational context. Homework interactions infuse myriad, complex and entwined verbal and bodily expressions.

7.2 Maternal knowledge

Elements of section 7.1 hint that mothers activate existing knowledge of their child to navigate homework. As seen, Anna's knowledge of Izzy leads her to develop shared homework talk which avoids confrontation and distress. When Izzy momentarily explodes with annoyance at misspelling a word, Anna negotiates this skilfully, reflecting later that navigating such outbursts comes through experience. Intimate maternal knowledge allows Anna to combine distraction, repetition and firmness to overcome problems, while the preventive phrase *'only if you know it'* avoids known flashpoints. Homework is managed through knowledge of temperament, distress triggers, and past experience of tense situations. Elsewhere, I noted Nell's use of alternative techniques (humour; facial expressions; family phrases) to acknowledge Lucy's successes while avoiding discomfort from conventional praise. *'Boom!'* and fist bumps, in the homework context, are modelled on existing knowledge. Both Anna and Nell avert tensions through maternal expertise. This emotional capital, situated in mothers' knowledges, secures homework positivity.

However, mothers experiencing negative homework encounters also use nuanced knowledge to craft their practices. Portrait 4 revealed that, despite a conflicted relationship with homework and mutual mother-son distress, Fiona has a refined

understanding of Sam and a highly strategised homework approach. Her video is lengthy (32 minutes) but contains only a small amount of recognisable 'work' plus much discussion of task selection and some simple preparatory research. I raised three observations with Fiona. Firstly, she does not correct Sam's substantial misunderstandings (such as that Hadrian's Wall encircles their hometown). Secondly, Fiona permits diversions from the task to watch inessential videos. Thirdly, she engages in complex decision-making. Fiona's responses demonstrate how she integrates knowledge of Sam and his learning difficulties into her approach.

In relation to Sam's errors:

Extract F:

> ***Fiona:*** *I think my initial reaction is not to shout him down too soon because I worry that then he'll clam up so then when he, cos when he says 'Oh I think they built [Hadrian's Wall] in [hometown]' like this, I thought I'm not gonna say anything because when we go and look at the facts and then we put it in his like little PowerPoint presentation we can look on the map as to whereabouts it was […] but I just worry that if I shout him down too quickly he will then not open up as much.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Thus, Fiona makes continual judgements as the task progresses, based on intimate maternal knowledge. Understanding his difficulties and critical of homework expectations, she recognises that to correct errors may damage his motivation, instead planning to overturn misunderstandings through later investigation.

Logic behind the video diversions (on toolmaking and weaponry) is similar. For Fiona, Sam's interest in these topics justifies going off-task:

Extract G:

> ***Fiona:*** *He's very enthusiastic by the fact that they're tools and um that- it's kind of right up his street, he loves that sort of thing […] I think because he*

was just so excited about watching it and I was just like 'oh I've got to let him watch it' he's just and you know he'd sat there so well and done his home- or you know done what he had to do so er I just thought I can't [slightly laughing] crush him at the final hurdle.

(Interview 2)

In acquiescing to the detour, Fiona recognises Sam's interests, affords his enjoyment, rewards his effort, and protects his self-esteem; all founded in her existing knowledge.

Although the interaction mostly covers task selection rather than substantive homework progress, beneath the surface, Fiona is engaged in sophisticated decision-making, underpinned by maternal knowledge:

Extract H:

Rachel: *What are you thinking while you're guiding his choices?*

Fiona: *I think there's quite a lot of things that run through your mind […] I mean it's up to him what he chooses erm but I guess in the back of my mind I'm also thinking how can we display it or how can we present it, how do we research it, how long's it gonna take erm will he get bored halfway through, you know if he goes for quite an ambitious one [inhales] how many steps is it gonna take for us to complete it you know so there's kind of like a whole load of things that I'm thinking about [laughs] to get these little projects done.*

Rachel: *It's kind of a mammoth task really when you lay it all out like that-*

Fiona: *-I know.*

Rachel: *-you're not just sitting next to him making sure he's doing it, you're having to manage the situation for the best outcome for Sam aren't you and that involves all this extra emotional effort on your part.*

Fiona: *Yeh, yeh and another thing that I'm thinking about is how can we complete this homework you know erm, using Sam's- what he's capable of?*

(Interview 2)

To support Sam, Fiona cycles through various considerations, including his chances of success. Portrait 4 recognised this as a burden. Here, I highlight Fiona's skill. Detailed knowledge steers Fiona's decision-making towards strategies that might enable

success. Her labour is not just emotionally and cognitively draining, but should be recognised as reflexive, complex and skilled.

Helen describes her support as *'intuitive[]'*. Stimulated reflection was essential for understanding her motivation, choices and meanings. I observed that when Corey does not know an answer, Helen uses repetition only and wondered whether she lacked alternative strategies. For example, when Corey is confused about a question and instead pretends to *be* the mouse, saying *'I don't know if I like the lion [shrugs shoulders] I'm really scared'*, Helen simply nods and says *'ok'.* She waits for an answer, while Corey continues to struggle for three minutes, during which he talks unrelatedly about the lion and tries to persuade Helen to write an answer for him. Helen's reflection reveals that her conceptualisation of both the support role and homework's purpose, shapes these limited responses: believing that homework *should* challenge Corey, Helen likes the task, hoping it may stretch Corey's thinking. Judging his misunderstandings as lack of focus not ability, her role is to refocus his attention, not to simplify, scaffold or guide. On this approach, she says:

Extract I:

> ***Helen:*** *Something basic I know he knows and often he's not listening or he's not thought it through so you just do it again or get him to look at it again and then he, it clicks erm so sometimes just repeating it does, he listens more, or he thinks it through that little bit more, or often he's [slight laugh] he's one that daydreams quite a bit, his imagination is absolutely amazing so he does something if he's reading it sparks his imagination, he's off at a complete tangent and you sort of have to refocus him on 'this is the actual question, this is what we're looking for' so I sort of try and do that with him.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Helen's simple repetition technique is understandable when contextualised by her construction of homework's purpose as 'to challenge' and her role as 'to maintain

focus'. When Corey underperforms through wandering attention, it makes sense not to explain but to repeat the question and allow Corey to reconsider. An apparently limited strategy is built on Helen's construction of homework and what it can afford her son. Her perceptions of Corey, based in past homework interactions, lead her to tailor her support towards monitoring, re-focusing and repetition. Helen's mothering, therefore, *'intuitively'* shapes her homework approach.

Video analysis, combined with stimulated conversations, reveals the mothers as reflexive, both during homework interactions and afterwards about their practices, uncovering that their behaviours are founded in intimate knowledge of their children.

7.3 Mothers' relational work

Applying nuanced knowledge of their children to homework support makes mothers' position *in relation* to their child significant. Situating school-set tasks relationally and integrating mothering with homework, creates multifaceted, subtle, sophisticated support which elevates simple learning assistance and distinguishes homework from school-based activities. This section considers how a relational position particularises mothers' homework support.

In a follow-up interview, I enquire whether the shared laughter which punctuates Sian's homework practice aids homework management:

Extract J:

> ***Sian:*** *Erm I think it's probably really important. I think happy kids learn. I think lots of tasks are daft and dull and repetitive and so finding the fun is kind of a good recipe all the way through life.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Sian's response suggests she aims to facilitate homework using humour. Hinting that homework is sometimes unstimulating, Sian adopts a light-hearted approach, to motivate when the task does not. Furthermore, Sian frames homework as fundamentally different to classroom work, because, despite mimicking school strategies, mother-supported learning occurs within a very different relationship. I ask if Sian's homework approach is different *because* she is Emma's Mum.

Extract K:

> ***Sian:*** *Erm I think yes obviously schoolwork is completely different to homework and I think homework is relational, it's part of our relationship. I don't think the words I use would be different to the words I would use if I was supporting her in class as a parent helper: read this again, what does it say, does that match. But I think the relationship is obviously at the fore at home, whereas the task would be at the fore at school.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

This distinction highlights that a task infiltrating home *from school*, constructed *by teachers*, and tied *to school requirements*, will always be different when enacted *inside the family*. Following school requests and using conventional teaching methods is secondary to the relationship within which homework sits. Previous chapters have shown homework becoming embedded in mothering identities; this confirms that mothering also embeds into homework practices.

Nell's constant presence within her video provides another example of homework's relational dimension. Although Lucy can complete the task independently, Nell's motherly companionship structures the activity, creating a particular atmosphere through humour, family talk and non-verbal expressions. We mutually reflect on this:

Extract L:

> ***Nell:*** *Yeh I was just smiling to myself watching that actually cos she was … it was kind of a nice feeling cos we were sort of, we'd had a nice morning […]*

she was being a bit of a joy doing it then and it was something that she understood and could see how she did it, so yeh it was just quite nice really to sort of sit and you know, sort of let her get on with it really.

Rachel: *So, for you, it was quite a relaxed moment …*

Nell: *Yeh exactly yeh and what I sort of said earlier about us um kind of just spending some time together. From looking back at the video it looks like we sort of quite, like, quite like bonding or getting on well and that kind of thing.*

Rachel: *Yeh that's really interesting cos that's something I'm seeing when I look at people's videos. It's one thing to hear people talk about what their approach is but when you actually see a mother and a child together you get a totally different sense of what's going on for that relationship-*

Nell: *-Yeh I think you're right cos the other thing is for Lucy, I said this to [name] the other day that sometimes I think with Lucy when I'm interacting with her I'll be like interacting with her but making her tea, or interacting with her and half keeping an eye on my emails or whatever whereas homework for me and Lucy is very much, I'm really conscious of sort of giving her my time to do it and I think quite often that reflects on how Lucy is with me in that she's like, she really enjoys having me just concentrating on her rather than on a variety of things.*

(Interview 2)

In constructing homework as requiring full attention, Nell and Lucy gain relationally. Their shared homework is reciprocally pleasurable as *'bonding'* time. Nell gains because, as a relational experience, homework is more than educational, enabling her to engage fully with her child outside pressures as a lone parent, working fulltime and running a business. These moments of relationship-building and mother-daughter interaction have deep, personal validity. Although homework is school-set, the focused one-to-one time is mutually beneficial, and valued beyond the learning itself. This sentiment is articulated by several mothers (portraits 1, 3 and 5; also Sian).

However, it is not only those who enjoy homework time that use relational work to construct it for their own ends. Leah, mother of a ten-year-old with sometimes

turbulent teacher-pupil relationships, supports her son's homework as a requirement of both the pupil and parent roles. However, they both dislike homework and question the educational validity of repetitive tasks. These experiences shape Leah's approach towards 'mutual coping'. In her video, Leah and Jack collaboratively tackle the tasks, sharing their negative opinions. For example, Leah critiques the teacher's lack of positive feedback, complaining:

Extract M:

> ***Leah:*** *Last week again you wrote absolutely beautifully, nothing wrong with your writing, you got everything right and all you've got is a tick, no team points no nothing … I can understand why you don't feel very motivated to do these but [flicks page] I guess [folding book back] we've got to crack on and do them anyway.*
>
> *(Video)*

In empathising, Leah positions herself on Jack's side, validating his low motivation. They suffer homework together, yet their filmed collaboration reveals Leah's considerable effort to support Jack to a high standard, in intense, detailed and lengthy interactions. The lack of teacher praise appears to motivate Leah to invest *more* time and effort, despite Jack becoming progressively less interested.

The mother-son game of compliance in a practice they both dislike produces a parental honesty which contrasts with some other participants. Leah openly criticises tasks and teacher, takes her son's side against the school, and actively encourages political statements as Jack's response to the spelling words: motivating, if possibly unsuitable. However, although they are relationally close, operating as a team to 'get through' homework, Leah reflects that her substantial efforts are no more than a *'game'*, adding *'there is no way I enjoy sitting down to help Jack with his homework, I do it because we should'.* Relational mothering produces a mother-son collaborative

team who endure and survive monotonous homework by sharing their negative feelings, adopting a game framing, and playing with subversive elements and discussions. This approach, although unusual, is as situated in Leah's mother-child relationship as the contrasting practices of other dyads are in theirs. Leah, a lone mother, constructs the mother-son relationship around dialogue, positioning Jack as intellectually capable and encouraging him to articulate his ideas to an empathetic listener. Leah's relational work results in a shared collusion against the homework system. Propelled by their relationship, homework support moves beyond monitoring into an equitable, discursive domain.

Another way to consider homework's relational dimension is to reflect on the mothers' emotional investments, which are greater than simple encouragements to educational progress. Fiona, attuned to Sam's interests, conducts homework as a motherly, not teacherly, interaction, letting Sam *'take the lead a little bit and just kind of find out what interests him'*. This is more than simple learning support and also goes beyond knowledge of Sam. It is rooted in the maternal relationship and emotional reactions this prompts. Fiona's moment-by-moment, tailored actions, are driven by an emotional investment which is characteristically different to a teacher's. Whilst a teacher may care about a child's progress, and even happiness, they are less emotionally embedded with that individual. Previously, I referenced Fiona's delicate handling of Sam's misunderstandings. In Extract G (p.301) she describes not wanting to *'crush'* him when he makes mistakes, a powerful language choice reflecting her desire to protect Sam's self-esteem, which she considers at risk from homework. Asked if this is an emotional response, Fiona confirms *'definitely'*. Her *in the moment* responses are emotionally situated and operate as relational work. The decisions

which follow are thus driven by the relationship, not the task. Educational activity is modified by an existing relationship which operates outside school structures, assumptions and intentions.

In her video, Fiona asks Sam to start writing. His facial expression instantly alters: he looks disappointed, his lower lip projects forward, he groans and slowly drops his head onto his forearms. Discouragement is apparent in his entire body. Watching this moment back, Fiona gives her own emotional and bodily response. As she sees Sam crumple, she puts her hand to her mouth, conveying a noise which is simultaneously sympathetic, heartfelt and an acknowledgement of the situation's familiarity. Her emotion-charged, empathetic response illuminates how maternal emotion is integral to the homework experience. Furthermore, it indicates that relational emotion management within homework encounters occurs alongside Fiona's intellectual and practical decision-making. If affected at the time by Sam's visceral response, Fiona masks this and moves the activity forward, ensuring Sam accepts the writing task, using the relational work of motherly reassurance: *'All right and then we can watch some more [tool-making videos] tomorrow'*. Emotional reaction to Sam's unhappiness is released only during the stimulated reflection, as Fiona recalls the challenge. The relational work of a mother-supporter experiencing emotional reactions to their child results in homework adaptations. A combination of emotional investment and individualised enactment produces targeted, personalised, adaptive practices. Thus, Fiona diverts from tasks to watch associated but non-essential clips, and selects approaches which closely meet her son's capabilities. These responses demonstrate the potential advantages for differentiation, in homework as a mother-led relational learning encounter.

Yet, the changes Fiona makes through her relational position do more than aid learning or ease Sam's distress. They benefit Fiona too. The video's end evidences this. Having declared the session over, Fiona permits Sam to view one more clip. She reflects:

Extract N:

> ***Fiona:*** *I think because sometimes you know if homework does do a nose dive sometimes I think to kind of end on a high […] I always try and end it so he's happy and he's fine and he doesn't have you know an awful experience of that homework session [laughs] and um and not just him but me as well because you know if you close the laptop and everybody's in floods of tears then you know it's very hard to move on from that […] I'm always conscious of that and um so I guess you know if there's like an extra few minutes for him just to [inhale] refocus his brain on something else then that's a good thing […] he's so enthusiastic to want to look at it, I was just like [places hand on heart] oh you know it's fine let's just go with it ...*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Thus, Fiona negotiates homework to ensure *both* parties can exit the interaction feeling positive. The potential for homework to end with *'everybody in floods of tears'* reminds us that homework is an emotionally challenging activity in this family. Delicately using her relational mothering, Fiona manages a practice known for being negative and distressing. Integral emotion management skills safeguard their mutual wellbeing, prompted by emotionally protective intentions. As Fiona unconsciously *'places hand on heart'*, she reinforces that her decisions are emotionally centred within her mothering.

Several mothers commented on the distinction their maternal position brings to homework support. Just as Sian (Extract K; p.304) describes homework as *'part of our relationship'*, Fiona, too, concludes that a mother's learning support is distinct. After

reviewing her video, she reflects that her maternal role affords opportunity to use a different kind of support:

Extract O:

> ***Fiona:*** *… there is a definite clear difference in the school's approach and my approach […] obviously the schools like you say are on such a strict curriculum that there is no time for you know each child to pursue their interest a little bit more and spend a bit more time on what makes them happy whereas I think as a mum you're yes you are invested in their learning but you're more- you're invested in their emotional wellbeing as well […] so I think there is a definite clear distinction between the two.*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

Although Fiona avoids claiming that her investment in Sam's wellbeing is greater than in his learning (attributable to her narrative of good mothers' moral responsibility for educational development; see Chapter 6), she recognises maternal investment in wellbeing as integral to her support, distinguishing this from school motivations. Maternal investment in a child's happiness, wellbeing and interests therefore makes homework support manifestly different. Viewed like this, homework will always be made unique by the relational situation and the characteristics of the mother supporter's relational work.

Homework support is a relational activity so relational dimensions influence how it operates. The mothers' videos and self-reflections demonstrate how, through distinct relationships, homework is adapted and made different. Relational homework enactments vary, but are always situated within the particular relationship into which homework penetrates. Homework is not simply a universal school practice, but is embedded in mother-child relationships, which alter its form, purposes and operation, in myriad subtle ways.

7.4 Connecting video, stimulated reflection and narrative: constructions, contradictions and consistency

Analysis of the videos and stimulated reflections has been presented here largely outside the cases of which they are part. However, these data, though unusual in homework research, are not separate from the mothers' narratives, but integral to them. As illustrated in *figure 4* (p.188) the homework narratives informed my understanding of the videos and stimulated reflections, whilst the videos and stimulated reflections elaborated the meaning in participants' narratives.

This connection can be seen with Leah's data. I have noted that Leah is openly critical of homework, describing it as sometimes *'pointless'* and a *'game'* to be negotiated or played. Yet she also wants Jack to meet expectations and develop a strong work ethic, through homework, and admits to *'people-pleas[ing]'* and seeking teacher praise. This narrative tension is replicated in Leah's video, wherein she sympathises over the uninspired and repetitive task, whilst encouraging sustained effort through intense support. She spends considerable time, for example, helping Jack to create more complex sentences than the task requires, related perhaps to the work ethic

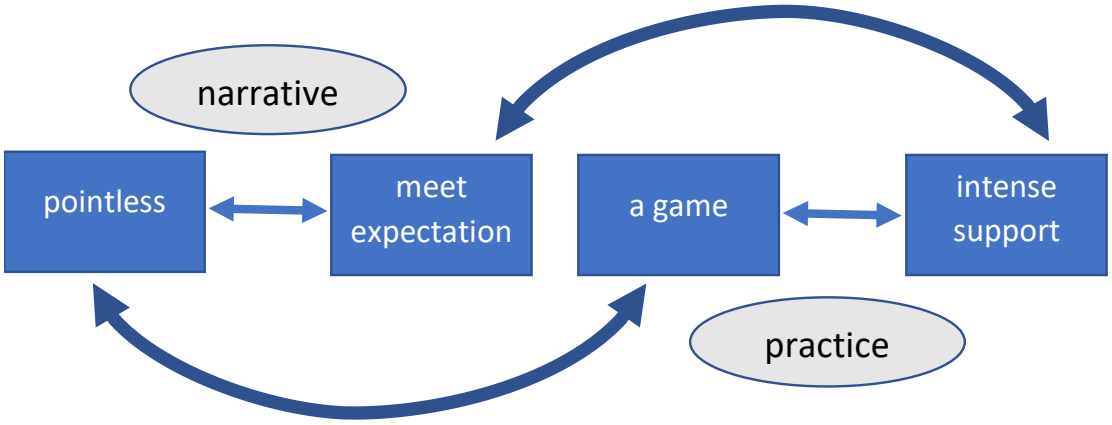


Figure 22: The narrative-practice connection (Leah)

she advocates or the praise she seeks. This discrepancy between open critique and intense support is apparent in both interview narrative and videoed interaction. *Figure 22* illustrates how the tension in Leah's observed practices echoes the tension in her narrative, demonstrating that how she supports homework practically is tied to the dual way she constructs it.

Leah's narrative construction of homework as both '*pointless'* and an expectation to be met, explains her observed homework support behaviours in which she simultaneously plays homework as a *'game'* and engages in intense support. In turn, these behaviours both support and clarify her homework beliefs. Homework is described as an activity to be endured and survived. It is also performed as such.

