HE in FE mature students' experiences of labour, learning and lockdowns: a feminist narrative inquiry

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Abstract

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Numbers of mature students are steadily declining across England's HE sector. A significant proportion of mature undergraduates study at further education colleges (HE in FE), the context of this study. This inquiry builds on research which explores the effect of paid work or unpaid care work on mature students' learning but offers a new perspective by considering the interaction of both forms of labour on learning in the home during COVID-19 lockdowns. The study broadens theoretical perspectives on this group by using Gouthro's critical feminist theory of *the homeplace*. The research makes an original contribution by arguing that the key lenses through which we understand mature students' experiences of learning at home are labour and relationships. The thesis extends Gouthro's framework with two new important concepts: *homeplace* security and collective *homeplaces*. The inquiry also addresses a knowledge gap by examining the narrated lives of working men and women in differing family units. Qualitative data were investigated from online life history interviews with 15 HE in FE mature students and a research diary. A multi-layered, feminist framework, *The Listening Guide*, was used to analyse the transcripts and create I-poems. Findings indicate that the gendering of care work and the digital colonisation of the homeplace by paid work affected the students' autonomy as learners. Reclaiming the home as a private sphere enabled them to resist some pressures and persist with study. Individual further education college staff played a major role in supporting students; however, the thesis recommends that colleges recognise unpaid work as a legitimate contributor to HE learning. To enhance social justice and gender equity, a reimagination of work-based learning which develops students' capacity to critique structural inequality at work is needed. The study

recommends that colleges work on new narratives for and about mature students which counter deficit perspectives.

Table of Contents

List of Figures and Tables

Figure 3.1 Conceptualising interrelationships in Gouthro's theory

Table 4.1 The participants

Table 4.2 Listening Guide (LG) readings of participant transcripts

Table 4.3 Labels for the storylines

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List of abbreviations

DSA   Disabled Students' Allowance

FEC   Further Education College

FT   Full-time

HE in FE   Higher Education in Further Education

HEI   Higher Education Institution

HESA   Higher Education Statistics Agency

LG   The Listening Guide

LGBTQI+   Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, intersex

MEd   Master of Education

OfS   Office for Students

PGCE   Postgraduate Certificate in Education

PT   Part-time

RPL   Recognition of Prior Learning

SEND   Special Educational Needs or Disabilities

TA   Teaching assistant

VET   Vocational Education and Training

WBL   Work-based learning

Chapter 1: Introduction

1.1 Rationale for the study

England's population of higher education (HE) mature students is not doing well. The number of mature students starting undergraduate degrees, including Foundation degrees, dropped by 52% between 2010 and 2018 (The Office for Students [OfS], 2020a). This is a cause for concern across the HE sector and for educators committed to social justice. The OfS (ibid) attributes the fall to a dramatic 70% decline in part-time mature entrants over the same period. The part-time undergraduate picture looks bleak: in 2021 there were only 65,690 entrants, which is the lowest number for the last 6 years (OfS, 2023). Mature students make up a large proportion of the part-time cohort, 87.9% (ibid). Butcher (2020) notes 'the oft-reported drop in part-time student numbers can be viewed as a proxy for the retreat of adult learners from higher education' (p. 5).

Understanding this decline in order to improve mature students' access to HE is important for equity. This thesis seeks to understand the complex lives of HE in further education (FE) mature students. All too often research isolates their employment from their commitments at home or it stops 'at the door of the HE institution' (Callender, 2018: 90). This thesis is important because it examines how their learning interacts with both paid labour and care work at home and reveals ways in which providers can offer support to mature students which recognises their contributions, enhances their learning, and ultimately increases their participation.

My interest and commitment to this group of students arises from my professional practice as a lecturer in a further education college (FEC) in England. I taught a range of initial teacher training programmes and Education postgraduate and undergraduate degrees to full-time and part-time mature students. Many of my students struggled to reconcile their course with the care demands of parenting, or looking after elders and

partners. The Higher Education Statistics Agency (HESA, 2023) does not include this as a participation characteristic despite the fact it is clearly an indicator of withdrawal risk. The National Union of Students (NUS, 2009) strongly recommends HEIs collect data on students' parental status as 60% of student parents consider abandoning their course because of the tension they face reconciling study with care, but this recommendation was not adopted by my employer. The FEC's Access and Participation Plan (OfS, 2023) did not consider in detail the risks posed by mature students' support needs to their equality of opportunity. Their care responsibilities were invisibilised to a large extent. I was frustrated by the HE mitigation policy which specifically ruled out the breakdown of childcare arrangements as grounds for an assessment extension. Whilst lecturers were sympathetic when ongoing care work affected our students' studies, we could do little to aid them. The dichotomous view of mature student labour was nowhere better evidenced than in this mitigation policy which valued so-called productive work by allowing extensions for an extraordinary or temporary increase in waged workload, whilst denying the same extenuation for care work. This injustice motivated me to show the value of all forms of work to the learning of mature HE in FE students through their own narratives and voices.

This feminist narrative research explores the experiences of 15 working mature students on full-time and part-time undergraduate degrees at three FECs in northeast England. FECs enrol 14.3% of all HE mature students (OfS, 2021). There is only one HESA (2022) widening participation key performance indicator (KPI) regarding mature students: the percentage of entrants who have no previous HE qualification and come from a low-participation neighbourhood. A focus on locality, such as the HESA KPI, can serve as a proxy for educational disadvantage, but it is oversimplified (Robinson, 2012). It does not account for the widely acknowledged pressures which put mature students at greater risk of non-completion than their younger counterparts (Hubble and Bolton, 2019; OfS, n.d.), namely family responsibility and paid work (Callender, 2018; Mannay and Morgan,

2013; Merrill, 2015; Morgan, 2015). Butcher (2015) urges us to see part-time, mature students as 'disadvantaged' (p.2) because most work full-time and often care for dependants. This perspective also needs to be brought to bear upon full-time students; however, some mature students' work both within and outside the home can also be conceptualised as advantageous to their learning.

1.2 Research aims

The overall aim of this qualitative research is to explore the question:

How did work in the home during lockdowns shape the learning of HE in FE mature students?

This is supported by two subquestions:

1. *How does their learning at home interact with their care work and paid labour?*
2. *To what extent are FECs providing support for HE mature students who labour at home?*

It was not my intention to focus on COVID-19 pandemic experiences but the timing of my data collection, as England was being released from its third national lockdown, meant they were a central part of participants' narratives. This situation influenced my choice of conceptual framework: Patti Gouthro's (2009) critical feminist theory of *the homeplace*. This took on a relevance Gouthro could not have envisaged as she developed her thinking on the interdependence of public and private realms in lifelong learning contexts.

To answer my research questions, I used a qualitative research design. I conducted semi-structured interviews with 15 participants to elicit their educational and working life

histories. The transcripts of these conversations are the main data source, but I also use my research journal as data to examine my role in the co-construction of these narratives.

1.3 The contribution of this thesis

This thesis generates new knowledge in the HE in FE mature student field. Firstly, by employing Gouthro's (2009) learning and *the homeplace* theory, I add a new critical feminist perspective to literature which problematises the nature of vocationalism of HE in FE. Perhaps the most prevalent threads in HE in FE discourses are work-readiness and employability (Avis and Orr, 2016) which are used as student recruitment strategies. 63% of Foundation degrees are taught in English FECs (Association of Colleges [AoC], 2022). These are degrees which 'are intended to equip learners with the skills and knowledge relevant to employment, so satisfying the needs of employees and employers' (The Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education [QAA], 2020: 3), so the FECs' emphasis on waged labour is unsurprising. Shaping the HE in FE offer in response to local employers' demands for particular higher-level skills is logical (Parry et al., 2012). A particular type of technical skills-based learning is therefore valorised which excludes the learning which arises from labour in *the homeplace.* This thesis argues for a reimagination of work-based learning (WBL) which encompasses forms of situated knowledge from unpaid care and unjust workplace relations.

Secondly, the timing of this research during the COVID-19 lockdowns and the inclusion of working mature students who care for elders, pets or live alone in addition to those who care for children, means the thesis adds two new insights and concepts to Gouthro's (2009) original *homeplace* theory. I make a case for the inclusion of the concepts *homeplace* security and informal collective *homeplaces* for understanding diverse mature students' experiences which hitherto have received little attention. Whilst there

is an important existing body of research (e.g. Callender, 2018; Moreau, 2016; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Nikiforidou and Holmes, 2022; Savage, 2023) into the experiences of student parents, who may not be mature or part-time, there are fewer references to the social reproductive labour of students who care for others. Research on mature students often focuses on heterosexual women who are mothers (e.g. Edwards, 1993; Reay, 2003; Webber, 2015) and there is little current research on male perspectives (Gill et al., 2015). My research notes this absence and seeks to include men's stories and those of LGBTQI+ students. I also question the usefulness of Gouthro's inclusion of identity as a lens through which to understand mature students' experiences in the circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdowns. When a person's work takes place in one space, the significance of different identities becomes less relevant than the labour itself which is sometimes dictated by family roles. Therefore the thesis argues relationships and labour are the key lenses through which to understand mature students' *homeplace* experiences and how they relate to learning.