Helen's video and narrative also provide meaning in tandem. Helen's construct of homework as critical to her son's future success locates her in a supportive role. Yet her videoed behaviours align more with management than assistance. When Corey directly requests help, Helen responds *'I'm not writing your homework'*. Although he appeals further for assistance, Helen resists, insisting Corey physically complete the task:

Extract P:

> ***Corey:*** *[slumps back in chair] I can't*
>
> ***Helen:*** *Miss [teacher name] will know my handwriting*
>
> ***Corey:*** *[looks sideways at Helen] How d'you know that?*
>
> ***Helen:*** *Cos she knows yours too … [long pause] …*
>
> ***Corey:*** *Why can't you write [pointing at sheet] like mine?*
>
> ***Helen:*** *Cos I can't [laughs] write like you*
>
> ***Corey:*** *[picks up pen and goes to write on corner of sheet] Look*
>
> ***Helen:*** *No [warning voice] Corey*

Corey: *Look just- [writing on corner of sheet]*

Helen: *[slightly firmer] Corey*

Corey: *-Look*

Helen: *[sharply] Corey!*

Corey: *[focused] This is how my writing is*

Helen: *[exasperated] I know!*

Corey: *[points at his writing with the pen] Write like that*

Helen: *[slight laugh and shake of head] I can't write like that*

Corey: *That's just-*

Helen: *-Cos it's cheating Corey!*

(Video)

As described, Helen ordinarily strategises that parental repetition encourages independence, concentration and completion. Here, she is, alternately, amused and exasperated by Corey's pursuit of collaboration, eventually insisting *'it's cheating, Corey!'* Helen frames increased support as inappropriately 'doing' the task. Contextualised by her interview narrative that homework should *'push on'* brighter pupils, Helen likes this homework exercise precisely *because* it challenges Corey. In resisting calls for help, she shades her habitual narrative with detail. Whilst her role is to offer challenges the school fails to provide (by purchasing additional materials), it is not, conversely, to simplify given challenges. Even though Corey is confused to the point of incapacity, Helen hopes it might *'push him on'.* The video data, Helen's reflection, and her narrative of homework as critical to success, combine to reveal this distinction in her homework role: to maintain high expectations through monitoring, managing and refocusing, without assisting, or *'cheating'*. This interpretation makes sense of the very managed homework support in Helen's video, reinforcing, and clarifying, her interview narrative.

Sian negotiates a line between maternal availability and child autonomy. During interview, she describes explicitly resisting a managerial or policing role, affording her children autonomy. However, in practice, she also decides how, where and when homework should occur, placing it temporally and physically within her maternal domain. This paradoxical position of resistance to and replication of her own past homework experience, in which Sian locates herself inside homework practices and yet outside homework responsibility, is visible in her video. From the outset, Sian apparently intends a hands-off role. Having confirmed that Emma knows what to do, Sian leaves the table and the scene, indicating verbally and bodily that Emma should work independently. However, Sian completes household chores alongside Emma, balanced between involvement and autonomy; she is both present and absent from the task. This availability allows Sian to respond to Emma's needs: initially leaving her without support, but when assistance is required, increasing participation, eventually working collaboratively with Emma. In the same way that Sian narratively resists and reproduces the intense mothering for educational success she experienced as a child, in her video she moves dynamically between absence and presence, independence and monitoring, child autonomy and maternal support. Her stimulated reflection shows similar duality. Describing her role in the activity as *'constant checking'*, she also states that if Emma had resisted the task, she would have willingly abandoned it. In this way, the push-pull tension in Sian's narrative, of being both outside and within homework, is mirrored in her video and stimulated reflection (*figure 23*).

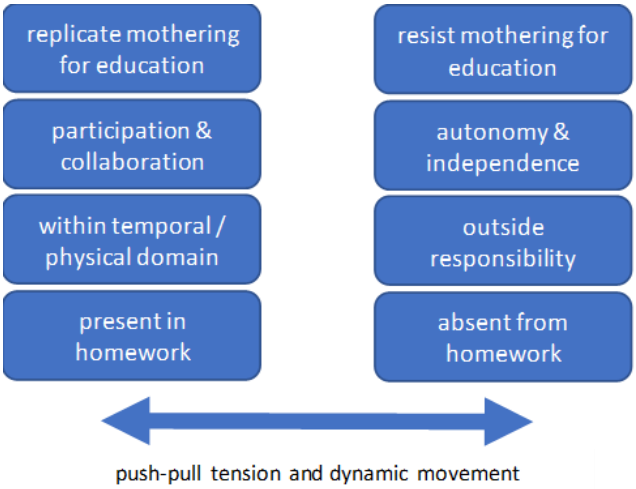


Figure 23: Dynamism in the maternal support role (Sian)

Ruth's portrait (Chapter 6) suggests her motivation to protect Lois from unsupported homework is shaped by memories of insufficient parental support amid strict expectations. Ruth's video demonstrates her constant presence, watching closely and assisting with mistakes, within a warm, supportive homework environment created through lighting, location, body position and touch (section 7.1). Her *intense* maternal support occurs within a counter-authoritarian atmosphere, gentle, yet laser-focused on the task. The additional video data reveals Ruth's embodiment of her spoken intent to be supportive and protective. Furthermore, reflecting on the praise scattered throughout her video, Ruth says:

Extract Q:

> ***Ruth:*** *I suppose back to my childhood nobody really said 'oh that's good.' I had a twin that I was always compared to you know so it's never … [long pause] … I can't- I don't think I can actually remember anything other than one incident at school when I got a book because I'd wrote a really good essay or something so I think for her it's encouragement as well, if she thinks- or she is doing well just to tell her that, it's not hard to say you know 'really well done on that' …*[26]
> *(Interview 2)*

[26] This extract was also used in Chapter 6, p.245, and listed there as Extract N.

Interview narrative, video and reflection demonstrate Ruth's congruous construction of homework support and enactment of the supporter role. Her narrative, embodiments and reflections all echo her protective intentions.

Anna, the only participant to acknowledge her role in the constructed nature of the video data, describes her intentions as follows:

Extract R:

> ***Anna:*** *I wanted to make it something that we do regularly that would be as close to exactly as we do it normally […] so I sent you spelling that we do do every week and we do it in exactly that way erm and then I did this [counting practice] as an example of something which is then quite different which is also as we would do it every single week […] I think actually they're probably re-watching them they're a pretty good depiction of how we would normally do it …*
>
> *(Interview 2)*

The mothers in this thesis make intentional selections. Anna plans to present *'normal'* but also chooses to contrast formal and informal homework. Helen, highly involved in providing supplementary home learning, submitted footage of an unusually challenging school-set task which emphasised what she thinks homework *should* be like. Jenny filmed a creative task which matches the practical, artistic activities she wants for her daughter. The stimulated reflections afforded opportunity to interrogate the mothers' constructions and meanings within. The constructed nature is important. Anna's admission of conscious decision-making reinforces the mothers' agency in what they reveal, either during interview or via video. Video and reflection therefore add detail to the mothers' narrative constructions, illustrating elements of their approach, clarifying or reinforcing meaning and even, as with Ruth, being more impactful than interview. The video

data in this chapter is thus individually contextualised and understood as part of each mother's constructions.

7.5 Concluding remarks

In this chapter, I analysed all participants' videos rather than focusing on particular individuals, considering each film both discretely and in combination with the mother's stimulated reflection. Additionally considering the data holistically with interview narratives, has revealed that the videos are connected to and situated within individual homework constructions. This multiway approach afforded further understanding of both the narratives and the videos themselves.

The mothers' homework support practices and micro-actions are embodied, relational, and maternally-shaped. Each act is founded in established mother-child relationships, built on nuanced maternal knowledge, and moulded by mothers' relational work, decisions, strategies and emotions. Siting homework within specific relationships means that maternal identities shape not only mothers' homework constructions, but also homework practices, family norms and individual actions. Responses vary by mother, turning a universal practice into a nuanced, tailored and individually characterised activity. Emotionally embedded choices, invested in the mother-child relationship are embodied in homework as an integrated practice of mothering. The videos and stimulated reflections position mothers as informed and experienced, with nuanced practices and choices rooted in their mothering and mother-child connections. Homework thus situates in continuous maternal relationships and dovetails with existing mothering.

The videos exist only at my request. They are both consciously and unconsciously curated. The mothers knew their given interview stance and had some sense of my interests before filming. The videos therefore reflect decisions about what to reveal of both their homework practices and their mothering selves. They are therefore continuations, exemplifications and sometimes contrasts to the participants' established narratives, which supports greater understanding of maternal constructions of homework and the homework role.

I end by reflecting on the videos' personal impact. Ruth's video was the first I received. At her initial interview, I had sensed she was a firm mother, with high homework standards. The moment of first viewing her video was powerful. I was struck by her affective, embodied, relational enactment of homework support. The warmth, closeness and love embedded in her actions was visually striking and affective. It underlined the importance of viewing homework not just as an educational exercise, but as a relational activity built on mother-child connection. It confirmed that video data adds important detail to knowledge of gendered homework labour, reinforcing mothers' experiences as emotively driven and rooted in mother-child bonds. Once again, an affective response to the mothers was key to understanding their data.

8 DISCUSSION: THE MOTHERISATION OF HOMEWORK

8.1 AGENTIAL MOTHERISATION: WHAT AND HOW?

This chapter advances the argument that homework support is a *motherised* practice, created by agential mothers whose responses to homework are shaped by dimensions rooted in their existing, relational mothering, their emotions and their biographical experiences.

8.1.1 RELATIONAL NURTURE, SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

Fox (2016) identified homework as a collective family activity. This study extends this idea, recognising it as relational nurturance. As 'sel[ves]-in-relationship' with their children (Chodorow, 1978, p.209), the mothers situated their homework practices relationally, using maternal skill and knowledge.

These relational aspects of homework construction influenced how it was experienced. For example, Anna enacted it as high quality, mother-child time, rectifying emotional loss felt from fulltime employment and long working hours, heightened by her child's desire for greater maternal presence. Unconscious micro-behaviours demonstrated relational dimensions, including physical mother-child connection during informal activities, and homework strategising which drew on their relationship. Both Nell and Ruth also experienced restricted mother-child time: Nell, due to lone parenting; Ruth due to study and shift work. One-to-one homework was sometimes their *only*, or only *focused*, mother-child time. Nell reflected on attending completely to Lucy, whilst Ruth commented *'that's like mine and her time'.* Not only relational in itself, requiring successful paired interactions, homework also

enabled relationships to be nurtured when life pressures otherwise impacted them. This gave homework a validity and value beyond its educational benefit.

Each mother's responses to her child's homework needs revealed their connection. Although rejecting gendered responsibility, Jenny constructed homework around tailored interactions. Using *'drive-by'* mothering, she offered intense, emotionally-present interaction when required, but avoided micro-managing time or activities. Homework as a tool for *'proper present attention'* reflected an intention to mother in relationally supportive ways which nurture positive relationships. Reid Boyd and Letherby (2014) conceptualised the 'being there' of mothering as: a maternal presence that is emotionally attentive not simply physically present. Jenny's behaviours marked emotion and relationality as central to her support, despite demonstrating less physical presence than other mothers. Fiona, whose approach appeared strikingly different to Jenny's, also centred her child's emotional needs, adopting a relational perspective on homework, *alongside* physical presence.

Some mothers recognised the relational dimension of their support as particular to their maternal position. Sian reasoned that school methods, whilst integral, were secondary to the relationship within which homework sat: *'the relationship is at the fore at home, whereas the task would be at the fore at school'.* Similarly, Fiona described *'a definite clear difference'* between home and school practices, with wellbeing framing her approach, compared to curriculum-driven school strategies. Jenny claimed *'a more refined understanding'* of her child's needs, tailoring support around unique differences and resisting inappropriate practices, articulating a mothering which made *her* the expert on her child (Kilty & Dej, 2012). Sian, Fiona and

Jenny had markedly different practical approaches to homework but shared a view that the mother-child relationship defined their support. Rather than homework moulding the parent-child relationship according to institutional directives (Lange & Meaney, 2011), instead the mother-child relationship led homework.

As a relational exercise, mothers made homework fit their existing relationship. Often this was positive, with mothers moulding their support effectively (contrasting with Dudley-Marling, 2001; Hutchison, 2012; Levin et al., 1997). However, some pairs were negatively impacted. Fiona and Sam suffered lengthy, strained and unhappy homework interactions which emotionally harmed them both. The relational dimension sculpts not only how homework is enacted, but also how it is *felt*. As effect on the situated relationship varies by dyad, a different sample might evidence a contrasting level of relational and emotional harm.

The participants' relational approaches revealed the sophisticated nature of maternal support. Interactions reflected mothers' nuanced and intimate knowledge of their child, learned within the mother-child relationship, enabling varied strategising from existing knowledge and skills: humour and non-standard forms of praise maintained positivity; family phrases, operating as shorthand to established meaning, avoided tensions; inappropriate tasks were resisted; and past experiences shaped responses. Fiona, who spent the greatest time and effort supporting homework, demonstrated supple, sophisticated, in-the-moment decision-making, as she negotiated the gap between her child and his homework. This relational sophistication challenges claims that parents give limited attention to homework (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009) or that mother-child homework interactions are poorly

focused (Hutchison, 2006, 2012), but supports Baranovich et al.'s (2019) small-scale, observational study, in which mothers understood their children well, observed their homework behaviours closely, and diagnosed understanding. This thesis's data does not permit mapping of strategy to outcome, in order to assess effectiveness. However, identifying that mothers carefully craft their support using maternal knowledge, suggests 'active' involvement, an approach considered beneficial, as long as it avoids becoming controlling (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Whilst study participation may have prompted the mothers to ignore household tasks and demonstrate greater involvement while being videoed, their interview narratives often referenced similarly intense practices and sustained homework focus. Indeed, as described, focused homework interaction was even welcomed in busy schedules.

Hutchison (2012) suggests the emotional capital for successful homework support is not held on classed grounds. Both Nell (declaring as working-class) and Ruth (the most disadvantaged amongst the group) embodied emotionally subtle strategies. Whilst previous studies hint that awareness of children's abilities influences mothers' support (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995), this study suggests existing knowledge also provided emotional capital to maintain positive encounters.

However, those with negative experiences also showed nuanced knowledge and emotional responsiveness. Fiona's refined appreciation of Sam's needs afforded emotional sensitivity which sustained positivity against significant odds. She enacted the composure Hutchison (2012) suggests is essential in homework encounters, despite underlying tensions. Fiona did not lack skill, strategy, or emotional capital, as

might be expected in a struggling dyad. Her support went beyond the basic monitoring described in much homework literature (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Forsberg, 2007; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009), demonstrating both emotion-focused and problem-focused approaches to homework challenges (McGregor & Knoll, 2015). Fiona's emotional and cognitive labour should be recognised as reflexive, complex and skilled, centring simultaneously on task and child, and reminiscent of the advantageous, parent 'helping relationship' MacBeath and Turner (1990) depicted. This beneficial relational component could be overlooked if Fiona's support was judged against Sam's attainment. I do not advocate replication of Fiona's emotional and physical input; it was burdensome and unsustainable. Nevertheless, recognising and valuing mothers' sophisticated engagement is important. Schools should not assume ineffective maternal support when children struggle; these parents may demonstrate more complex skills and nuanced strategies than the parent whose child needs little assistance. Walker et al.'s (2004) call, for teachers to guide parents in monitoring children's homework emotions, appears unfounded, since mothers already balance emotive interactions far beyond likely classroom occurrences, often using intricate skills.

Situated, relational support was formed not only according to maternal knowledge, but corresponded with mothers' constructions of homework itself. Helen believed homework should challenge (Vazquez et al., 2020), so emphasised independence, even when work was difficult, leading to repetition as her main support strategy. Her self-described *'intuitive'* responses reflected the view that assistance was *'cheating'* and her role was managerial. School-framed ideas about success, performance and homework's role in academic advancement (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 1995) made her

approach logical. Conversely, Ruth and Fiona believed lack of input signified poor parenting, designing intensive approaches accordingly.

The psycho-social biography of mothers' selves-in-relationship shaped their homework support, and they were reflexive both during homework and when discussing their practices. Homework was motherised by its relational situation, entanglement within mother-child bonds, the mothers' past experiences and their maternal knowledge and skills. (This left little room for fathers' participation which may explain their lesser involvement; see 8.1.5).

8.1.2 EMBODIED PRACTICES

Contextualised, embodied micro-actions, previously outside the homework discourse, underpinned relational homework support. Conscious and unconscious behaviours shaped each mother's experience. These interrelated dimensions, revealed through video, suggest possible differences between maternally-supported homework and classroom work. Aspects rarely raised in research by researcher or participant (Muir & Mason, 2012; Perakyla, 2006), 'the unsaid or the unsayable', were here mapped onto bodies (Hollway, 2009, p.466). Observation revealed these hidden elements, exposing them as embodied, embedded and *integral*.

The socially *and* individually and emotionally constructed embodiments (Shilling, 1997) which shaped maternal homework support suggested agency and difference. Formal school learning was remoulded by casualising, in-formalising and creating a familial atmosphere. Homework was relaxed using food, location, or actions. Mothers' choices transformed it from a fixed, school-designed activity into a maternally-led exercise, claimed as a relational, home pursuit. As discussed,

homework is generally researched from an educational perspective focused on its assumed relationship with academic progress. These findings suggest that, on entering the home, the founding school experience is reframed. Literature claiming parents act in teacherly rather than parental ways (Hughes and Greenough, 1997, cited in Edwards & Warin, 1999; MacBeath & Turner, 1990; MacBeath 2000, cited in Solomon et al., 2002) overlooks the nuanced relationality of embodied maternal support, partly because the focus is rarely lived experience.

Embodied relationality was visible in all homework encounters. As *'our time'*, physical proximity was integrated within Ruth's homework interactions. She verbally contrasted this with her husband's more physically and emotionally distanced support. Embedding proximity within homework practices reflected participants' mothering, adding detail to Baranovich et al.'s (2019) finding that, during homework, mothers and children sit together.

Parent-child touch conveys emotions and information between parties and is meaningful from a very young age (Hertenstein, 2002). Physical connection was variously conscious and unconscious. Touch is inseparable from its relational context, with existing relationships framing these embodiments, which were additional to, but integrated within, homework encounters. When homework interactions are assumed to be solely educational, embodiments are seen as having relational function only. Whilst not appearing to support learning directly, bodily interactions contrast formal, school-based learning where adult support rarely includes a physical element. During motherisation, mothering overlays the school task, connecting embodied behaviours, tangentially, to homework. By reflecting relational context,

touch emphasised homework's construction as informal, relational and maternally-shaped. Relationally-produced embodiments supported homework by communicating valuable emotions like reassurance, encouragement and care, thereby sustaining focus, effort, or learning. Mother-child relationships which were *both* physically and emotionally produced shaped the homework encounters, demonstrating emotional connection and reflecting mother-child 'emotional convergence' (see Else-Quest et al., 2008) through embodiments appropriate to context: Fiona mirrored Sam's excitement with raised eyebrows and wide eyes; Sian paralleled Emma's giggles with her own laughter. Responses were situated, unconscious reactions to the flow of mother-child interaction.[27]

Embodied responses were often based in the maternal knowledge already highlighted, for example Nell's use of humour, or Anna's development of family talk. This was also a form of maternal mirroring, like the emotional convergence discussed above, wherein past experiences fostered responses which avoid tension. This subtle, situated and knowledgeable approach is less likely from teachers, since it demands a deeply embedded, situated, long-term relationship. The mothers reflected on how these relational tools aided homework management. Nell described her conscious adoption of alternative forms of praise, while Anna explained her development of the phrase *'only if you know it'.* Such techniques were embedded in each dyad's shared history, both within and outside homework support. Thus, family learning contexts built on, and reinforced, their biographical-

[27] The videos contained limited examples of negative behaviour, aside from minor reluctance, momentary annoyance, or boredom, meaning mothers' non-verbal emotional responses during negative homework encounters could not be thoroughly explored.

relational and intimate foundations, embedding long-established, embodied, emotional and relational connections within homework, which may not be present in school interactions.

Other embodiments also reinforced the relational difference between school and home support. Permission to engage with homework using humour was established through mothers' bodies. Sian, for example, leaned in, to giggle along with Emma. Humour was simultaneously a strategy of homework support, and an expression of the dyad's relationship. Such embodiments served multiple functions: maintaining positivity, supporting mistakes sensitively, expressing shared enjoyment, acknowledging individuality, sustaining relationships, and mirroring emotions. Humour was not always part of homework support. Nevertheless, it highlighted how emotion, embodiment and relationality entwine within homework.

Family talk shared similar functions to non-verbal behaviours, being also an embedded (sometimes subconscious) element of homework interactions. It could be playful, humorous, reflect shared history, or draw on nuanced maternal knowledge. It was informal, matched mothers' homework support decisions, enhanced mood and was sometimes consciously strategised. Family talk was rarely referenced by the mothers during interview, demonstrating, like other embodiments, its deep embedding in both activity and relationship. Evidencing dyadic closeness and the established relationship, it revealed how homework came to fit an existing dynamic and way of *being* mother and child together. Shared language was a tool of homework interactions, both for what it allowed mothers to achieve, and because it embedded homework within their relationship.