Thirdly, this thesis brings a new methodological contribution to HE in FE literature. In this narrative research, I use The Listening Guide (LG) (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Edwards and Weller, 2012; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011) to analyse data from life history interviews. Whilst other researchers of mature students (Lyndon and Edwards, 2022; McCusker, 2020) have used this feminist method, thematic analysis has undoubtedly dominated in FEC-based qualitative research (e.g. Cree et al., 2009; Fenge, 2011; Robinson, 2012; Welsh, 2020). Edwards and Weller (2012) argue the LG focus on producing poems from qualitative data is not a superior form of interpretation, but it leads researchers and readers into a different relationship with participant stories. This research shows the value of adopting a new method within the field.

1.4 Thesis outline

This thesis has seven chapters. Following this introduction, chapter 2 explores literature on mature students. This falls into three main sections: firstly, dominant conceptualisations of mature students, part-time students and student parents which promote a deficit view; the next section explores how traditional representations of gender structure understandings of mature students; finally, I explore how the promotion of paid work and WBL leads to inequality and exclusion. Chapter 3 presents the critical feminist theoretical framework underpinning this study: Gouthro's (2009) theory of *the homeplace*. Chapter 4 discusses methodology: alongside philosophical considerations and the narrative research design, I discuss sampling, introduce the participants, describe the conduct of the interviews and the LG data analysis method. I also consider research ethics and data presentation. My findings and discussion are synthesised in the next two chapters which answer the research question: how did work in the home shape the learning of HE in FE mature students in lockdowns? Chapter 5 discusses my findings relating to the first subquestion, examining how HE learning intersects with paid work and care work at home during the English lockdowns. Chapter 6 discusses findings in relation to the second subquestion, namely to what extent FECs support mature students who labour at home. Finally, chapter 7 concludes the thesis by summarising its findings, highlighting its contributions to knowledge, the implications for HE in FE and the study's limitations. I suggest possible future research directions and end with a personal reflection.

1.5 A note on terminology

It is important to clarify the terms used to denote the mature students whose experiences are interpreted for this thesis. Researchers in the field argue the terms 'non-traditional' (Callender, 2018: 88), 'mature-age student' (Mallman and Lee, 2016: 685) and 'mature student' (Waller 2006: 115) are not nuanced enough to account for the varying backgrounds of this category of under-represented students. In England, a 'mature

student' is defined as someone who enters HE as an undergraduate aged 21 or over (HESA, n.d.; OfS, 2021). I use this term throughout the thesis despite acknowledging it suggests more homogeneity than exists. It is no simple task, as other researchers have found, to conceptualise the mature student experience because it is so varied (Britton and Baxter, 2001; Busher and James, 2020) and I return to this in chapter 2. The participants in this thesis share four salient characteristics for this study: they are over 25 years of age, they study an undergraduate degree at an FEC, they live at home, and they all work in a paid and/or unpaid capacity.

I also use the term 'lifelong learning' in this work to refer to education which spans further and higher education sectors in the UK. It applies to postcompulsory formal and informal contexts and is not necessarily bound up with qualifications which demonstrate learning has been achieved. Politically, in the late 1990s, the interpretation of this phrase began to shift away from orientations to learning which were humanistic (Faure et al., 1972) and radically transformative (Freire, 1974) to take on an economistic focus (Biesta, 2006: Coffield, 1999; O'Grady, 2013). A new human-capital policy discourse emphasises lifelong learning as skills acquisition, assuming an unproblematic relationship between individual prosperity and vocational achievement (Allatt and Tett, 2022; Butcher, 2020; Leathwood, 2006).