The videos suggested a limit to the extent homework schoolifies homes, in contrast to established concerns about colonisation's impact on families (Cairney, 2003). Mothers' constructions, responses and embodiments meant a school-directed activity was recognisably different from classroom practices. Furthermore, previous claims that middle-class mothers advance their child's education because their parenting mode matches school expectations (de Carvalho, 2001; Reay, 1998; Ulé et al., 2015) may insufficiently recognise nuances in how all mothers undertake homework support. Even these educationally-oriented mothers adapted homework, rather than acting solely as school adjuncts (Farrell & Danby, 2015), surrogate teachers (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009) or replicators of school pedagogy (C.Clarke, 2021). In identifying that embodied mothering modifies homework, maternal homework support is revealed as relationally nuanced.

Although embodiments varied mother-to-mother, group patterns suggest homework was never solely educational and was always dovetailed with existing mothering. Situated within individual relationships, embodied behaviours supported specific intentions, sometimes homework-related, sometimes not, including emotion management, relational cohesion, and enjoyment. Integrating embodied mothering made homework recognisably distinct, both *from* school learning, and *to* each dyad. Additions, adaptations and relational dimensions consciously and unconsciously individualised homework. The videos offered complex examples of how relational body, verbal and emotional elements entwined to shape homework practices. Like maternal knowledge and skills, embodiments motherised homework.

8.1.3 THE EMOTION CARE WORK OF MOTHERISATION: EMOTIONAL INVESTMENT AND EMOTION DRIVERS

The mothers' homework engagement went beyond accepted discourses of 'homework as educationally valuable,' and expectations embedded in mothering scripts, being more than *education* care work or responsibility for educational labour. In Chapter 2, I referenced emotion as a factor in parental involvement generally (Lorenz and Wild, 2007, cited in Hallam & Rogers, 2018) and parents' emotional commitment to homework help (Solomon et al., 2002), while in Chapter 3, I recalled Ruddick's (1980) assertion that maternal practices 'begin in love' (p.344). Relationally-embedded, maternal responses to homework reflect mother-child emotional connections and indicate mothers' emotional investments and motivators. Emotions are both present within, and emotionally drive, the *emotion* care work of homework interactions.

Previously I argued that because care and love emotions arise from self-other connecting 'bonds' (Graham, 1983, p.15), care is underpinned by a relational dimension (Doucet, 2012). Maternal emotions are therefore relationally formed within a framework which produces powerful moralised self-feelings (Denzin, 1990). Homework support, itself a situated and relational interaction, therefore exposes individual emotion responses. This does not deny either the strong motivational forces mothering scripts create through emotion norms (Thoits, 2004), nor shared emotional resonance within the mother-group (Golden & Erdreich, 2014), but suggests that mothers' emotional responses to homework expectations are also shaped by their view of themselves as mothers, their mothering approach, and the emotions which follow. Maternal responses to homework, therefore, 'begin in love'

(Ruddick, 1980, p.344), resulting in emotion drivers and emotional investment which underpin emotion care work.

Homework help is therefore built on mothers' emotional commitment and relational connection to their child. Visible in videos and during interview, each mother demonstrated an emotional bond, and enacted her emotional investment. The portraits highlight emotional dimensions including loss, anxiety, protection, devotion and guilt, some, but not all, of which produced negative experiences.[28] An irresolvable, yet motivational, tension between responsibility and guilt meant Fiona could not escape homework, despite negative personal consequences. Moralised self-feelings as a devoted, yet fallible mother, experiencing agonising guilt, meant she worked tirelessly to support homework. Like Dudley-Marling's (2001) participant-parents, Fiona felt 'personally responsible for [her] children's struggles', attributing Sam's challenges to her own failings (p.191). Having centred absolute accountability within her maternal identity, underpinned by moral codes against which she judged herself, Fiona felt at fault, yet profoundly responsible for improving Sam's situation. Adherence to mother-as-carer and homework-as-care-work scripts, produced devotional homework practices, and an unreasonable labour toll. In helping more, Fiona 'paid a higher cost' (Levin et al., 1997, p.223). Believing her educational involvement was fundamental (Gimenez-Nadal & Sevilla, 2016) she, thus, experienced the 'almost theological sense of guilt and anxiety' of mothers invested in dominant scripts (Griffith & Smith, 1987, p.94). Responsibilised guilt,

[28] As a mother-researcher experiencing both role and research topic, the emotions highlighted may vary from those considered significant to other readers. This underlines the situated, emergent and developing nature of qualitative findings, particularly where reciprocal research relationships shape interpretations.

rooted in intense devotion, prompted engagement in activities she (and teachers) acknowledged as unsuitable. Although inappropriate, homework, bound to Fiona's emotional investment and relational commitment to her child, was unrelinquishable. This emotional response was profound.

An emotion lens suggests that moralised self-feelings frame Fiona's view of both appropriate mothering practices and herself as a mother. Socially patterned emotions (Hochschild, 1979) leading to guilt as a 'necessary component' of mothering (Sutherland, 2010, p.310), reveal Fiona's responses as gendered emotion norms (Denzin, 1990; Thoits, 2004). Mothering mandates normalise, even make necessary, Fiona's emotions, despite their unpleasantness. Although Fiona recognised and named negative experiences as 'guilt,' she was trapped by the underlying social and psycho-social premise that this proved she mothered responsibly. Auðardóttir (2021) connects this cycle of maternal responsibility-guilt to neoliberal systems which personalise outcomes, thereby masking both social dictation of mothers' behaviours and structural problems, leading to self-criticism and shame.

For Ruth, mothering scripts and moralised self-feelings were less significant to her homework emotions than a pre-existing, psycho-social, emotional response to painful biographical memories.[29] Ruth's relational feelings as a mother formulated a nurturer-protector identity and homework connected deeply to this. Past negative

[29] This is not a judgement of Ruth's parents. Studies suggesting working-class parents view their educational role as less *explicitly* involved, may explain their hands-off approach (Gillies, 2006a; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020; Lareau, 1989; Reay, 1998; Vincent & Martin, 2002). Their firm homework expectations can be understood as a logical response, demonstrating value for education and trust in teacher expertise, even though Ruth found their uninvolved approach problematic.

homework emotions shaped present care and love emotions, prompting emotional reactions which underpinned her homework approach. An emotional commitment to nurturing Lois meant homework support became protective 'love labour' (Lynch & Lyons, 2008; O'Brien, 2007). Although not moralised by mothering scripts, this was still a moral feeling. Situational, moral self-feelings therefore reflect not only a group's emotion norms and practices, but are shaped by individual experiences. I previously argued that emotion care work 'ties this labour to the relational feelings one has towards the recipient, centring it within one's emotional identity' (p.124). Ruth's homework support was therefore emotion care work, driven by relational feelings and an emotional identity which combined 'physical caretaking with love [and] nurturance' (DeVault, 1999, p.54). This echoes Aarseth's (2018) and Irwin and Elley's (2011) challenge to claims that educational ambition *principally* prompts parental involvement.

Anna's emotion motivation was also shaped by past psycho-social experiences, this time from early mothering. Deep emotional connection to her child was evidenced in the feelings of loss she experienced from nursery and school transitions which foreground other people's significance ahead of her mothering self. These feelings were alleviated by framing homework support as an intense, valuable maternal task, thus repairing the fractured mother-child connection. The negative emotion driving Anna's involvement (loss) produced positive outcomes (pleasure in the reformulated maternal role). However, conversely, apparently positive emotions (Fiona's devotion) could create negative experiences (guilt and strain).

Helen's emotional motivation was anxiety. Her biographical experiences framed additional schoolwork as critical. However, she perceived a lack of quality and investment in the school's homework approach. Anxious, as a working-class mother in a socio-economically deprived area, that her son had been abandoned, Helen became intensely involved in supplementary learning. Other studies similarly find parents compensating for perceived school failings (de Abreu & Cline, 2005; Wadham et al., 2020). Helen's portrait demonstrates that these actions can be emotionally-motivated. Her changing feelings about Corey's teachers, from unimpressed by their assumed disinterest, to *'absolutely thrilled'* that they *'really do care'*, underline her deep anxiety. Auðardóttir (2021) argues that anxiety is a principal maternal feeling, produced in 'power relations within the social space which perpetuate mothers' anxiety' (p.63). Embedded in Helen's personal and mothering experiences, anxiety fundamentally drove her support, focusing her investment on additional home learning.

Emotionally-motivated homework responses risked catapulting the mothers into negative experiences. When challenges occurred, an emotional toll developed: Anna blamed herself for insufficient time to invest in homework, rather than inflexible school expectations which inadequately recognise maternal employment; despite considerable investment in inappropriate homework, Fiona experienced intense guilt for her son's difficulties; limited teacher communication, felt by Helen as indifference, heightened her personal anxiety. Homework was also burdensome and emotionally draining, despite mothers' sometime pleasure in the role. These strains may not have arisen had the mothers' initial motivation not been emotion. Maternal homework support's emotional epicentre therefore carried personal risk.

Emotional connection, emotional investment, and emotion drivers contextualise homework support. Despite being underpinned by mothering norms which frame emotional intensity as part of good mothering (Hays, 1996), and exacerbated by neoliberal responsibilisation and government discourses, each example suggests *individual* emotion responses to relational mothering and care shape homework support. Aarseth (2018) critiqued 'quest for advantage' as explanation for middle-class parenting practices, suggesting a psycho-social reading reveals that 'affective dynamics' contextualise their ways of being and relating (p.1099). Indeed, 'affective dynamics', being situated, afford understanding of *all* mothers' deep involvement and attention to homework support, not just middle-class mothers' engagement.

An emotion lens reveals homework support as emotion care work, centred in maternal relationships and *rooted in love* (after Ruddick, 1980, on maternal practices beginning in love). As such, maternal emotions motherised homework, being the origin of mothers' intense involvement and individual practices. Embedded in relationally-situated, maternal emotion responses which reflected mothers' emotional connections and investments in their children, homework support was an emotion practice: it was individualised emotion care work, integral to mothering, born of personal emotions and biographical experiences, not simply a socially produced, morally encouraged, or educationally expected, functional act. Mothers' motivations were 'love narrative[s]' similar to the justifications O'Brien's (2007, p.170) mothers gave for their school-focused labours. Holistic analysis, attention to psycho-social-biographical elements, and detailed, in-depth portraits afforded discovery of this key dimension, though mothers themselves may have been less aware of the intense emotions driving their homework support.

The mothers herein accepted a homework support role because relational mothering made them emotionally connected, invested and driven to enact emotion care work. Such emotion-motivated care work motherised homework support, making it individually constructed, negotiated and experienced. Thus, homework must be understood in relation to mothers' agential mothering, as demonstrated next.

8.1.4 Aligning homework with mothering

Motherisation of homework occurred because mothers were agential in constructing homework support and aligning it with their mothering. To understand the homework-mothering match means reflecting on how mothers positioned themselves and constructed their mothering. This is most clearly seen through Jenny, whose *'child-centred'* mothering shaped her homework view, allowing her to reject gendered responsibility, whilst still recognising each child's needs. Jenny's responses to homework (such as flouting the school's reading diary demands) were shaped, firstly, by nuanced knowledge of each child, and secondly, by her child-centred mothering philosophy. Thus, she favoured individually-tailored homework support. Furthermore, a *'drive-by'* approach, involving short bursts of quality mother-child interaction, was constructed around being fully present and emotionally available. This focused contact was not particular to homework, but reflected all Jenny's mother-child interactions. Homework was not a separate category of activity with special practices, but a by-product of Jenny's mothering and conducted in alignment with this. It was thus made to 'fit' her mothering practices. Instigated by school, homework was formulated within the home, in accordance with Jenny's mothering.

Sian more consciously articulated how homework aligned with her mothering, describing it as an example of mothers' constant support, similar to tying shoelaces or reaching something from a high shelf. This construction replicated her construction of all daily assistance: *'it's **just** another activity […] it's treated the same as everything else'*. This attitude neutralised homework, preventing it escalating to high value, minimising the potential for stress. These examples demonstrate how a task given importance by government and schools is, by some mothers, contained and made to parallel common support practices.

Other mothers demonstrated their own alignment approaches. Nell made homework a joint activity, working alongside Lucy using teamwork and partnership. This mirrored Nell's feminist parenting intentions and existing mother-child relationship. Even as an accepted responsibility, therefore, homework fit Nell's mothering. Ruth mothered protectively. Her videos have been noted for their intense warmth and close support. However, rules and responsibilities which she also advocated, were fitted into this existing emotional support. Her call to *'suck it up and do it'* was situated within embodied emotional support. Thus, Ruth's homework approach was led not by the rule-following she described, but by the supportive mothering she actioned. Homework-mothering alignment underpinned each mothers' particular practices, shaping and framing their role.

Participants with less positive homework experiences also used mothering to lead their homework constructions. Fiona's well-established, devotional mothering, meant homework requirements fell within her unwavering support, regardless of their emotional burden. Her existing mothering framework subsumed support

activities automatically, with level of input and intensity of support, informed accordingly. This suggests that, although homework support is encouraged by governments and expected by schools, mothers' responses are framed by mothering, rather than educational, constructs. With mothering a key dimension in shaping homework support, each mother matched homework to her mothering, because mothering was already relationally and emotionally established.

Emotion drivers identified in this study – loss, anxiety, protection, devotion – produced particular models of homework support. Homework labours were negotiated both *within* and *out of* their mothering. Although homework was demonstrably embedded into mothering as a significant and sometimes burdensome activity, it was individual mothering which shaped the support, with school colonisation less proscriptive than anticipated. Although Reay (1998) views home and family as exploited to the needs of the education system and other scholars argue that homework inculcates parents into school-defined pedagogic behaviours (C.Clarke, 2012; Crozier & Davies, 2007; Forsberg, 2007), the exploitation arising from powered school-family relationships and parental involvement expectations, may be tempered by individual approaches. Colonisation may not be one-directional, as previously implied (see Edwards & Warin, 1999; Keogh, 1999; Petrie, 2005), with homework support 'done' to mothers through school and social expectations. Here, mothers moulded what homework *became* inside their homes. This dimension is overlooked when policy and research frame homework as a school process. This study hints that homework is, instead, more fluid, with mothers shaping it considerably. Variation in apparently fixed school processes should therefore be recognised.

The visible approaches identified in Chapter 7 reveal mothers as powerfully centred in determining how homework operates. Neither a separate nor entirely school-defined exercise, homework was embedded in mothering, linked to maternal self-constructs, and framed within existing support practices. Consequently, homework was not uniformly enacted, even amongst a group with similar views of education, homework and maternal responsibility. Cairney (2003) called for consideration of how school processes impact families. These findings suggest the effect of school procedures is varied, nuanced and multi-dimensional, with mothers having greater agency over individual school practices than previously recognised. This supports a motherisation argument, demonstrating that a key dimension lies in mothers' alignment of homework with their own mothering.

8.1.5 Control, care-by-control and agency

One of the principal ways mothers demonstrated agency was by taking control. In part, this occurs because scripts which position mothers as educational carers, assign them homework responsibility, suggesting Wingard and Forsberg (2009) were right that homework 'blurs the boundaries between care and education' (p.1592). However, participants also claimed greater skill to support homework than fathers.

Not all the mothers had a partner living with them, but all referenced their child's father, often articulating distinct differences in homework approach. On one level, these differences reflect social assumptions about maternal care work. The families demonstrated a highly gendered division of schooling labour (Reay, 2005a), with fathers rarely supporting homework (Rønning, 2008). A mother-as-homemaker, father-as-breadwinner gender narrative absolved some fathers of child-related tasks,

despite all the mother-participants having entered the workplace. This traditionally gendered, moral parenting discourse sustained domestic inequality (Suwada, 2021).

Fathers' educational support was framed as absent or peripheral (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 2005b), happening only under mothers' direction (Gottzén, 2010; Lareau, 1989), or ineffective. Helen described her husband's inability to organise domestic labour, or parent like she did. Laughing at the idea of him supporting homework, she predicted likely chaos. Traditional roles positioned Helen as homework supporter, but in dismissing her husband's skills and emphasising her own, she also claimed the role. Similarly, Ruth believed that homework ran smoothly *only* through her central involvement. She created routines around her participation and only reluctantly agreed to her husband supporting reading due to family practicalities. Fiona also controlled homework as her arena, suggesting her husband could not navigate homework's complexities, eventually stressing she *'wouldn't, couldn't,* ***wouldn't want****'* him to take over [my emphasis]. Each mother defended her dominant role, controlling how and when homework occurred and centring her superior skills. Ruth summarised this with: *'it's not about me not trusting my husband but … [long pause] … do it once with me and you won't need to do it twice'.* By framing fathers as less capable, mothers' control appears better for themselves and their child.

Tendency to reject, critique or supervise fathers' involvement supports Daphne Pedersen's (2012) assertion that mothers gatekeep the mothering arena (although Lareau, 1989, suggests this is principally a middle-class behaviour). Gottzén (2010) found fathers echoed this gatekeeping narrative to justify their lower educational

involvement. This narrative may reflect my recruitment of mothers who were the parent 'most involved with homework'. However, finding that participants *claimed* a superior approach suggests that managing support was not only how mothers *experienced* homework, but how they *constructed* it too. Justifying maternal control through more advanced skills, they created homework as a mother's domain, simultaneously experiencing *and reproducing* a gendered mothers-as-supplementary-educators script. As Crosslin and Bailey (2021) assert, in adopting these cultural norms, mothers enforce their own burdening.[30]

Lone mothers described their children's fathers as uninterested, ineffective, lacking awareness of maternal workloads, and unable to think independently or orient to children's needs. These apparently individualistic fathers foreground their own self-care, which Ribbens McCarthy et al. (2003) suggest is permitted in fathering but not mothering. Lone mothers had had homework responsibility foisted upon them by fathers' absences, but their perspective that low educational responsibility was symptomatic of fathering, highlighted that they, correspondingly, took control and elevated their own parenting.

Only Jenny indicated a more equal share of homework labour. However, beyond her stated resignation as homework manager, she made no reference to her husband's homework engagement. Although Jenny did not appear to seek homework control, and her rejection of homework responsibility aligned with her quest to develop children's independence, cues similar to the other mothers' prompted her

[30] Revisiting the mothers post the 2020/2021 school closures would elicit whether gendered homework practices continued, or whether, through necessity, fathers became accepted as suitable homework supporters.

homework participation. Remaining emotionally and relationally committed to her children, Jenny responded to their needs just as other participants did.

A view that no one supports homework like a mother, recalls O'Brien's (2008) mother-participants who rejected traditional parenting ideologies, but still claimed no one would *care* like they did. In managing homework as *their* task, this study's mothers also referenced their caring. As a good mother, responsible, in her own words, for helping her children *'flourish'*, Ruth's emotional and relational desire to protect resulted in *care-by-control.* Viewing lack of homework support as lack of care, homework control was less about adhering to mothering scripts, achieving personal status, or safeguarding educational gain, and more about ensuring proper support. This care-by-control dimension contrasts Daphne Pedersen's (2012) maternal gatekeeping and Landeros's (2011) maternal status claiming. Similarly, in refusing to share homework labour with her husband, believing herself both cause *and* solution to Sam's troubles, Fiona demonstrated care-by-control. Mothers facing homework problems have previously been found to become more controlling (Dudley-Marling, 2003; Levin et al., 1997). For Fiona, it was logical to control, through emotional and cognitive energy, the activity she hoped might resolve Sam's difficulties. Helen's anxiety about lack of teacher investment meant her managerial labours, echoing the practices of parents who supplement homework due to pedagogic misalignment with school (de Abreu & Cline, 2005; Wadham et al., 2020), were also an act of care-by-control.

Mothers' control of how, where, when and by whom homework was supported, reflected their agency and choice-making. Although initially framing homework as a

practice which breaches family-school boundaries, encourages pedagogical mother-child interactions (C.Clarke, 2021; Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989) and increases mothers' school labour (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Karnad-Jani, 2021; Reay, 1998), this matricentric study is also interested in maternal empowerment. Discovering that mothers are agential suggests homework may not solely colonise or 'transplant' school models (Crozier & Davies, 2007), because '[a]s women negotiate gender ideologies within these [home-school] systems, they experience both agency and constraint' (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p.167).

8.1.6 Maternal gains

Agential homework support afforded mothers individual gains, benefitting them beyond restricted ideas about homework as an educational tool. Homework support advantages went beyond previous indications that parents use homework to stay up-to-date with academic progress (Lehner-Mear, 2021; Sayers, Petersson, et al., 2021; Xu & Yuan, 2003). For Anna, educational participation re-established a dislocated mother-child connection and she overcame the emotional pain suffered from maternal separation and a lost central role in Izzy's day. The institutional circumscription of the maternal role which occurs when children progress into schooling is recognised elsewhere (David et al., 1993). Homework re-centred Anna as a close, connected, significant figure, affording her a significant 'emotional' and temporal-physical 'presence' (Reid Boyd & Letherby, 2014, n.p.). Homework support thus offered a 'proxy' (Landeros, 2011, p.248) for Anna's previous maternal caring.

Other mothers gained similar advantages from the one-to-one nature of homework interaction, including time-poor Nell and Ruth. Caught by the 'cultural contradictions

of motherhood' which traps mothers between public work roles and private family roles (Hays, 1996), the child-centred, emotionally-engaged, intensive mothering practice of homework sustained both positions, while focusing attention on their child. Important beyond its educational dimension, homework nurtured mother-child connections and justified time spent on both child and relationship. As *'mine and her time'* (Ruth) or *'like bonding'* (Nell), homework counteracted tough employment demands. It afforded the mother-child connectedness required of intensive mothers who must balance the constant strain of separation-connection embedded in modern mothering (Ennis, 2014a). Whilst acknowledging homework's burden, most mothers reflected on pleasurable aspects. Even Fiona, unusual for disliking the task entirely, initially gained personally through teacher validation of her support. The close attention given by these mothers differed from parents who manage homework alongside other tasks (Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). The value of homework's one-to-one dimension lay outside its educational framing, linking instead to relational needs.

Jenny framed her homework role differently to the other mothers, but her drive-by mothering shared similarities with the intense one-to-one attention just described. Her child-centred, emotionally-present model of mothering, albeit restricted temporally, was consistent with other mothers' support. Arguably each working mother-participant mirrored Jenny's drive-by approach, being emotionally intense and present within specific times and activities. Anna, Nell and Ruth directed their focus towards homework, but demonstrated the same supportive, engaged, *'proper present attention'* Jenny advocated. Even Sian, who favoured homework autonomy, described her *'availability'* and responded attentively when needed. Their children's

needs prompted the mothers' homework labour, with emotionally supportive mothering the principal feature and educational development a secondary outcome. In the end, for these educationally-oriented mothers, homework supported their mothering as much as it supported schooling, and maternal benefits accrued alongside educational ones.

The practical burden of homework was reframed to establish positives. Gains varied, but were often connected to homework's relational framing within the mother-child relationship. Furthermore, maternal support continued, despite challenges, partly because individual gains sustained engagement. Although burdened, Ruth resolved tensions from her biography, using homework to create a new, protective mothering model. Even Fiona, the mother with the most difficult experiences, continued to support homework as a resolution for underlying guilt. Homework engagement therefore offered emotional benefits alongside emotional costs (Levin et al., 1997). In considering why mothers support homework, despite its disputed educational value, the lens must extend beyond school requests, government framing and homework's complicated relationship with mothering scripts, to understand the individual and localised value to mothers who experience it. As de Marneffe (2019) argues, the personal and emotional importance of mothering practices *to mothers*, should not be underestimated. In homework's case, its relational construction affords varied benefits.

8.2 AGENTIAL MOTHERISATION: LIMITED OR HYBRIDISED?

Although homework's motherisation suggests agency, the mothers' empowerment was also limited by powerful moral discourses and mothering scripts, mother

judgement, and socio-biographical experiences which shaped their feelings about, and constructions of, homework. Complex socio-biographical differences meant some mothers reproduced, while others resisted, cross-generational homework practices. This section discusses these dimensions.

8.2.1 Responsibility, moralised mothering and mother judgement

The portraits herein evidence mothers' responses to dominant social expectations of their educational support. Only one mother rejected gendered homework responsibility, drawing a distinction between herself and social expectations (although, as indicated elsewhere, this ideological rebuttal did not make Jenny *un*involved). Classifying and conducting homework as care work, most participants automatically, and sometimes unquestioningly, accepted a principal carer role. Five of the mothers associated education care work with traditional domestic practices centred in 'caring mothers' and 'breadwinner fathers,' concluding that homework's gendered practices were unlikely to change. A construction of care as motherwork pervaded, despite all participants reflecting mothers' widespread shift into paid employment (Reid Boyd & Letherby, 2014). Each family had a neotraditional framing, in which mothers remained tied to caring roles despite both parents having careers (O'Brien Hallstein, 2012). These findings suggest that when school practices enter the home, they are segued into mothers' caring domain. Dominant discourses presenting homework as an educational practice, therefore overlook its real-world enactment inside maternal care. Mothering's care narrative appears pervasive. To detach homework from maternal responsibility would require a radical approach: conducting it inside schools; de-gendering parenting from 'the social space of

women' (Auðardóttir, 2021, p.63); or removing educational development from inside the framework of care.

Homework's position as a fundamental exercise resounded across the sample, despite highlighted problems (Fiona's challenges; Ruth's juggling; Jenny, Sian and Leah's disagreement with tasks). Painful homework memories and current burdensome experiences sometimes spurred more intense support. The mothers positioned themselves as supportive, engaged and conscientious, claiming appropriate and consistent involvement. This was rooted in their framing of both homework and mothering and in how the two phenomena connected. Their accepted responsibility to support, or at least be supportive *of*, homework, meant it's *'one of the jobs we have to do … to be a mum'* (Ruth). Homework support as essential mothering indicates the reach of discourses around education care work, including moralised scripts which direct maternal responsibility for children's educational development and formulate the good schooling mother. Education care work, situated within the moralised myth of the good mother, helped the participants *'to **be** a mum'* (Ruth; my emphasis). Like Goodwin and Huppatz (2010) attest, 'mothers want to be good' (p.7), despite 'good' being externally defined by hegemonic scripts.

I have outlined how the moral dimension of mothering leads to judgement of individuals as good or bad, firstly by ongoing measurement of maternal behaviours against normative standards, and secondly by encouraging 'invidious comparisons' between mothers (Griffith & Smith, 2005, p.35). Commitment to homework support, as a moralised maternal responsibility, is one such measure. Although the mothers

denied feeling personally judged over their support practices, a subtext of shared mother-to-mother judgement was apparent: obliquely, participants critiqued non-compliant mothers for failing their children, complained about families who breached homework rules, and suggested non-conforming mothers lacked *'self-respect'*. Each 'invidious comparison' against assumed standards was morally-underpinned.

Self-judgement also occurred. Fiona exemplified the maternal guilt possible when a mother holds herself responsible for her child's educational progress, speaking of *her* guilt for *his* struggles. She also recognised the publicly granted, professional judgement of her mothering, implicit in school messages, events, and simple practices like awarding homework stickers. Moral judgement pressured Fiona's compliance. Whilst she denied feeling personally judged by individual teachers, Fiona sensed a judgement against normative standards because *the system* labelled Sam a 'failure': *'I feel that that reflects on me personally'* she acknowledged. Thus, structural problems were experienced as personal failures (Auðardóttir, 2021).

Others were also aware that mothers' educational support is professionally judged. Ruth's emphasis on her consistent compliance, despite difficulties, indicates the perceived risk for those who do not conform. In contrasting material and social circumstances, Anna was also conscious of potential judgement. Unlike fulltime-at-home mothers who reference 'availability' as proof of their moral rectitude (Johnston & Swanson, 2006), Anna used intense homework support to reassert her morality and overturn the 'spoiled' identity of maternal absence (May, 2008, p.472). Reclaiming her moral position by demonstrating a new kind of availability, she

resisted judgement as a bad-because-absent mother. Teacher praise for homework externally validated Anna's mothering, recognising her conscientious approach as within moral standards and supporting her identity as a good and present mother. Homework involvement therefore shielded Anna from judgement. Emphasising their homework support was a form of self-protection. Claims of high engagement and meeting standards others did not, contributed to self-images as good (because involved) parents *and* protected mothers from judgement.

Moralised scripts meant mothers both participated in, and were subject to, judgement. Whilst a mother-researcher position encouraged rapport with the participants, and afforded helpful emotional responses, it also risked influencing the mothers' comments because of the judgement embedded in homework discourses. Mothering scripts produce mother-to-mother judgement (Griffith & Smith, 2005) but are particularly moralistic about maternal sensitivity and care (Walkerdine & Lucey, 1989). Some mothers appeared conscious of my complicated position, occasionally regarding me as 'expert' and asking technical questions or responding cautiously. The authority and knowledge I represented imbalanced our relationship. Even where mothers did not overtly respond to my 'expert' status, their comments were likely framed by awareness that, as either mother *or* expert, I might 'judge' their revelations. It made sense to assure a mother-interviewer that they fulfilled socially-expected homework support, thereby inadvertently partaking in the universal judgement of all mothers' education care work.

Moralised mothering scripts which entangle homework with maternal responsibility through the idea of mothers as carers, meant individuals were beholden to

judgement by group, system, expert, or self. Constructing educational support as a maternal responsibility, integral to moral mothering, meant 'orient[ing] to homework as their prime responsibility' (Farrell & Danby, 2015, p.261), despite the nuanced ways they also motherised it.

8.2.2 Reproducing or resisting the past: hybrid motherisation

Bhave (2011), writing about 'hybrid mom[s]', saw mothers' choices as purposeful and dynamic. Yet, they are also set within the context of their own mothering. Participants willingly reflected on their own past homework. Some remembered experiences appeared foundational, limiting their agency in motherisation and encouraging the repetition of established practices.

Helen recalled positive homework experiences, attributing her professional career to out-of-school learning, making a direct link between parent support and future success, with habitual references to her father's supplementary practices, and to *'pushing on'* ahead of school expectations. Criticising her son's homework, which replicated the limited offering of her childhood, led rationally to the view that adopting her father's approach would overcome this problem and repeat her own educational success. Helen's homework views and parenting approach were therefore embedded in childhood memories. Anna, similarly, recalled her experiences positively, highlighting *'proactive parents who were always around'*. Although constant parental presence conflicted with her circumstances, Anna actively demonstrated intense involvement whenever possible, positioned her child at the centre of her marriage and outlined a childhood with whole-family activities. Homework support was an overt expression of involvement, care and presence, *'a*

formal way of making that part of your relationship with your child.' Though not detailed in Portrait 5, Jenny experienced exam failure as a result of her parents' relaxed, uninvolved attitude to formal education. While Fiona and Ruth would have viewed this as parenting failure, Jenny believed the experience had taught her autonomy, responsibility and internal motivation. Consequently, she consciously distanced herself from homework, encouraging her children's independence. Jenny's biographical experiences formulated her perspective that children should take responsibility. She embraced, rather than rejected, her parents' approach. Memories of childhood homework, could therefore, encourage replication of parenting practices, minimising a mother's need to craft a new approach.

However, sometimes biographical experiences were negative and the mothers rebuffed their parents' approach. In these cases, hybrid mothering was greatly empowering, making motherised homework *their* process. Ruth, Sian and Nell engaged in agency and maternal change-making. Consciously rejecting her mother's reliance on a man for homework help, Nell instead advocated mother-child problem-solving. Enacting 'matroreform' (Wong, 2012), she challenged her experience of being mothered, claimed maternal power and created new practices in a personal 'act of resistance and empowerment … to refuse replication of mothering oppression' (p.81).

Wong (2012) notes that matroreform need not be founded in feminist consciousness like Nell's (indeed we cannot know whether Nell's mother *felt* oppressed), but in experiences that were 'psychologically, spiritually or emotionally damaging' (p.87). For example, Sian, deeply impacted by her experience of supplementary learning and

the maternal 'policing' of homework, consciously gave greater homework autonomy to her children. Shaped psycho-socio-biographically, yet personally empowered, she sifted her experience, accepting some elements (striving for educational success; a regular, protected homework time) and rejecting others (the policing of homework; additional tutoring). Ruth further demonstrates the filtering of past experiences to create unique mothering approaches. Aiming to protect Lois from difficult educational experiences by constructing a new context for homework, Ruth focused on relationally-intense, warm, caring, present support, accentuated by entwined bodies and environmental mood signifiers. However, she dovetailed this contrasting approach with learned attitudes. Her phrase, *'suck it up and do it […] it needs to be done'* echoed the same high behavioural standards to which she had been subject: homework expectations, rules and compliance, and agreement with punishments for missed homework. Thus, Ruth simultaneously resisted and replicated her biographical experience, just as Sian's complex reaction to her homework experiences repeated some elements, whilst strongly resisting others.

According to Reay (2005b), because class reproduction through maternal educational involvement means '[m]others' own educational histories continue to exert powerful influences on their involvement in the present' (p.28), reformulation of cross-generational approaches to education may be particularly necessary for working-class mothers (Reay, 1998). However, despite some classed memories and socialised behaviours (Helen's anxiety that her son had been abandoned by the same education system which abandoned her; highly gendered, working-class parenting roles), this thesis found mothers from all mother groups could resist, reform, or hybridise educational practices, and working-class mothers did not always

intergenerationally reproduce established class practices. Ruth, Nell and Sian were not constrained by their working-class educational experiences, nor were they unable to transmit educational capital to their children, as Reay (2000) suggests. Re-engaging with education and reframing maternal support, they created different educational experiences for their children. The educational-orientation of these participants is significant. Mothers without such confirmed educational-orientation may have correspondingly limited ability to reframe negative practices. Exploring whether their reframed or hybridised homework support does successfully build the educational success these working-class mothers sought would be salient future research.

Cross-generational homework practices suggest mothers are psycho-socio-biographically influenced, even regarding apparently school-controlled activities (similar to Karnad-Jani's 2021 findings on replicated parental involvement practices). However, hybrid mothering enables individual responses. Some mothers reject problematic aspects and reformulate contrasting homework support; others adopt comparable approaches, or use homework to emphasise similarity with their own parents. Family patterns matter (Thomson, 2010). They shape mothers' homework support, whether in reproduction or resistance. The varied responses, and range of agentic potential, frames the mothers as 'generational pivots' (Hollway, 2010a, p.137), reflecting back on their own experiences, whilst simultaneously advancing forward as mothers. Maternal homework culture, motherisation and individual agency are therefore situated within a complex generational relationship. Mothers, in constructing homework, and homework practices, are shaped by individual psycho-social-biographies, as agents or as cross-generational replicas.

In sometimes resisting elements of their past, and creating hybrid approaches which supported their intentions, mothers in this study demonstrated homework agency and empowerment, tailoring homework to their identities as good and caring mothers. These were moments of multiple agency: over school homework, and over their own mothering.

8.3 EDUCATIONAL-ORIENTATION, INVESTMENT MOTHERING AND EMOTIONAL RISK

The mothers in this study were *educationally-oriented*. Not only were they educationally successful themselves (all except one had a tertiary level qualification) and generally supportive of education, they were also actively supportive of formal, school-directed processes. Being educationally-oriented, 'good schooling mother[s]' (Goodwin & Huppatz, 2010, p.15), they represented the linked dimensions of educational support, neoliberal responsibility and moral mothering. Their classed experiences varied, yet they shared a view about formal education *and their role within it.* The most socially and economically disadvantaged participants (Ruth and Helen) demonstrated educational aspirations, responsibility and fulsome involvement, outperforming the participation of some more privileged mothers. Previously I referenced Hutchison's (2012) finding that class is an inadequate explanation for variable emotional capital in homework interactions, alongside research suggesting government and school discourses obscure working-class mothers' educational support by promoting culturally-fixed involvement practices (Gillies, 2006b; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005; O'Brien, 2007). In highlighting educational-orientation as a significant marker, this study further challenges a purely classed view of maternal education support.

This study sought mothers who actively engage with homework. Social expectations mean those not oriented towards education practices were unlikely to volunteer and expose their non-compliance. The only participant rejecting social norms was the mother with biographical knowledge about education. Arguably, her Chair of governors role provided cultural capital and privilege to contest some traditions, whilst still orienting towards the structures and practices of formal education.

Milkie and Warner (2014) suggest that modern mothering is *principally* characterised by work for children's advancement; work which promotes or protects their futures in an insecure system. Key dimensions of the competitive-investment mothering script advanced in Chapter 3, include individualism, competition, and maternal investment in an intense educational role. This script is appropriate across classes because a neoliberal society and uncertain economic situation responsibilises all mothers (even if material opportunities to enact educational support vary). Aspects of this script were visible across all portraits. Maternal focus on their role in securing an individualised, educational 'safety net' (Milkie & Warner, 2014, p.66) was tangible when Fiona revealed *'I invest in him so much, he's only got one childhood and we've got to get it right for him'.* This investment hinged on the notion of absolute maternal responsibility, in a society where success is not guaranteed and must be individually laboured for. Fiona's investment was focused on her child, not his competitors. Even Anna, who believed she had ensured excellent schooling by investing in a private education, still elevated her role to essential. Alongside enacting time-consuming school processes, this meant actively seeking additional homework despite the teacher deeming this unnecessary, and telephoning her husband from work to discover spelling test results; all of which reveals assumed

responsibility, insecurity, and the personal significance of her educational investment. Anna did not recognise her actions as competing against others, but as supporting her child. Jenny, far less involved in homework, and with a personal preference for outdoor play and instrumental lessons, recognised homework as a *'necessary evil'* which prepared her children for secondary education. She thus ensured that homework was adhered to, as a tool in securing her child's educational position, now, and for the future. These examples reflect the parent-secured 'safety net' central to competitive-investment mothering, echoing a widespread belief that present educational participation ensures future success (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Ulé et al., 2015).

Competitive-investment mothering also influenced mothers' experiences at the opposite end of the class spectrum. The marketised education culture was evident in Helen's approach. Despite lacking the material, social and cultural advantages of middle-class Jenny and Anna, Helen was situated in the same neoliberal, individualised school and social system, shared the same ideas underpinning competitive-investment mothering, and sought to advance her child's education through her actions, just as middle-class mothers do (similar to Poullaouec's working-class parents, 2021). Believing qualifications essential, Helen framed supplementary homework as critical and urgent because it might secure Corey's future amid inadequate school provision. She bought cut-price workbooks, spoke of education for personal betterment, and used the catchphrase *'pushing on'* to describe supporting her son beyond school expectations. Elsewhere, Ruth, living in council housing and self-describing as poor, followed parental involvement expectations rigidly, even completing reading tasks on Christmas Day, because this fit

her understanding of individualised, responsibilised schooling. Though encouraged in these actions by the system, Ruth, Helen and Anna framed their educational investment as integral to their mothering and individually, relationally and emotionally focused. They perceived their actions as essential support for their children, not as peer-to-peer competition. Competitive-investment mothering was, therefore, how these educationally-oriented good mothers understood their role in the education system.

In the Landeros (2011) study which informed my development of competitive-investment mothering, participants used sophisticated, professional skills. Although, in this study, no explicit connections existed between the mothers' occupations and their homework involvement,[31] their support was skilled labour: constant, participative, anticipatory, preventive and proactive, but also restorative, compensatory, supplementary and reactive. Fiona anticipated problems and worked in complex ways, investing time, cognition and planning. Helen's attentive use of additional materials proactively aimed for better outcomes. Ruth used consistent support to avoid mistakes. They resolved perceived difficulties: Anna claimed additional homework; Leah taught her son to 'play' the homework system; even Jenny, despite rejecting maternal responsibility, intervened in problematic activities. The mothers' responses went far beyond the simple monitoring described elsewhere (Farrell & Danby, 2015; Forsberg, 2007; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009), demonstrating willingness and aptitude to negotiate homework in sophisticated and adaptive ways.

[31] Jenny may be an exception. Her child-centred approach to homework may reflect her family therapist training, although this was not explored or made explicit in her interviews.

According to competitive-investment mothering, status is gained via an assumed connection between a child's achievements and a mother's educational participation (Landeros, 2011). This elevates support beyond compliance with school requests and scripts of maternal care work. By articulating their higher skills, critiquing fathers, claiming and maintaining control of homework, the mothers demonstrated their success *as mothers*, particularly if their child made good progress. Homework support was 'a reflection of [their] dedicated involvement … a defining and visible factor' in their good mothering (Landeros, 2011, p.248). An effective homework supporter role therefore indicated maternal goodness. Whilst participants did not claim a special social status from their educational involvement like Landeros's mothers, nevertheless, a sense of morality around their educational actions was evident: Ruth justified her involvement by asserting that a mother's role is to help children *'flourish'*; Fiona described labouring *'religiously'* for her son. The moral appropriateness of their homework efforts was evident.

However, adherence to competitive-investment mothering inadvertently produced the negative emotions referenced by scholars whose work underpins this theory (Griffith & Smith, 1987; Milkie & Warner, 2014; Wong, 2012). Helen illustrates the consequences of this most poignantly, for she embodied the anxiety arising from a script which demands future success, while presenting that success as uncertain and dependent on individual responsibility. Her home learning actions arose directly from this anxiety. Having personally benefited from credentials which are unequally distributed, and observing the consequences of educational 'failure' for her husband, Helen was simultaneously worried and determined, fearful that her son might not thrive without additional intervention. Her 'future-oriented, planning-ahead

approach to education … rooted in conceptions of liberal individualism' (Golden & Erdreich, 2014, p.268) matched approaches previously attributed to the middle-class, and classically tied to a competitive style of parenting. Yet it resulted in emotional strain.

Tension, stress and burden were not unusual. Educational-orientation which results in elements of competitive mothering is not isolated from maternal emotions. Responsibilising mothers educationally, by integrating homework's neoliberal framing with mother-child investment, prompts a range of negative emotions, including 'depression, anxiety, self-doubt, low esteem' (Wong, 2012, p.95). The burdensome investment mothering encouraged by educational-orientation thus ignited emotional challenges which might not otherwise have been experienced: Helen's anxiety; Ruth's burden; Fiona's guilt. Emotion-homework integration is therefore bi-directional and cyclical, with emotions producing invested homework support, which itself prompts various emotions. The cycle triggered by the emotional investment advanced when educationally-oriented mothers adopt competitive mothering (*figure 24*) sustained their motivation, even when the emotions were, or became, negative.

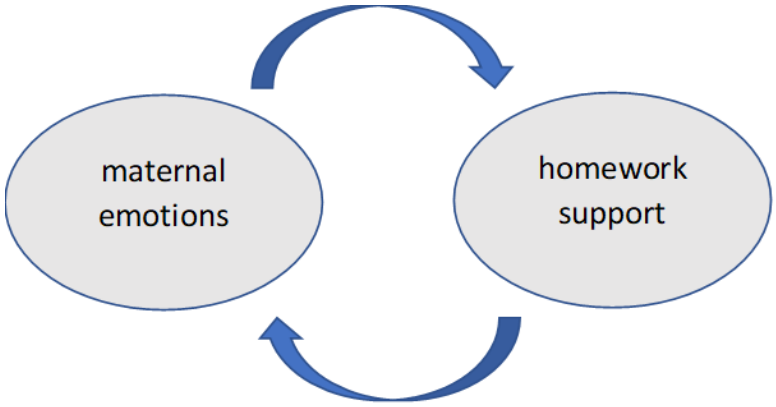


Figure 24: The cycle of emotional investment in homework

Individual emotional risks arising from competitive-investment mothering, were not associated only with a higher class position, as suggested by Gimenez-Nadal and Sevilla (2016), nor felt only by mothers of struggling learners (Dudley-Marling, 2003). As both working- and middle-class mothers demonstrated the same deep care and emotional investment, emotional risk applied to all. In fact, aside from Fiona, whose child had learning difficulties, the highest levels of emotional strain were felt by those most precariously positioned (Helen and Ruth). Having embraced their central educational role, systemic inequalities heightened the emotional burden.

These educationally-oriented mothers adopted the practices of an ideological system founded on individualised academic success, and this orientation shaped their responses to homework. Homework support was thus aligned with competitive mothering, through maternal investment in the child. This investment should be understood within constructs which centre educational participation at the heart of mothering and integral to maternal goodness and morality. For understanding these mothers' homework involvement, a shared educational-orientation frames them better than a classed lens.

8.3.1 Reframing classed narratives of homework participation

Despite framing the participants in this study as educationally-oriented, invested parents, who motherised homework, the proposition in the extant literature that educational participation is a classed experience must be explored. I have emphasised my view of the participants *as mothers first*. However, in being

'everywhere but nowhere' (Savage, 2005, p.939), the powerful, but often unacknowledged impact of class, cannot be divorced from their experiences.[32]

Reay (1998, 2005b) claims that social reproduction embedded in education systems, and enacted through mothering, contributes to inequality, arguing that working-class mothers find their historic educational experiences constraining and difficult to overturn (see also Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; Hutchison, 2012). They are hindered by needing to negotiate unfamiliar or inequitable education practices to operate effectively as supplementary educators (C.Clarke, 2021; Gillies, 2006b; Poullaouec, 2021). However, working-class mothers in this study do not reflect this. Helen, Ruth and Nell, all with working-class backgrounds, engaged intensively with their children's homework, responding to school demands, embracing additional learning, and accepting responsibility for educational support. Helen and Ruth, despite difficult memories (feelings of school abandonment; lack of parental support), had re-engaged with education, embracing the importance of home support for their children's academic success. Although this study did not consider whether they were materially disadvantaged from offering the same level of support as their middle-class counterparts, it does suggest they were not constrained by their educational past. A class-only lens obscures that some mothers advance beyond historic experiences to reform educational practices for their child's benefit. Whilst this *may* be achieved by formulating a middle-class approach (Hutchison, 2012;

[32] Problematic traditional categories based on job or income were, as noted in Chapter 4, further complicated by participants' occasional reluctance or difficulty in describing their class identity, and by the fluidity of class across life experiences (Crozier et al., 2019). However, class remains a useful social metaphor for experiential similarities. The composite, 'best fit' of participant viewpoint and holistic data given in *table 2* (p.137) allows discussion of the potential role class played in the mothers' experiences of homework support.

Tereškinas, 2021), framing the participants as 'educationally-oriented,' rather than classed, better recognises their experiences, because these mothers *did not claim* a middle-class stance. Rather, Helen and Ruth, perhaps fearing judgement for their locations, declined to self-define, while more economically-secure Nell proudly claimed her working-class heritage. Educational-orientation brought these mothers system experience and knowledge (though its depth varied). For example, having reintegrated with the education system, Ruth used her new university experience to negotiate expectations and develop positive homework practices, advantages usually attributed to middle-class parents (Golden & Erdreich, 2014; Lareau, 1989; Reay, 2000). In this study, educational capital was not class-based but biographically-gained.

Ambition is not peculiar to the middle-classes. Poullaouec (2021) and Tereškinas (2021) both argue that working-class mothers' mobilisation for their children's educational success mirrors middle-class aspirations because, under the neoliberal state, all classes recognise individual educational qualifications as beneficial. Intense educational support has therefore increased across social classes, particularly amongst mothers (C.Clarke, 2021; Hartas, 2011; Schaub, 2015). This contextualises Helen's supplementary work, a practice associated with the middle-class (Griffith & Smith, 2005; Lareau, 1989). Her school-style activities contrasted with privileged Jenny's preference for bike riding, music lessons and creativity (activities reminiscent of Lareau's concerted cultivation, 2003). Classed differences, therefore, did not evidence greater middle-class homework involvement, but indicated the reverse, with working-class mothers more strictly wedded to formal education practices. Thus, claims that working-class support is complementary but not compensatory

(Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998, 2005b) are challenged because Helen *did* use compensatory work to combat perceived school failings, while middle-class Jenny preferred her daughter to *'build something out of chicken wire'*. These findings suggest working-class mothers are proactive in *adding to*, not only *reacting to*, school provision.

In fact, the most economically and socially marginalised participants exhibited greater intensity and anxiety around educational involvement than their middle-class counterparts. Privileged Jenny advocated a hands-off routine. Leah and Sian, now sharing Jenny's secure social position, were also selective in their involvement. In contrast, gendered parenting roles which left Helen's family economically reliant on her husband's lower-paid, precarious work, despite her better qualifications, justified Helen's anxiety about Corey's future, heightening her belief in formal education and driving her involvement beyond school expectations. Precarity reinforced Helen's educational-orientation and the importance of *'pushing on'*. Just as for Poullaouec's (2021) working-class parents, qualifications were the currency of social mobility. Yet Helen understood the risks in a competitive education system that may not support working-class children effectively. Ruth's investment in homework was also underlined by family insecurity. In a neoliberal society, with individuals made responsible for their social and financial position, a competitive education system makes logical working-class mothers' supplementary endeavours to advance their children's success. Turtulla and Lopar's (2022) recent parent involvement study echoes this, wherein the lowest educated parents helped with homework the most.

Milkie and Warner's (2014) 'individualized safety net' (p.66) not only explains middle-class mothers' actions, but also, *and perhaps more so*, the actions of educationally-oriented, working-class mothers who are acutely aware of their families' precarious position. The more disadvantaged the family, the more critical the educational goal (Ulé et al., 2015). Whilst homework was supported by all, classed location may have enhanced its importance to the disadvantaged.

Working-class mothers place emphasis on education's possible benefits, adopting practices to advance educational ambitions: marginalised, low-income or lone-parenting mothers are active and resourceful in supporting education (Akere-Azeez, 2022; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Jacobs & Daniels, 2020); working-class parents emulate middle-class concerted cultivation (Tereškinas, 2021); while immigrant parents remedy perceived systemic deficiencies by supplementing homework (de Abreu & Cline, 2005). Further advancing the ideas in these studies, my findings contrast Gillies's (2006b) claim that working-class mothers' educational support occurs outside school structures. Instead, these educationally-oriented, working-class mothers were highly-focused on formal, school-defined processes. This focus, combined with awareness of both social precarity and education's value as a social currency, meant these working-class mothers strove to create an educational safety net for their children through homework support. This challenges established proposals that school-home cultural (dis)continuity upholds different parental involvement practices and underpins variety in classed educational experiences (Golden & Erdreich, 2014; Reay, 1998, 2005b). A reverse situation may be emerging, in which educationally-oriented working-class mothers support their children's formal education intensively, thanks to the assumed value of educational

qualifications in neoliberal society and global trends towards intensive parenting (Lee, 2021).

In this thesis, a classed lens did not identify *which* mothers engaged intensively with homework support, nor which experienced heightened emotions or challenging incidents. Other dimensions, outside both class and educational-orientation and located within emotion-based, psycho-socio-biography, framed these experiences. Fiona, living a predominantly middle-class lifestyle, demonstrated a middle-class homework perspective consistent with the culturally dominant framing of education. Her middle-class cultural alignment and capitals suggested she should suffer minimal homework strain. Yet Fiona's homework interactions were the most emotionally-draining, requiring a range of strategies and emotional literacies to contain and rectify challenges. Rather than class, or class cultural alignment, deep emotions within Fiona's construction of mothering better explained her homework experience.

Reay (1998) highlights that middle-class mothers' cultural reserves enable them to view educational difficulties as caused by school deficits. This study's mothers reflected this, with Jenny framing problematic tasks as inappropriate, and both Sian and Leah criticising teachers for uninspiring homework. In contrast, the working-class mothers perceived problems as personal rather than systemic: Ruth accepted her older child's homework punishment rather than questioning the task's suitability for his learning difficulties; Helen viewed requests for assistance as evidence of daydreaming or cheating, rather than signifying a hard task; Fiona blamed herself for her son's problems. Self-blaming, as Reay (1998) would expect, despite recognising structural issues, Fiona remained unable to reject homework itself as flawed, despite

its clear unsuitability, whereas privileged mothers like Jenny easily rejected inappropriate tasks.

However, a more complex explanation than class accounts for Fiona's whole data. Recognising a system which positioned Sam as *'failing'*, Fiona protested against the desire for *'all these little robots'* and her disaffection with systemic challenges later became sufficient enough to make a complaint. Fiona's continued support for a process she simultaneously articulated as problematic is explained by homework's function as an emotion practice, embedded in her mothering and the emotions which prompted her actions. Rejecting homework entirely would require Fiona to abandon devoted mothering, risking moralised self-judgement for failing against her chosen mothering tenets, from which her emotion motivation derives. For Jenny, who separated homework from her mothering identity, problems existed outside her own actions, whilst they remained central to Fiona. Class, therefore, was a blunt, and only partial, explanation for Fiona's guilt, which is better understood by recognising how emotions underpinning her homework actions reflected her mothering self.

If, as Ball (2003) argues, the middle-class 'represent and perform themselves as moral subjects … [and] issues of identity, responsibility and aspiration are up front' (p.3), then intense maternal homework support might be understood as part of moralised *and classed* mothering. However, this argument lacks sufficient nuance for this study's mothers because they did not reflect two, distinct, classed groups who did and did not perform moral homework support. As educationally-oriented, competitive-investment mothers, they *all* participated in homework support. It was different, possibly harder, for working-class mothers like Helen, who lacked a home-

school partnership, or Ruth, who battled practical burdens (notwithstanding material differences which this study has not explored). However, ultimately, the mothers were connected, *as mothers*, by a shared emotional impetus to support their children. Class, whilst undeniably part of their experience, does not sufficiently explain why they constructed their support roles as they did, nor account for the intensity of mothers' homework participation, which cut across class groupings. A more nuanced explanation for homework involvement is found in emotional and educational investment.

8.3.2 Classed experiences of home-school 'partnership'

Although working-class mothers' support emphasised investment in school practices, there were differences in their experience of homework as parent-school partnership. Taking the case of Helen: despite strong support for educational practices plus anxiety that teachers insufficiently supported her son, Helen did not seek additional schoolwork, or voice her concerns, instead supplementing school-set tasks behind closed doors. Barg (2019) similarly discovered that working-class parents are less likely to initiate teacher contact, even when their child has difficulties. Helen's later joy and relief on discovering the teacher's investment in her son, underscores the tensions ingrained in her previous unwillingness to approach them. This reticence, noted by Reay (1998) as lower confidence, kept home and school separate (akin to Lareau's 1989 notion of working-class separation from school), suggesting working-class mothers, whilst not less involved, may feel reluctant to challenge teachers. Previous findings from internet discussion forums, that mothers identify homework's purpose as for maintaining home-school relationships, may therefore be class specific (Lehner-Mear, 2021).

The way Helen's anxiety was accentuated by feelings of abandonment, contrasts with privileged Anna's pleasure and confidence in educational partnership. Anna found teachers approachable, assertively asked for additional homework, and situated her mothering within a positive parent-teacher relationship. Indeed, she re-established maternal relevance *through* this partnership. Other middle-class mothers also experienced a sense of partnership. Jenny, as school governor, described a positive relationship with the Head Teacher, and confidently challenged staff when her view differed, as did Calarco's (2020) and Landeros's (2011) privileged parents.

Although Leah and Fiona demonstrated middle-class life experiences following working-class childhoods and initially demonstrated belief in mother-school partnership, this was unsettled by teacher behaviours. Consequently interacting less with school, Leah navigated homework to protect Jack from punishment, echoing Gillies's (2006b) working-class mothers who, finding school interactions stressful, engaged only to challenge injustices or offer protection. While Fiona initially assumed staff mirrored her homework efforts with in-school support, teacher inaction damaged this viewpoint. Her experiences confirmed that only she would support Sam effectively, and belief in the home-school partnership dissolved. For mothers with a more fluid class experience than privileged Jenny and Anna, teacher failure to nurture home-school partnership had a negative outcome.

Although parenting ideals may have crossed class boundaries, the benchmark for good parenting lies in scripts that are 'challenging if not oppressive' for some families (Golden et al., 2021, p.457). Thus, a classed experience of teacher interactions and school communication impacted how homework support operated. Despite the

educational-orientation and competitive-investment mothering exhibited by all participants and working-class mothers' reframing of past educational experiences, intensive homework support happened under different circumstances: working-class mothers supported their children in a vacuum, with limited teacher contact and sometimes hidden from view. Though assisting, supporting, or even compensating for school education, inadequate teacher-mother communication meant limited partnership *around* homework processes, and no opportunity to influence their child's homework, as Anna and Jenny did. Historic observations that teachers offer insufficient contact to working-class parents appear to remain relevant (Central Advisory Council for England, 1967). Classed experiences of unequal home-school partnership thus restricted working-class mothers' empowerment and influence within homework systems. It may be mother-school *connection* and the advantages that brings, not maternal *participation*, that is limited by class.

8.3.3 The paradox of educational-orientation and emotional investment

The paradox of mothers' intense, emotionally driven investment in educational support is that it forces them to be competitive. This competition occurs both within the education system, and manifests mother-to-mother, making mothers part of the judgement from which most participants narratively distanced themselves. Accepting normative, scripted mothering standards, whilst being emotionally and educationally invested in their children, meant the mothers measured themselves against competitive practices like homework. The entanglement of emotion within mothering tied mothers to these activities, for reasons which were psycho-socially formed *and* socially expected. Mothers were thus both socially responsibilised for

their children's future success and responsibilised themselves. This combination of dimensions led the mothers to invest in their children through a competitive system in which everyone is precarious unless they proactively create an 'individualized safety net' (Milkie & Warner, 2014, p.66).

For their children to be advantaged by their emotional and relational homework investment, the mothers participated in a system which was sometimes negative: for themselves (through emotional or practical burdens), or for others (such as middle-class mothers enjoying a home-school partnership from which working-class mothers are excluded). Competitive-investment mothering is also negative for mothers globally, since, if everyone is responsibilised, everyone's position is made precarious and subject to the quality of safety net they can build and sustain. Each mother must therefore compare, compete and emotionally invest themselves, whatever the cost.

Whilst mothers in this study agentially motherised homework, the emotional and relational investment enabling them to achieve this, *also* resulted in their entanglement with a mothering script and education system which made their investment competitive. Paradoxically, although not viewing themselves as competitive (indeed I outlined at the start of section 8.3 how the mothers framed their actions as protective not competitive) competition was a consequence of their emotional investment, with actions reflecting competitive dimensions. Their internally important mothering was tinged with judgement, benchmarking, performance and individualised responsibility. Yet the mothers themselves were motivated by relational and emotional investment in their children, constructing,

enacting and embodying homework for reasons embedded, not in competition, but in mothering.

8.4 Concluding remarks

This discussion highlights the homework constructions and practices of educationally-oriented mothers. Though class cannot be divorced from maternal *experiences* of education, in the case of homework support, it was not the principal driver and did not sufficiently explain their involvement.

Understood as a school devised and controlled educational tool, or colonisation process encouraging mothers into pedagogic roles, homework is also closely connected to mothers' constructions of their mothering. By crossing the public-private boundary, and entering the mothers' realm, homework becomes subject to agential motherisation practices, maternal emotions and embodied mothering. Mothering's relational dimension, situated within mother-child emotional bonds, results in homework support being relationally and individually shaped, and driven by maternal emotions. Mothers may become supplementary teachers, as expected by government/school discourses, but they are motivated from within their mothering, relationally, emotionally and psycho-socio-biographically. Thus, homework is not just an educational exercise, structured by school or social demands, but, by entangling with mothering, becomes rooted in maternal identities, emotions and emotion care work. Although homework embeds into mothering through moralised scripts, social expectations and a mother-as-carer discourse, mothering itself fundamentally shapes homework through acts of relational, situated motherisation, which draw on mothers' existing knowledge, skills and embodiments,

emotional investments and hybrid approaches. Schools set homework, but mothers formulate its practice through motherisation.

9 CONCLUSION

9.1 ANSWERING THE RESEARCH QUESTION

In this thesis, I set out to understand **what shapes constructions of homework and the homework support role for mothers with primary-aged children**. I investigated mothers' constructions of homework and their support role, what shapes these constructions, how visible these constructions are in mothers' homework practices, and how mothers reflect on and make sense of their homework role and experiences. This has provided a new way to understand homework.

Mothers' homework constructions are located in their existing mothering approaches, maternal care work and emotions, and shaped by these dimensions and individual psycho-socio-biographical experiences. Although mothers often frame their support as critical to homework and operate in relation to gendered social scripts about mothers' suitedness to emotion care work and position as supplementary educators, their homework constructions are not solely based on school discourses of homework as academically beneficial. Instead, **mothers' homework constructions are socially, relationally and emotionally produced within their own mothering**. **These complex constructions result in a process of motherisation.** Motherisation is visible in mothers' decisions about their support role and how they construct it, in how they physically embody and enact their homework support, and also in how they describe and reflect on their homework experiences and individual interactions. Thus constructed, mothers' homework support is driven by emotions found in their maternal identities, mothering and mother-child relationships. This means that whilst homework has become embedded in socially-

produced mothering expectations derived from educational policy and hegemonic mothering scripts, mothering itself is also situated in, and central to, how homework support is carried out. The motherisation process is thus significant.

The research design and methodological approaches enabled my research question to be answered, by working with a small number of participants over an extended period, to produce data from interview, video and stimulated reflection. This range of data afforded a holistic, psycho-socio-biographical analysis of each mothers' experiences, informed by Hollway and Jefferson's (2000, 2013) free association technique. Matricentric feminism (O'Reilly, 2016, 2019), portraiture (Lawrence-Lightfoot, 1983; Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997), and feminist ideas of reciprocity and situated knowledges, supported my aim to understand the mothers holistically, using the principle of Gestalt. Video footage allowed the embodied, relational and situated dimensions of homework support to be revealed, factors largely overlooked in the homework literature. My own positionality and reflexivity were integral to the orientation of this thesis. The lens developed for understanding mothers' homework support, their agential and empowered motherisation practices, and what drives and shapes their engagement was only possible by approaching the research in this methodologically innovative way.

9.2 Contributions to the field and applications for knowledge

This thesis makes **four** contributions to the homework research field. Firstly, it adopted **new methods and an innovative research design to investigate homework as a social and relational practice rather than an educational tool**. Combining interview with videography, stimulated reflection and portraiture highlighted the

maternal role in homework, centring mothers as key participants in how homework operates. Secondly, **a new conceptual framework was adopted, through which to understand homework's meaning for mother homework supporters,** using emotion and emotion care work, psycho-socio-biography and embodiment, mothering and mothering scripts. This included **theorisation of a competitive-investment mothering script**. Thirdly, this work produced **a new conceptualisation of homework, as a relational emotion practice integrated with mothering, mother-child relationships and mothers' relational work**. Finally, this led to the development of **the new concept of motherisation, which recognises mothers' knowledge, skills, experiences, emotions and, critically, their agency, in responding to and creating homework practices.** Cumulatively, these contributions produce **a new way to understand primary school homework**.

This new conceptualisation suggests homework is not solely a school-controlled or school-focused practice. The participants motherised its enactment, creating homework support practices according to, and in line with, their own mothering, their psycho-socio-biographical experiences, and the way homework was situated within their existing mother-child relationships. Framed by social scripts of good mothers as both supplementary educators and emotion care workers, mothers' own narratives, experiences, reflections and embodied behaviours situate homework as a social and relational experience, embedded in mothering, maternal identities and maternal emotions.

These original contributions, offering a new lens with which to view homework and mothering, have wide application. The novel conceptualisation relates to both good

schooling mothers generally and homework support specifically, potentially shaping how society thinks about, how scholars study, and how governments and schools create homework, but also informing how mothers and mothering are studied and understood.

Recognising how emotion, emotion care work and mothering shape homework may assist governments, schools and teachers to understand homework in praxis. Indeed, highlighting homework as social and relational, rather than purely educational, prompts a fundamental reconsideration of whether school intentions for homework provision complement how homework operates in families. Universal policies, procedures and practices may be ineffective, inappropriate, or need adaptation, to account for mothers' agential responses to homework. If schools consider that afterschool work remains a valid educational exercise but wish to ensure equity in its operation, then afterschool clubs, run by educational professionals, could be considered as an alternative location, with homework practices reframed accordingly. This is not to argue that mothers' support is not beneficial, but to suggest that if universality is considered important, this approach may be more equitable.

However, in challenging the one-size-fits-all nature of homework as currently designed by schools and promoted by governments, and in revealing that individually motherised homework support is not identically experienced, this thesis sounds a warning bell over recent recommendations to devise national guidelines for standardised practices (Fitzmaurice et al., 2021). Attempts to standardise homework, whilst potentially smoothing out school-to-school differences in design and

expectations, must recognise that, homework's enactment, being home-situated, is centred around each individual mother's decisions, outside the school's remit, meaning homework is always subject to important individual variation.

Standardised procedures also risk overlooking mothers' skills and practices, thereby continuing the problematic discourse of *school-led parental involvement*, in which maternal experiences are subordinated to institutional needs, rather than moving towards *parent-centric engagement* practices (Goodall & Montgomery, 2014; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005). This thesis's new way of understanding mothers' central role in home learning can prompt reflection on what else might be learnt from maternal approaches. Mothers' skills and knowledges may have applications elsewhere in education and other child development settings. Rather than persuading parents to learn from schools, as is often advocated in parental involvement discourses, in learning from mothers, schools might adopt parent-centric practices which recognise mothers' skilful engagement. Furthermore, raising the profile of the situated and relational dimensions of learning support, and learning from maternal approaches, could influence different models for teaching or teaching assistance, particularly if future studies establish the effectiveness, or advantages, of mothers' relational support.

Highlighting mothering and the maternal role in homework challenges the hegemonic idea that mothers' education care work is simply an extension of their childcare, lacking application beyond basic functions. The matricentric aims of this thesis are therefore realised by going beyond the revelation that maternal homework labour brings practical, temporal and emotional burdens, to afford

appreciation of the maternal skills and drivers which enable successful management of burdensome, and widely overlooked, social expectations. Thus, mothers' homework skills, knowledges, nuanced approaches and experiences, may be better recognised. Further, the level of cognitive and emotional investment (and burden) acknowledged herein, indicates that schools should perhaps give more time and attention to homework, moving it from an 'add-on' exercise, into a more considered and valued position.

Although the parental involvement discourse is still frequently referenced, and often given as a principal justification for primary homework, the parent's role remains poorly understood within the education profession, is rarely explicitly valued, or overtly planned for, lacks attention in teacher training programmes (Epstein, 2018; Jeynes, 2018) and is absent from the current National Curriculum (Sayers, Marschall, et al., 2021). Ideas within this thesis may encourage teacher reflection on the parental (maternal) role in educational development, both broadly and relating to homework, and promote both pre-service and in-service training on the parental (maternal) homework role and family educational support generally. Policymakers should embed the realities of parental (maternal) support in official documentation and school guidance. Furthermore, providers of parental engagement programmes, popular in the UK but often constructed, like homework, from the school's perspective, may also be challenged to consider new ways to recognise and support the maternal role. Appreciation of maternal education work at individual school and teacher level, may encourage improved home-school connections, particularly if these are more equitably framed and better recognise family skills and knowledge.

This thesis is meaningful beyond its conclusion that homework is neither purely educational, nor universally experienced. In demonstrating that the variety of interplay (and sometimes tension) between family practices and school practices is highly nuanced, it encourages schools to reflect on the divisions between homework as they construct it, and homework as it is constructed and enacted in families. Caronia and Colla (2021) argue that, in crossing the home-school boundary, homework creates a 'homeostatic balance … scaffolding parents and children's joint homework activities, and concurrently incarnating school values' (p.26). However, the level at which this happens may vary, according to the degree of mothers' existing educational orientation, their embedded mothering, and their motherisation practices. Homework's role in connecting school and home is therefore highly individual, and not always dominated by school culture.

This thesis complements existing literatures, particularly those discussing mothers-as-supplementary-educators, whilst also challenging official orthodoxies around homework and parental involvement, which can instead be understood through the lenses of motherisation and matricentric homework agency. Whilst not offering a universal truth about primary school homework, or maternal homework support practices, this thesis presents relational and emotional truths about the way homework is constructed, negotiated and experienced by *these* mothers, indicating that maternal homework support should be more widely recognised.

9.3 Untying the knots: what else and what next?

There are areas highlighted by this study's design, or excluded by my methodological choices, which require further research and for which this study is a helpful

springboard. (See Postscript for connections with the Covid-19 pandemic school closures).

Integral to my feminist stance was the creation of holistic interpretations which recognised the mother-participants as unique individuals. I was reflexively aware that however holistic this aim, and despite the range of techniques used (portraiture, free association, Gestalt) the mothers' narratives would necessarily be contracted and dimensions excluded due to limited space. Furthermore, that three mother-participants' portraits were omitted troubles me.[33] Such moral issues require ongoing researcher reflexivity, long after institutional ethics approval is granted (Takeda, 2022). As Roberts (2018) pondered, 'is *not* telling a person's story akin to silencing them? If so, excluding certain accounts in favour of others for practical reasons feels like a greater betrayal' (p.122; my emphasis). Whilst planned journal articles may help to rectify these issues, I reiterate an earlier point that although my chosen methodologies helped me come closer to participants' experiences, the mothers are only ever co-producers, beholden to my central role as scholarly interpreter and decision-maker. The emotional weight of this is burdensome. Creating the portraits was 'a great responsibility … entail[ing] significant emotion work' (Roberts, 2018, p.123). Although undertaken with reflexive integrity, this will always be imperfect.

I noted, in Chapter 4, my gradual realisation that those who find homework support challenging, or negative, were less likely to participate in a study inadvertently highlighting their perceived 'failure' against current maternal norms. This may be

[33] Note that all participants do appear in Chapters 7 and 8.

exacerbated by concerns about gendered judgement in a mother-focused study. Self-selection to a homework study may also unavoidably recruit those more interested in homework as a practice, or more able, personally, to support homework (McGregor & Knoll, 2015). Kiewra et al. (2009) reflect on this statistically. Eighty-one percent of their participants had high-achieving children, thriving under current educational practices, making their sample likely to be pro-homework. Comparably, I was unlikely to access those who were less interested in, less involved in, or less able (for various reasons) to support homework, or those whose children struggled. This study's mothers were oriented towards engagement with formal educational processes. My conclusions therefore reflect a particular group of educationally-oriented mothers whose practices may contrast other mothers' experiences, though generalisability was never a research aim. A research design enabling researcher-mother relationships to be built prior to data-gathering may mediate these issues, such as ethnography (the researcher meets mothers in their own communities over a sustained period), or school-based research (using established relationships, a teacher co-researcher recruits participants with varying experiences). Indeed, if one of the key conclusions is that mothers make homework fit with their mothering, questions remain regarding mothers for whom homework does not fit, or cannot be made to fit: are these mothers excluded from supporting homework and how do they feel about this exclusion, or are they forced to adapt their mothering in ways that are not seen in this thesis? This line of thinking suggests researchers should also explore whether there are positive and negative ways of making homework fit, for mothers and their children.

The small sample size restricted the dimensions of mothering visible. Whilst an intersectional lens highlighted class differences, beyond this, all participating mothers were white and UK-born. Swathes of experience are inadvertently neglected when recruitment produces a limited racial and cultural spectrum. Likewise, mothers in same-sex relationships are not included. Motherhood, and the experiences it produces, cannot be divorced from its context (Hill Collins, 1994), so the thesis conclusions are highly localised. Much mothering literature is written from a white, middle-class perspective (Sutherland, 2010), although marginalised groups are sometimes represented in studies focused on the classed and raced dimensions of education and mothering (see Gillies, 2006b; Holloway & Pimlott-Wilson, 2013; K.Jackson & Remillard, 2005; Lareau, 2003; Reay, 1998). Duncan (2005) warns that although dominant mothering scripts are widely understood, individual negotiation occurs according to complex identities. This study, did, therefore, 'omit' mothers with homework constructions based in a range of alternative cultural, individual and intersecting dimensions. However, since mothers are heterogenous, I could not encompass all maternal experiences, and the in-depth, holistic research design required small numbers. The solution is therefore not a less detailed study with more participants covering a wider range of individual dimensions, but further studies replicating a similar, in-depth research design to identify what shapes the homework constructions of mothers not represented herein. I do not claim generalisability or a universal truth about all UK-based mothers. Indeed, my discussion of intersectionality and situated knowledges indicates the need for future studies encompassing cultural, racial and classed dimensions of maternal homework support, which cumulatively reveal similarities and differences between mothers.

This is important, in the light of my focus on subjectivities, standpoints, positionality and reflexivity. Hunt (2011) argues that researcher interpretations vary by complex historical, emotional and social dimensions, meaning sociological narratives reflect both participant *and* researcher. Where, as a mother-researcher, I shared cultural and racial similarities with my participants, interpretations may be closer to the mothers' lived experiences than less 'experience-near' approaches might achieve (A.Cooper, 2009). However, 'multiplex identit[ies]' (Narayan, 2013, p.25) mean my conclusions will never be truly congruent with the mothers' own meanings (Riessman, 1987). This acknowledged risk is not exclusive to portraiture, but exists in all research. Situated in the knowledges and experiences of these mother-participants and in my responses as a mother-researcher, these findings reflect 'a story amongst other stories' (Walkerdine et al., 2001, p.88). This does not devalue the conclusions as relevant, powerful, new knowledge, but recognises that there are other maternal homework support stories yet to be heard.

The dominant cultural practice of *mothers*-as-supplementary-educators, the moral imperatives underpinning mothering scripts, and a matricentric feminist standpoint, provided clear empirical and methodological justification for the focus on mothers, not parents. Nevertheless, the conclusions in this thesis indicate an agenda for future research into fathers' experiences, such as exploration of the homework constructions and practices of those fathers who do undertake homework support, particularly to ascertain whether moral scripts and emotional drivers shape their involvement, just as for mothers. A meta-analysis by Kim and Hill (2015) led them to speculate that fathers' educational support strategies may be more academically challenging than mothers'. As it is unclear why, situated homework studies should

investigate whether fathers' conceptualisations of the support role are different. Although this study's mothers described fathers' homework support as more physically and emotionally distant, fathering is also relationally-situated, suggesting fathers' homework support may still be a relational practice. The relational shaping of fathers' homework roles should therefore be explored, to investigate possibly comparable 'fatherisation' processes, their prompts and constructs, including in lone father, or two-father families. As homework is a culturally-situated practice, fathers' roles should also be studied in families where educational support is considered the father's domain. Conversely, discovering *un*involved fathers' homework constructions is pertinent, firstly to understand why they do not centre themselves within homework, and secondly, to identify whether their views of maternal involvement mirror mothers'. Mother-father dyadic studies might even enable parental constructions to be explored for their complementary or contrasting dimensions.

Despite well-intentioned feminist approaches (reciprocal practices; mother-to-mother relationships; positionality; reflexivity), the power differential in research contexts may not be successfully overcome and the interviewer-interviewee relationship likely shaped conversations. Griffith and Smith (1987) argue that this power dimension is not as impactful as supposed. However, the moralisation of mothering norms which produces maternal judgements in a good mother / bad mother binary, and cultural pressure to conform to good mothering expectations, means this study's participants may have been particularly sensitive to both topic and mother-researcher influence. Alldred and Gillies (2002) suggest the interview interaction produces 'presentations of self which largely conform to dominant

cultural forms because of the implicit expectations that shape the interview process' (p.146). Whilst avoiding this normalisation process may be impossible, aspects of my research design mitigated the issue. A holistic lens led me towards free association analysis, which enabled consideration not only of what was explicitly stated, but also of why this might have been said, other data which illuminated the response, and how elements dovetailed to produce meaning. This resulted in Gestalt-inspired, detailed, nuanced interpretations. Video observations and stimulated reflections supported in-depth understanding, as did follow-up interviews which encouraged relationship-building, and improved the insight from initial meetings. Although interview self-performances were at risk of modification towards normative expectations, they were only one part of a research design which enabled analysis beyond surface representations. However, I acknowledge the discursive production of mothering practices for schooling, to which both the mothers and I are subject, which is a factor in any research focused on the moralised terrain of mothering. Despite this, being a mother-researcher *also living this discourse*, enabled empathetic interpretations of the meanings and experiences beyond participants' performances as good, compliant, educationally supportive mothers. This is founded in the argument that emotional responses to the mothers supported data analysis.

Prior to data collection, I made the practical decision to focus only on mothers, rather than also interviewing each child. As a sole researcher conducting a highly detailed, holistically analysed, in-depth study, additional data would have been overwhelming. However, homework is *principally* given to children. To argue that homework must be understood from the perspective of those who experience it, implies the child's view is also critical. In concluding that homework is a *relational*

exercise, embedded in established interactions, with motherisation practices arising from mother-child emotional connections, this study has revealed half of an integrated story. The child's parallel experience of this relational activity would add significantly to the knowledge herein. Furthermore, small-scale, in-depth and holistic versions of Else-Quest et al.'s (2008) study, which considers mother-child emotional interplay during homework, would support an integrated understanding.

Having identified individual, agential and nuanced motherisation practices, future research should explore whether, in shaping notionally teacher 'set' homework tasks, individual mothers' actions support, or challenge, educational intentions. Apparent variations in homework's effectivity, wherein some studies find homework beneficial, whilst others conclude the reverse, may be explained by the different ways that it is motherised. A nuanced understanding of changes resulting from varying motherisation approaches may thus untangle some of the ongoing contentions in homework research.

Finally, a focus on women's role with children has previously been deemed 'complicit in reproducing societal assumptions about women deriving their identity from relationships in domestic situations and particularly from motherhood' (Letherby, 1994, p.525). For a feminist researcher, this is a difficult critique. I seek to highlight women's oppressions and marginalised position within patriarchal social systems, and to produce work with a social justice slant which will either promote women's release from dominated positions, or recognise their agency and empowerment. Equally, I cannot, having met my participants, whitewash their feelings about themselves as mothers and the valuable role they believe they play in homework

support, to advance the argument that women are subjugated to society's needs by the blanket expectations of motherhood. In Chapter 1, I claimed the words mother and mothering with specific intention to reveal gendered imbalances in family and school practices. I also recognised mothers as unique individuals with the capacity for agency and empowerment. Thus, although this thesis highlights maternal homework support burdens, it concurrently recognises mothering gains from this relational experience *and* reveals how, within social expectations, mothers make choices which create their own practice: knowledge I had not expected to uncover. To ignore mothers' experiences, feelings and views of themselves *as mothers* is to assume they cannot be reflexive, denies their cognitive agency and social awareness, and presents them as cowed and unable to make independent choices. As Baldwin (2021) says, to obscure the voices of those who see mothering as their internal identity, is not feminist. Instead, re-framing matricentric feminism to recognise that mother-child needs can be in harmony and their subjectivities sympathetically connected (Baldwin, 2021; Hollway, 2016), supports a focus on mothers *as mothers* and does *not* in itself reinforce social assumptions about women's place. Rather, it affords a different lens with which to understand mothers' experiences and constructions of their position.

9.4 Reflections

9.4.1 Their story; my story; their story

Research is 'the discovery of the self through the detour of the other' (Hunt, 2011, p.37), in which 'attending to the emotional dynamics of social research can provide valuable insights not only on those being researched but also on those conducting research' (Roberts, 2018, p.115). Exploring homework support in the lives of a small

group of educationally-oriented mothers highlighted dimensions of my own experience of which I was not previously aware. This 'inherently affective experience' (Roberts, 2018, p.115), shaped by reflexivity and a feminist desire for mother-to-mother reciprocity, brought understanding I had not anticipated. Intersections between my experience and the mother-participants' operated at a depth level which was significant both for analysis and personal understanding.

Homework support is more complex than it is presented in government policy, school practice, social discourse, or even scholarly debate. Focusing on the maternal position, and mothers' experiences, narratives and reflections, not only revealed that homework is a social practice not just a (limited) educational tool, but also demonstrated that mothering and homework are mutually embedded: new knowledge pertinent not only to these mothers, but also personally. In operating as mother-teacher-researcher, my triad of identities has been fluid, integrating in complex and ever-shifting patterns. Understanding maternal homework support has meant recognising my own responses as mother, teacher, researcher, teacher-mother, mother-researcher, mother-teacher, and teacher-researcher. Beneath this fluctuating ground of rolling lava, I recognise, unexpectedly, my own mothering as central to my identity, mirroring the mothers I met.

Although I set out to be open to where the data led, methodological reflexivity shows that my subjectivities and positionality cannot be divorced from the direction in which this research travelled. However, although my centrality to both portraiture and free association narrative analysis shaped the interpretations herein, this does not negate them. *My* ideas did not lead the conclusions. Indeed, the findings were

unexpected and other mothers' experiences and constructions challenged my own feminist, teacher and researcher beliefs about homework. Homework was not experienced, as I had anticipated, as a solely onerous exercise, which stranded participants within teacher-to-mother, mother-to-mother and society-to-mother judgement. Although burden and judgement appear in the narratives, these were not the dominant elements. Whether or not homework has a panoptic dimension, what mattered for these mothers was how *they* constructed homework, and the advantages *they* perceived in homework support. In this sense, it was the mothers' constructions of homework and their support role, not social expectations, which sustained their engagement. The methodological approach took my discoveries beyond that which might have been revealed in a more traditional research design, enabling the mothers to demonstrate their emotional and relational truths about homework support.

9.4.2 A SELF-PORTRAIT OF MATERNAL HOMEWORK SUPPORT (II)

It is January 2021. The Coronavirus Pandemic is raging. Cases are high and UK schools are closing … again. Homework has changed. Now it is not work just for the evening or weekend. It is all-day labour. My daughter is twelve, attends secondary school, and focuses on her friends as significant others. She grumbles, but conducts her schoolwork mostly independently, calling for my support because she misses human interaction more than because she needs assistance. I drift in and out of her room, check she's on track, engage when she solicits it. My role has changed.

My son is four and relatively new to school. He would prefer to be outside, kicking a ball, exploring in the woods, or helping in the garden. Yet his teacher sets tasks, many

tasks, which fill our days. My husband's study door stays firmly shut from Monday to Thursday; his salary keeps our family afloat. I give up trying to sustain intense PhD study whilst simultaneously overseeing schoolwork and settle in to support my child.

We sit together, side by side, always side by side, mostly touching, heads together. We do maths sheets and reading sheets. We practice letter formation and counting. We make all manner of things: a boat which we propel across the bath with a set of bellows, salt dough sea creatures for an ocean scene, a striped tiger from a toilet roll, and a concertina dragon for Chinese New Year. We learn about birds, the seas, festivals and recycling, and experiment with snow and ice when the weather turns wintery. We go outside when the task allows, and log on dutifully to the class 'lessons' twice a day. In online school, my son is mostly quiet. He watches what the other children do and say. He joins in when I coax him, writing carefully on his whiteboard and holding it up for the teacher to see. Our labours say: we are here, we are learning. He looks to me for guidance, encouragement, acknowledgement, and support. We work hard. He makes progress. My own work recedes into the background, because … because I feel that he needs me.

And when schools re-open, I sense my own sadness: that this time, this him-and-me-together, is over. He returns to school and we take in his pile of completed work. 'When you've finished with it, when you don't need it anymore,' I say to his teacher, 'Can I please have this back? It's a kind of marker of the time we spent together. Time that, without this horrible pandemic, we [do I mean I?] would not have had.' My child. My investment. My emotions.

And maybe now I realise the answers to the questions in my opening self-portrait.

The voice that tells me to be intensely involved in homework? That voice is mine.

It calls for my embedded, embodied emotion care work, revealing my desire to support and nurture. It signifies my urge to spend time with my child. It comes from my love and care emotions.

And why do I listen? I listen … because I am a mother.

….

The opening portrait in this thesis showed me straddling three positional identities in relation to homework, which frame my experience and thoughts: part teacher, part mother, part scholar, I hold a complex, hybrid, contradictory construction of homework support. It raised the question of why *I*, as a mother, engaged with homework support, despite my accompanying teacher and researcher understanding of its problems and limitations. Implicitly, this portrait suggested that if it was not in my teacher or researcher identity, then the central driver to my engagement lay somewhere inside my mothering. This PhD and final reflective portrait, above, demonstrate the answers to this puzzle: answers cumulatively revealed by the data I gathered, the narratives and reflections I heard, the interactions I observed, the interpretations I presented, and my own contrasting experience of pandemic homework support. Central to my homework responses are my mothering identity, relational experiences, and the emotion practices which derive from these. Unexpectedly, I realise the similarities between myself and my participants.

This final portrait raises a last question. Alongside the finding that relational mothering frames an emotional response to homework expectations, it also hints

that relational constructs of homework support are rooted not only in a mother's construct of herself *as mother*, but within individual dyadic encounters. My experience of homework support altered with each child, and was also different during the pandemic school closures. This suggests the motherisation of homework support identified in this thesis is not only particular to individual mothers, but may also be dynamically shaped by the temporal contexts and specific children with whom she interacts. This reinforces the importance of using affective and relational lenses, since homework is likely to be different not only mother-to-mother, but also mother-child to mother-child, as emotion practices, embodied actions, and supporter identities flex contextually. Homework support is not only *not a universally shared practice*, but is also highly situated. The motherisation process, rooted in mother-child relationships, maternal experiences, and embodied mothering, is subtle and individualised. Homework's relational dimensions, on which this thesis has focused, underline the malleability of motherisation in constructing homework support. This sophisticated understanding of what maternal homework support is, suggests the need for a new approach to homework at primary level, where it should no longer be framed by government, school, or scholar, as solely an educational, school-directed tool, nor as a universally identical home practice.

9.4.3 A FEMINIST LAST WORD

Emotion was, for a long time, avoided in research, particularly by those wedded to a positivist worldview and dominant research traditions. Loughran and Mannay (2018a) describe a focus on emotions as a move into 'marginalised terrain', warning that such work must be brave: 'imaginative, inspiring and innovative' (p.266). The conceptual foci of this thesis may thus result in its marginalisation. However, as a

feminist researcher I am motivated to highlight the affective aspects of mothers' supplementary-educator role, to reveal emotion's centrality to mothers' experiences as homework supporters, and to emphasise and de-marginalise an under-researched domain which impacts mothers across the UK. Few studies of good mothering make emotion a central feature of analysis, 'taking for granted the emotional turmoil of motherhood, leaving the variety of problematic emotions unspecified, and glossing over the particular techniques mothers use' (Lois, 2010, p.425). This thesis has grasped the opportunity to centre emotions theoretically, methodologically and analytically. In so doing, it offers new understanding to the homework research field.

POSTSCRIPT

As this thesis ends, I take a moment to acknowledge the Covid-19 pandemic which thrust the maternal experiences, outlined herein, to social consciousness as never before, reinforcing this thesis's argument, underlining its relevance, and indicating future research directions. Prolonged national school closures beginning in March 2020 and January 2021 shone a spotlight on parents' educational-supporter position and homework's role in family life. Scholarly attention has coalesced around *who* supported home learning and *its impact*. A heightened gender burden, mirrored globally, increased mothers' care work (Hazarika & Das, 2020; Hernández-Cordero et al., 2021; Otonkorpi-Lehtoranta et al., 2021), *and* their homeschooling labour (Pastori et al., 2021; Skinner et al., 2021; Said et al., 2021). Government, school and social assumptions that families could accommodate children's *fulltime* learning extended the existing, challenging role highlighted in this thesis. Although mothers have long navigated educational support, Covid-19 'profoundly amplified' this (Crosslin & Bailey, 2021, p.166). Previously a time-limited task, homework (now pandemic homeschooling) became a daily, even all-day exercise, which pressured mothers, both directly and indirectly, to 'teach' their children (Sanal-Erginel, 2022).

Some writers predict post-pandemic changes, as fathers take on more childcare labour, or society begins to re-value mothers' education care work. However, UK mothers averaged two-thirds more time on pandemic childcare than fathers (ONS, 2020b). Such workloads were problematic in two-parent families and likely overwhelming for lone (Hernández-Cordero et al., 2021) and disadvantaged mothers (Rousoulioti et al., 2022). Aligning with this thesis, pandemic scholars connect this imbalanced increase in labour to mothers' personal and social positioning as carers

(Bahn et al., 2020; Hernández-Cordero et al., 2021; Said et al., 2021), contending the pandemic 'stalled' the gender 'revolution', pushing mothers back into traditionally-gendered, intensive childrearing (Pitzalis & Spano, 2021, p.597, after England, 2010; also Hazarika & Das, 2020). In taking mothers' labour for granted, reinforcing maternal perfectionism and expecting greater maternal adaptability, resilience and responsibility (Auðardóttir & Rúdólfsdóttir, 2020; Güney-Frahm, 2020; O'Reilly, 2020), the pandemic intensified Hays's (1996) contradiction of modern mothering: to sustain being 'good' under multiple pressures.

Yet, following my findings, it is arguable whether mothers can bear this 'fourth shift' of family nurturing called homeschooling (O'Reilly, 2020, p.8), raising urgent questions about what happens when pressures become too great. Somewhat ironically, although I considered returning to explore my participants' pandemic experiences, the parallel impact on my own mother-researcher life prevented this. Nevertheless, discovering how these emotionally-invested, mother-supplementary-educators experienced homeschooling remains important. Having revealed emotion care work as a dimension of mothers' intense educational support and homework labour, the motherisation lens may now aid investigation of how mothers negotiated escalating expectations from their expanded pandemic support role.

Unsurprisingly, pandemic homeschooling studies indicate negative emotions, particularly for mothers of primary pupils (Bailey, 2021; Pastori et al., 2021; Rousoulioti et al., 2022). One-third of UK homeschooling mothers reported reduced wellbeing (ONS, 2020a). According to this thesis, mothering already drives educational support, with homework already embedded in relational mothering.

Lockdown homeschooling heightened the dimension of homework this thesis highlights, by normalising maternal responsibility for a child's *entire* educational day (Bailey, 2021). A school-led endeavour, with peripheral home support, became a central family responsibility 'integrally' involving parents (Blikstad-Balas et al., 2022, p.14). Yet, challenging the implication that pre-pandemic parents were mere managers, my participants were already highly engaged and responsibilised. Shifting pandemic expectations took advantage of mothers' existing realities, exacerbating rather than changing their experiences, thus explaining the negative impacts outlined: extended homeschooling did not simply require more *time*, but more *relational and emotional investment* too. My conclusions regarding persistent maternal burden and emotionally-invested motherisation practices, combined with worsened pandemic wellbeing, suggest government assumptions that primary learning can simply be 'put online' are naïve.

Although thesis data were collected prior to this turbulent period, and understanding mothers' lockdown experiences was never an aim, in highlighting how mothers already construct, negotiate and experience homework, this study offers a theorisation of maternal educational support with which to view pandemic findings. The discovery that primary children's home learning experiences are individualised, potentially diverging from school control, is relevant both for managing future school closures, and in relation to increased interest in hybrid learning. In turn, pandemic research indicates an urgent need to investigate not just increased maternal burden, but *how maternal practices and motivations are shaped,* both for educationally-oriented, highly-engaged homework supporters *and* those without established, intense support practices. The pandemic thus underscores this thesis's value.

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APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW TOPICS

Topic	Possible prompts
Homework views	Can you tell me about … • your views on primary homework? • where you think your homework views come from?
Approach	Can you tell me about … • your approach to homework? What influences this? • how your approach relates to you as a mother?
Role & responsibility	Can you tell me about … • your role in the homework process? • whose responsibility homework is and why? Is this always the case? • any time you have questioned a homework task / requested more homework / sought further explanation? What prompted this? • any time you have felt judged over homework? Who was judging you and why do you think they were? • your role in your child's learning, compared to the teacher and how these roles relate?
Involvement	Can you tell me about … • how much you are involved in homework? • why you become involved? • how important your involvement is?
Support networks	Can you tell me … • do you discuss homework / your homework views with others? • where you get homework support / ideas / information from?
Negative aspects / tensions	Can you tell me about … • any times when there has been tension in homework or in your homework role?
Childhood & parenting	Can you tell me about … • your son's / daughter's childhood? / what you want for their childhood? (How does homework fit with these ideas?) • your educational goals for your child? Where do these stem from? • your general parenting approach?
School (relationship with / approach to homework)	Can you tell me about … • your relationship with your child's teacher? How does this influence your homework approach? • what you know about the school's approach to homework / its policy? Are you influenced by this?
Homework behaviours / activities	Can you tell me about … • a homework session, how you approached it and how this relates to your homework role? (Was your role teacherly, motherly or something else?) • whether you ever do anything different than the set homework and if so, why?
Other	Can you tell me about … • what might happen if your partner took on the homework support role? • your own homework experience? (Was your mother involved?)

APPENDIX B: RECRUITMENT POSTERS

Recruitment poster for social media (version 1)

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Mothers and Primary Homework

Researching mothers' experiences and stories



- Are you the mother of a primary aged child who receives homework?
- Are you the parent who is the most involved with homework?
- Do you have views and experiences of primary homework which you are willing to share?

If you have answered yes to these questions, please visit the research project's website for more information and details of how to participate:

https://mothersandprimaryschoolhomework.wordpress.com

or email: Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk

Recruitment poster (version 2) emphasising informality

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Mothers and Primary Homework

Researching mothers' experiences and stories



- *Are you mum to a primary aged child who receives homework?*
- *Do you find yourself the most involved with homework?*
- *Would you be willing to share your views and experiences in an informal interview over coffee?*

Homework is set by schools but carried out in the home. Research suggests that mums are the parent most likely to be involved with this task. *Yet their views on homework aren't often heard.*

My name is Rachel, I'm a mum myself and I am currently carrying out research into mothers and primary homework. Your stories and viewpoints are important and could help us better understand mothers' experiences of primary school homework. I am interested in all viewpoints from all mums so if you might like to take part, please contact me on:

Tel: 07549 197873

Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk

Or take a look at the project's website for details of how to participate:

https://mothersandprimaryschoolhomework.wordpress.com

APPENDIX C: ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANT CONTEXT DESCRIPTIONS

Context descriptions for those participants appearing only in Chapter 7 (other participants' context descriptions appear within their portraits in Chapters 5-6).

Leah
Leah, a white, forty-four-year-old lone mother, lives with her son Jack in a large city. Leah is a homeowner and university lecturer. Leah feels her world view matches aspirational working-class mothers in her area more than her middle-class colleagues, but acknowledges that her education level and financial security probably distinguish her, arriving at 'lower middle' or 'grounded middle' as her preferred class descriptor. Leah describes prospects for young people in her largely white, working- to middle-class locality as low. Jack, aged 10 (Year 6), attends the local, mixed ethnicity, large primary school. His homework is limited to a reading diary, weekly spellings which are to be transformed into sentences, and occasional maths homework. Jack finds homework a 'chore' and can be resistant. Leah reluctantly engaged in additional work to prepare Jack for the local 11+ exam, a choice Jack made independently of school. Leah encourages verbal discussion with Jack, but feels his articulation has sometimes been misunderstood by teachers as challenging behaviour.
Nell
Thirty-five-year-old, white, Nell grew up in a traditional mining community and still identifies as working-class. However, she now has a Masters qualification, works fulltime running her own business, and owns her semi-detached townhouse property on a modern housing estate. Nell describes the surrounding town as a mixture of traditional working-class old industry, sixty percent white, with a diverse ethnic mix amongst the remaining population. Nell has been a lone parent since her daughter, Lucy, was two, although Lucy has regular contact with her civil servant father. Lucy is 6 (Year 2) and attends a large, local infant school. Her regular homework includes spellings, maths tasks and optional project work. Nell feels the project activities, framed over a longer period and related to class topics, offer 'more interesting' homework. Lucy enjoys drawing and writing, and likes gaining school rewards and pleasing the teacher.
Sian
Forty-one-year-old, white, Sian lives with her partner and two daughters, in a rural region. Sian declined to identify with any particular social class, but grew up in a generally low attaining, working-class area of East London, in which her mother's educational aspirations stood out. Sian was the first person in her immediate family to attend university, has recently completed a PhD, and has a professional job (nurse), while her partner has more traditional blue-collar employment (postman). Sian's second daughter, Emma, is 9 (Year 5). She originally attended a small village school, later moving to a larger primary. Sian describes Emma as bright and needing a high level of academic challenge. When this has been lacking, Emma has been more 'difficult' for teachers to manage. Emma's homework is 'low key', tending to extension of classwork, with no set pattern, which contrasts with the harder homework she experienced at her previous school.

APPENDIX D: STIMULATED REFLECTION QUESTIONS (ANNA)

Time point	Question
Video 1 (8 mins 29 secs)	
00:00-00:45	Can you talk about what you think this represents about your approach to homework?
01:34-05:00	Can you comment on your role in this particular homework, what you're doing and what you were thinking in this section?
06:44-07:35	[example of not saying 'no that's wrong'] Can you talk about why you took this approach?
07:35-end	[example of managing a moment of visible annoyance from child] What were you thinking at this point? What are your comments on how you managed this moment?
Video 2 (6 mins 12 secs)	
02:00-03:32	What do you think this extract tells us about your experience as a mum supporting your child's homework, and about a mother's particular way of supporting her child's learning?
Supplementary questions on both videos	
	What made you choose these two examples of homework experiences? What did you want them to show? Are they representative of your experiences?

APPENDIX E: PARTICIPANT INFORMATION & CONSENT FORMS

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project title: **Mothers and Primary Homework**

Researcher's name Rachel Lehner-Mear

Supervisor's name Dr Jane Medwell

Thank you for your interest in my research project 'Mothers and Primary Homework'. Before you decide whether you want to take part, it is important that you understand why the research is being carried out and what your participation will involve. Please read the following information and contact me if anything is unclear or if you would like more information, before you decide whether you wish to take part. Thank you.

Project aims:

This project aims to gather information about mothers' views of primary homework and how mothers make decisions about the role they take in their child's homework and the place of homework in their child's life. In particular, it seeks to explore the narratives mothers tell about their experiences of primary homework, in order to understand how mothers work with this commonly expected practice. Interviews with mothers and video of mothers' work with children around their homework will be gathered and analysed, in order to understand mothers' perspectives on primary homework.

Participant involvement requirements:

Participants in the project will all be mothers of primary aged children. As a participant you will be interviewed on two occasions during the project and you will also be asked to film yourself and your child undertaking a homework activity/ies of your choosing. Each interview will last approximately one hour and will be audio-recorded. The interviews will take a narrative approach. This means I will share general topics with you which you may wish to talk about, but you are encouraged to talk about factors which you feel are the most important to your experiences with homework. I would like you to video a homework interaction for approximately 20-30 minutes, but this can be made up of one activity or several short activities on different days. Family life can continue around the activity as it normally would. At the second interview, we will share the film for you to comment on your experience. The interviews will take place either in your own home or at another mutually convenient location. The interviews and the video will all be transcribed into text and anonymised.

Anonymity:
As part of the presentation of the study results, your words may be used. These will be anonymised so that you and your child cannot be identified. Please note that:

- You can decide to stop the interview at any point
- You do not need to talk about topics that you do not wish to
- Your name and your child's name will be removed and all information will be anonymised
- If other people (family members etc.) appear in your video, their words / actions will not be used

Data:
This study is carried out in accordance with the University of Nottingham's GDPR requirements. Please read and sign one copy of the accompanying 'Research Participant Privacy Notice and Agreement' which sets out why data is being gathered and how it will be used. All research data will be anonymised and stored in a secure place, in a separate password-protected file.

Consent:
It is your decision whether to take part in this project or not. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a consent form to sign. You are still free to withdraw at any stage, without giving a reason. If you withdraw from the study, all your data will be destroyed.

Your child's participation:
You will also be given a short information sheet to share with your child, so that they can understand the research project too, and a child appropriate agreement form for them to sign. Please share these with your child / read these to them, as it is also important that they choose whether to take part and that they understand they can withdraw from the project if they wish to.

Research findings:
Once the thesis arising from this research is completed, a brief summary of the findings will be made available upon request. The findings may also be presented at academic conferences, or in publications. The data will be kept, securely, for a minimum of 7 years from the date of publication. The university will store it for no longer than 25 years. The university's GDPR-compliant protocol permits me as the researcher to store securely and re-use the data in anonymised form.

Further information:
If you wish to ask for more information before you make your decision, please contact me:

Researcher: *Rachel Lehner-Mear* *Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk*
C12 Dearing Building
School of Education
Jubilee Campus
Nottingham
NG8 1BB

Supervisor: *Dr Jane Medwell* *Jane.Medwell@nottingham.ac.uk* Tel: 0115 8466480

If you feel participation in this study has harmed you in any way, or you wish to make a complaint on ethical grounds, please contact the School of Education Ethics Coordinator:

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: *educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk*

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM
(Please sign and return this form at your first interview)

Project title: **Mothers and Primary Homework**

Researcher's name Rachel Lehner-Mear

Supervisor's name Dr Jane Medwell

- I have read the Participant Information Sheet and the nature and purpose of the research project has been explained to me.
- I understand the purpose of the research project and my involvement in it and I agree to take part.
- I understand that I may withdraw from the research project at any stage without any negative outcomes and my data will then be destroyed.
- I understand that while information gained during the study may be published, or used in conference presentations, I will not be identified.
- I understand that I will be audio recorded during two interviews and also video recorded. I understand that my primary child/ren will be videoed and I agree to this. *(Please ensure participating children also understand and agree, using the attached forms).*
- I understand that data will be anonymised and stored for 7 years (according to the University of Nottingham's guidance on data storage) in the University of Nottingham's OneDrive, in password-protected folders. All data will be anonymised and will only be accessible to the researcher and her supervisory and exam teams.
- I understand that I may contact the researcher or supervisor if I require further information about the research, and that I may contact the Research Ethics Coordinator of the School of Education, University of Nottingham, if I wish to make a complaint relating to my involvement in the research.

Signed …… (research participant)

Print name …… **Date** ……

Contact details

Researcher: *Rachel Lehner-Mear* *Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk*

Supervisor: *Dr Jane Medwell* *Jane.Medwell@nottingham.ac.uk* Tel: 0115 8466480

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: *educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk*

Information Sheet for Children:

Mothers and Primary Homework

Hello! On this page, I will tell you a little bit about my project, what I want to do, and what you will be doing in the project if you take part.

My project: I am looking at primary school homework. I want to find out what mums think of primary homework. I also want to see what mums do while their children are doing their homework.

Activities: During the project, I will be interviewing some mums of primary school children to find out their views. I will also be asking these mums to film themselves and their child doing some homework so that I can see what they do too. As your mum might be part of the project, I wonder if you would be happy to be filmed doing your homework? There won't need to be anything different about your homework, or how you do it. You can just do it in your normal way. After you and your mum have been filmed, I will watch the video back with your mum, to ask her some more questions about what she thinks of primary school homework.

Things you need to know



Sometime, when you are doing your homework your mum will film you **both** with a video camera. I won't be there, so you can do what you normally do.



You can ask any **questions** to your mum or send me any questions to my email address (below).



I will keep a copy of the film so I can study it. If I write anything about you, I will give you a **secret name** so that nobody will know who you are.



You can **stop** at any time. You don't have to give a reason and nothing will happen to you as a result.

If you are happy with this and want to take part in the project, have a chat with your mum and write your name on the **Agreement Form.**

Thank you for looking at this letter,

Rachel Lehner-Mear Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk

University of Nottingham
UK | CHINA | MALAYSIA

Child Participant Agreement Form
(PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM)

E·S·R·C ECONOMIC & SOCIAL RESEARCH COUNCIL

Project title **Mothers and Primary Homework**

Researcher Rachel Lehner-Mear
Supervisor Dr Jane Medwell



I have **read** the Information Sheet and understand the research project 'Mothers and Primary Homework' and what I will be doing.



I **agree** to take part in the research project.



I **talked** about the research project with my Mum.



I **understand** that if I don't want to stay in the research project, I can **leave** at any time and I won't get into any trouble.



I understand that there will be a **video camera** used in the research project and that I will be filmed.



If anything is written about me, I will get a **secret name** so that nobody will know who I am.

Print name (child) .....

Signed (child) ..... **Date** .....

Contact details
Researcher: Rachel Lehner-Mear, Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk
Supervisor: Dr Jane Medwell, Jane.Medwell@nottingham.ac.uk Tel: 0115 8466480
School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

ADDITIONAL PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

Project title: **Mothers and Primary Homework**

Researcher's name Rachel Lehner-Mear *Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk*

Supervisor's name Dr Jane Medwell *Jane.Medwell@nottingham.ac.uk* Tel: 0115 8466480

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk

Thank you for your participation in my research project 'Mothers and Primary Homework'. During the process of gathering data and in beginning to analyse the filmed footage which you and other participants have contributed, it seems that a possible finding in this research project will be in *how* mums interact with their children during homework activities, showing that this is characteristically different to interactions children have with other adults during their learning time. This is not just seen in the way mums talk about homework during their interviews, but is most clearly visible in the video extracts of mums and children carrying out homework.

Use of still images in the thesis

Whilst this is something that I will be writing about in my thesis, I would very much like to accompany my analysis of this with some fixed, or 'still' images taken from the video footage. I am therefore seeking additional consent from all my participants for the use of still images within my thesis, taken from their video contributions.

Please note: these stills will only be available in the written thesis at the point it is submitted for examination and will therefore only be seen by my supervisory team and examiners. When my thesis is submitted online with the University of Nottingham, these images will be 'redacted'. This means that they will be removed. This will protect your visual image and identity from being seen by later readers.

Use of still images and video footage in conference presentations

In addition, I am seeking your consent to use the still images and short extracts of footage from your video contributions in presentations and talks that I may make at academic conferences and seminars. These events are likely to be relatively small and to be attended by academics and teachers. No names or personally identifying details will be used alongside the images and extracts. Conference organisers and attendees will be instructed not to share these with anyone outside the event. However it is not possible to guarantee this absolutely.

Partial or full consent

If you are willing to permit me to use images and extracts in this way, please complete and sign the accompanying consent form. Please note: you can give partial or full consent. The first part of the consent form asks for your consent to use still images in the thesis up to the point that it is examined. The second part of the consent form asks for your consent to use still images and extracts of footage in conference presentations. You can give consent to the first section only if you wish; please initial each statement and sign this section. If you are willing to consent to both requests, please ensure that you initial each statement, sign and give your details in both sections.

If you do not wish to consent to these requests, you are free to decline. This will not affect your involvement in the project in any way and you do not need to take any further action.

Further information

If you need more information before making your decision, please contact me:

Researcher: *Rachel Lehner-Mear* *Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk*
Dearing Building
School of Education
Jubilee Campus
Nottingham
NG8 1BB

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM – Additional
(Please sign and return this form)

Project title: **Mothers and Primary Homework**

Researcher's name Rachel Lehner-Mear

Supervisor's name Dr Jane Medwell

Permission to use images in thesis ***(Please initial each box)***

- I have read the Additional Participant Information Sheet and the additional request for the use of **still images** in the thesis has been explained to me. ☐
- I understand the purpose of using **still images** from my video contribution in the thesis. ☐
- I understand that no names will be used alongside the images. ☐
- I agree to **still images** from my video contribution being included in the thesis for examination. I understand that these images will be removed when the thesis is later made available online. ☐

Signed …… (research participant)

Print name …… **Date** ……

Permission to use images and video extracts in presentations and seminars

(Please initial each box)

- I understand the purpose of using **still images and video extracts** in conference presentations and seminars. ☐
- I understand that no names will be used alongside the images or extracts. ☐
- I agree to **still images and extracts** from my video contribution being included in conference presentations and seminars in this way. ☐

Signed …… (research participant)

Print name …… **Date** ……

Contact details

Researcher: *Rachel Lehner-Mear* *Rachel.Lehner-Mear@nottingham.ac.uk*

Supervisor: *Dr Jane Medwell* *Jane.Medwell@nottingham.ac.uk* Tel: 0115 8466480

School of Education Research Ethics Coordinator: *educationresearchethics@nottingham.ac.uk*

APPENDIX F: EXAMPLES OF ANALYSIS (JENNY; RUTH; FIONA; EMBODIMENT)

These examples of various parts of my analysis process are extracts taken from longer documents.

Initial observations made **post-interview**

Jenny Interview 1

Post-interview initial observations / comments / themes

- Childhood – views on this are child-specific e.g. eldest child was a high achiever with minimal effort; not good for her – wanted her to learn that mistakes and failure are ok – needs to 'learn' these things such as frustration and push herself in her childhood. E.g. middle child very creative – much rather she had time to engross herself in that than homework / doesn't see the point in filling in the reading diary when the child reads voraciously. Views about homework are child-centred. → children need to learn to be independent; too much adult help in homework interferes with that / doesn't nurture self-sufficiency. → "I feel strongly [homework] is for them to manage" but this is led by their children being able and not struggling.
- Parenting style: Warm, loving, interested, consistent but also step back to allow independence / responsibility for their choices and resilience / high expectations for household chores. (Doesn't see household as her responsibility). → "short burst of quality time" with children.
- Influences on homework approach: gets involved when interested herself e.g. art projects. Influenced by views on independence (with caveat that if they had learning problems would have different approach). More nudges for middle child with auditory memory problems.
- Personal experience: didn't work for GCSEs, parents didn't encourage this (mother verbalised it was not her responsibility). Despite being high achiever, had a shock when she did badly; an important lesson about internal motivation → influences her approach.
- Homework is "as much my partner's responsibility as mine" (very different from her peers).

Themes and questions identified **during transcription**

Jenny Interview 1

During transcription - thoughts / questions / themes

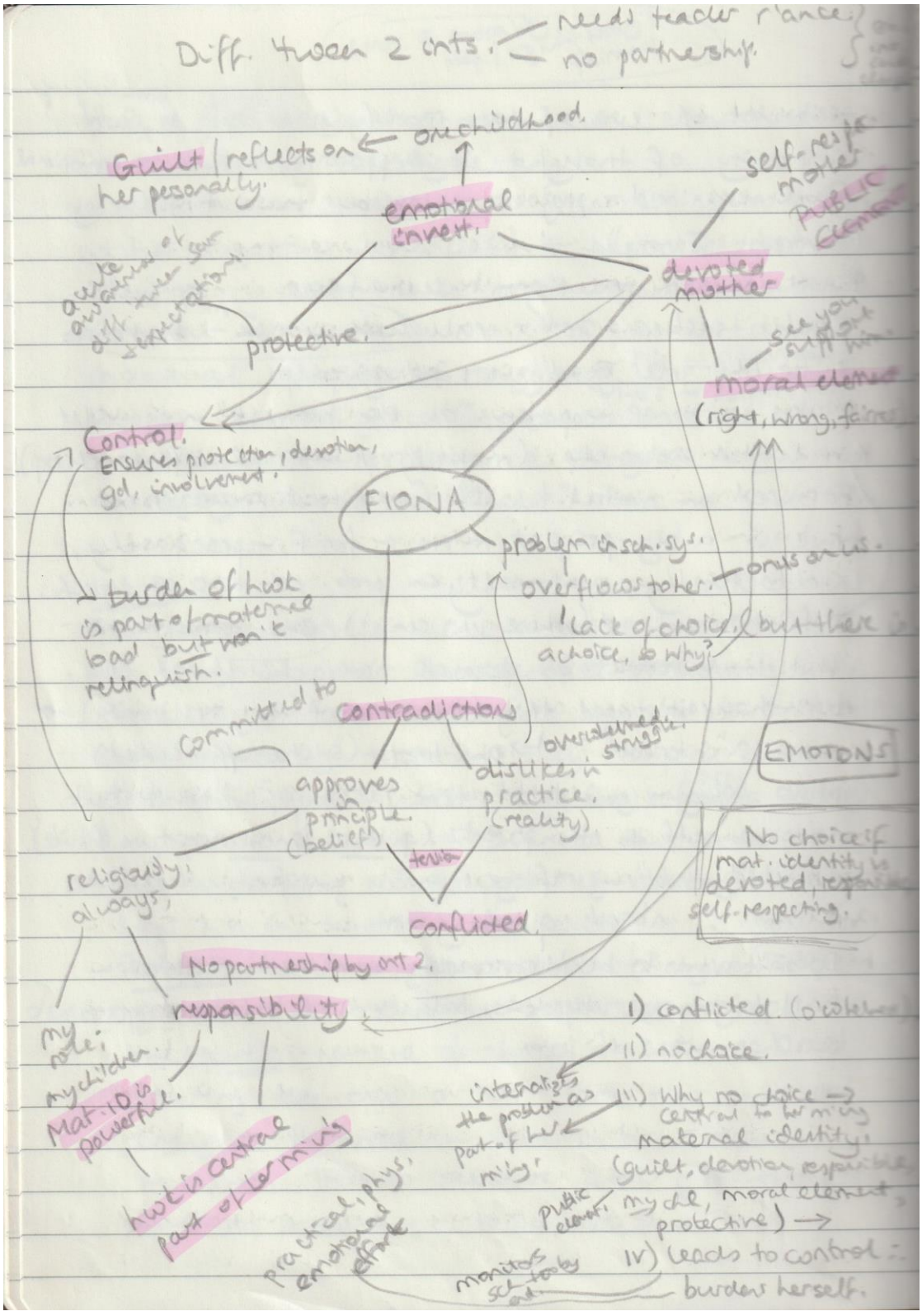
- Homework described as 'a necessary evil'
- If it doesn't meet the child's needs she won't do it → this is an example of maternal autonomy/agency in homework → where does this come from? Does this relate to her views of herself as responsible for her child's learning / that she is in a sense resisting homework's intrusion across the boundary / that she allows it across the boundary, but only on her very direct terms? This is J resisting the boundary cross; she's controlling what she lets through → what is enabling her to take this stance / construct homework in this way, as ultimately controlled by her?
- Claims she would step in if child was finding spelling hard, was crying, was not doing well in tests etc. → what is driving this? Is this the emotive/caring side of mothering, or is this the mother taking on the educator role, or is it her knowledge of the expectations of the wider education system? → Ask her more about what would motivate this.
- Uses laughter a lot. Are J's moments of laughter significant? They seem to relate to when she is talking about lack of maternal involvement – she is outwardly resisting engagement in homework, so does the laughter signify embarrassment or an acknowledgement that this is against maternal norms?
- At times the language used is of 'supporting' e.g. letter formation – this suggests that despite the insistence on not being involved, she is, or at least has been?
- Professional identity feels high in this interview – she references it / her knowledge / her book → is this important to how she then positions homework?

Line-by-line **free association analysis** (Ruth)

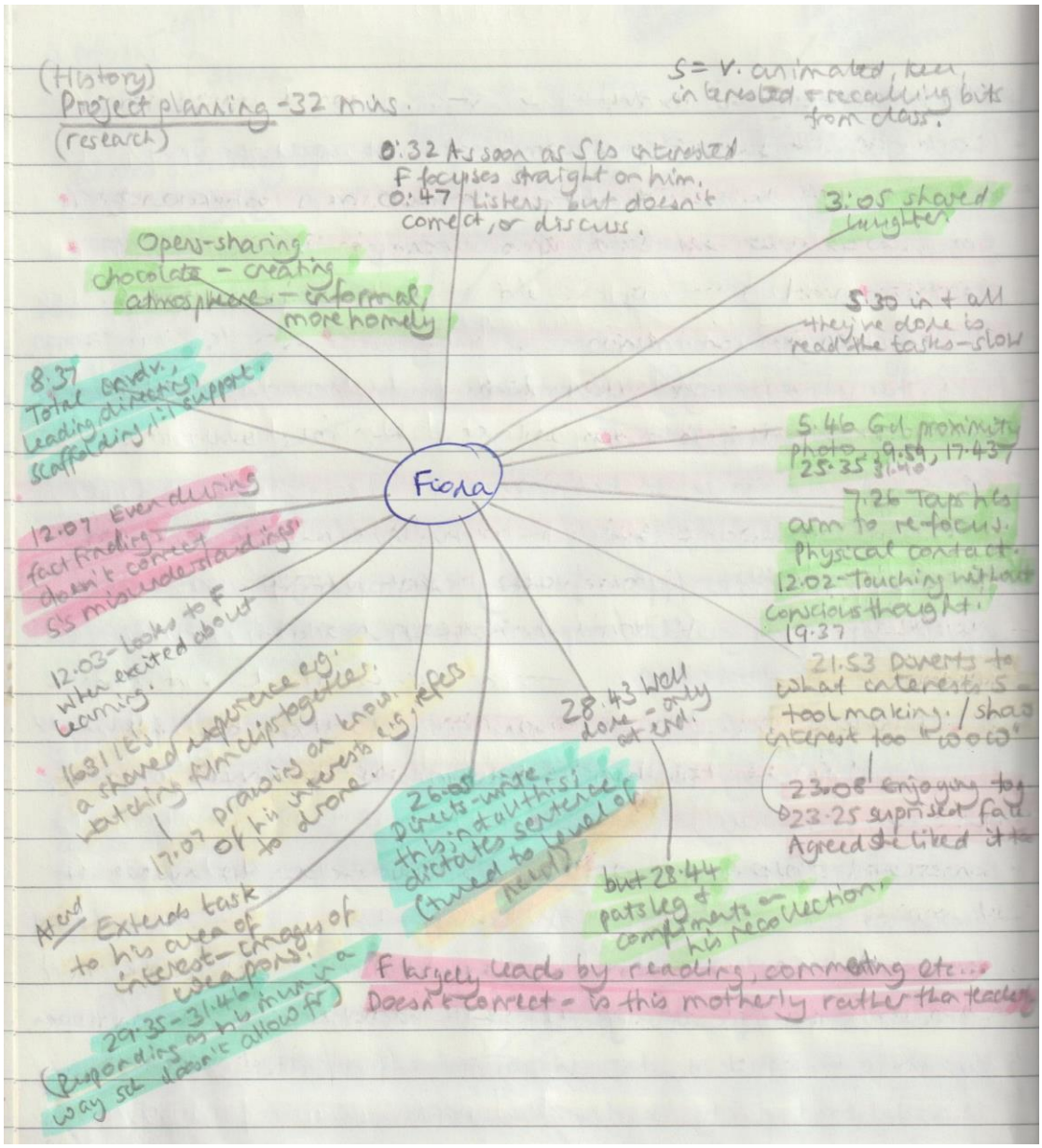
Extract C: *Oh, I feel really bad for her cos I feel like I'm constantly at her in them situations, don't get me wrong it's not all the time, most of the homework goes very smoothly erm but I feel bad cos I know that she will be disappointed if we haven't got, got it done or she's not done it well but I don't want it to knock her confidence either … she did go through a phase where she would start to lack confidence and just doubt herself and I don't want that for her … erm … but me it just makes my blood boil when I can't do something cos I can't physically help her, if I don't know … I know how I've been taught it she's explained how she's taught it but if I can't get it either then we're just not going to win the situation*

I asked Ruth to reflect on a time when homework had been a battleground with her daughter and, here, she unconsciously associates this with what I know about her own experience of doing homework as a child. Elsewhere in her interview Ruth explained that she struggled with homework and often didn't understand it or know what to do, but that she was not given parental support with this, causing difficulties in her learning. This unconscious connection between her own experience of homework and her approach to it now as a mother is revealed by the phrase 'but I don't want it to knock her confidence…' which prefaces her recall of a time when she felt Lois did lose confidence. The unconscious connection is also to the way she feels about her some time inability to help Lois because of her own perceived lack of skill. Ruth did not achieve well at school, nor find school / homework easy and elsewhere she voices that it is very important to her that this does not happen for her daughter. Here we see the effect of her connecting two things: i) her daughter seeming to struggle and ii) her desire for her daughter not to have problems like she did: 'it just makes my blood boil when I can't do something cos I can't physically help her if I don't know'. For Ruth, homework and her role in homework is clearly physical, practical and proactive. She wants to **physically** help and sees this as a way to protect her daughter from the painful experiences of homework which she herself had. This is the good mother as protector, influenced by her own biographical experience.

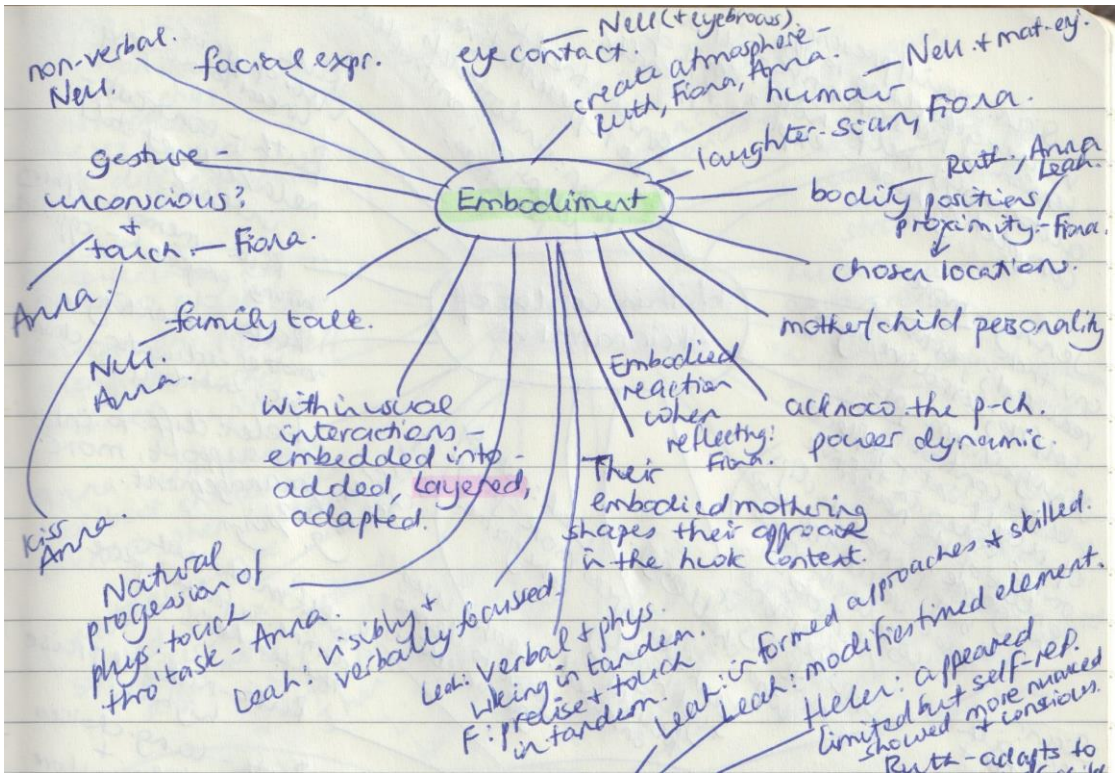
Intratextual analysis from one participant's interviews: themes & connections (Fiona)



Analysis of visual content in video as discrete data, mapped diagrammatically (Fiona)



Intertextual analysis across all participants' videos (theme: embodiment)



APPENDIX G: RESEARCH DISSEMINATION

Conferences (International)

"A Mothers' Role is to Make them Flourish": Mothers resisting, reframing and succumbing to school homework practices. Presented at Beyond Mothering Myths? Motherhood in an Age of Neoliberalism and Individualisation, 9th International Conference on Motherhood of The Australian Motherhood Initiative for Research and Community Involvement, 10th-12th July 2019, University of Sydney, Australia

Mothers "Playing the Game" of Primary School Homework: Maternal identities, protective practices and 'bounding' homework. Presented at About Face: Identities, In/Visibilities, Inequalities and Intersections in Education, The Gender and Education Association International Conference, 25th-27th June 2019, University of Portsmouth, UK

Invited Speaker Seminar

Understanding Mothers' Approaches to Primary School Homework: The push-and-pull of intergenerational homework practices. Given at the Centre for the Study of Practice and Culture in Education, Birmingham City University, UK, 13th October 2021

3-Minute Thesis Competition

Mothers Supporting Primary School Homework. Finalist at the University of Nottingham 3-Minute Thesis competition, 30th June 2021