Finally, it is in this educational policy context that the term 'employability' is frequently deployed. This term adopts a human-capital approach to labour and understands meeting the needs of employers in relation to skills and knowledge as a central purpose of both HE and FE (Duckworth and Smith, 2021; Jackson and Burke, 2007; Mallman and Lee, 2016; Merrill et al., 2020; Tight, 2023). This fuses with a meritocratic 'canonical narrative' (Pegg and di Paolo, 2013: 211) which claims that agency on the part of the individual student can surmount existing social inequalities such as social class or gender.

Chapter 2: Literature Review: the HE in FE Mature Student

2.1 Introduction

The purpose of this chapter, in three parts, is to explore relevant research on the experiences and labours of HE mature students which pertains to my own study. In the first section, I examine predominant conceptualisations of the mature student and two intersecting categories: the part-time student and the student parent. In doing so, I establish that a more expansive, heterogeneous definition is needed. The next section explores some of the ways in which mature students' narratives, experiences and motivations are portrayed in gendered ways. I also question how helpful notions of hegemonic masculinity and traditional femininity are. The final section reviews the neoliberal context of lifelong learning policy and its emphasis on employment. The exclusion of certain forms of work from this agenda is considered and how this is likely to affect mature women. I look at the importance of work-based identity and status and how role conflict plays out in the literature before finally making a case for a broad understanding of social support in mature students' lives. Throughout the chapter, I make a case for a critical feminist theoretical approach, a challenge which I take up in chapter 3.

2.2 Conceptualising the mature student

In the following sections, I examine the predominant conceptualisations of the mature student, the part-time student and student parent primarily in qualitative empirical research of the last 25 years and argue why the category 'mature student' needs to be troubled. The setting and samples for recent empirical research with HE mature students have led to a cluster of notions about this group which inform our understandings;

however, I will argue that in many cases these reinforce a deficit view. In discussing what is excluded, I aim for a definition of the term *mature student* which is more expansive.

2.2.1 The mature student

Although English widening participation initiatives and policy highlight the underrepresentation of mature students in HE (OfS, n.d.), the basis for the classification of this group is rarely problematised. The parameters are based on age and level of study (over 21 for an undergraduate student and over 25 for a postgraduate). Quantitative data used by HESA (2022) decontextualise and narrow our understandings of mature HE in FE students. Their participation is presented in a manner which purports to be objective but grouping them according to a dominant characteristic such as their gender, age or socioeconomic status fails to recognise the multiple characteristics they may possess which disadvantage them (Goodchild, 2019). Moreover, as HESA does not collect its own data on HE in FE students in England, but collates them from several sources, these students' 'instances of engagement with the provider' (HESA, n.d.) are likely to be slightly higher than the average HE student's. Data collected by HESA about low participation neighbourhoods (POLAR) (OfS, 2020b) apply to young, full-time applicants. The inadequacy of datasets for full and part-time mature student groups in HE in FE is also noted (Avis and Orr, 2016; Robinson, 2012), so a different approach to the inequality they may experience is demanded. The HESA (2022) quantitative data has a homogenising effect, suppressing the diversity within these groups. In emphasising the differences from a normative, full-time, younger student, there is a danger of turning a pathologising gaze on older students (Askham, 2008; Burke and Lumb, 2018). The preoccupation with key performance indicators for underrepresented groups in HE also obscures the experiential dimension of HE participation (Archer et al., 2003).

Several approaches to research create a deficit view of the mature student. Firstly, how mature students negotiate their positionalities within elite universities (Archer, 2003; Cree et al., 2009; Mallman and Lee, 2014; McCune et al., 2010; Reay, 2002; Reay, 2003; Tett, 2004) is a prevalent focus for the literature. This research is concerned with the way in which institutional cultures 'other' mature students, their feelings of alienation and the barriers they face (Archer, 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). This perspective investigates the deficit model applied to adult students in their chosen HEI; however, one of the issues which bedevils this approach is an unspoken assumption that mature-age students would aspire to high status universities, were it not for 'safety and comfort' (Reay, 2002: 411). The direction of this body of research belies a concern with the hierarchical stratification of HE, but when teaching mature HE in FE students I found that they are often fully aware of and yet indifferent to the higher status of research-led universities. Many of them have studied previously in FECs and like the supportive ethos, so choose to continue there. Some students are intent on gaining the qualification itself but are not concerned by the validating body. Some mature students may indeed lack the cultural capital to make decisions (Fenge, 2011), but this reading denies that HE in FE is a positive choice for many mature students. It is a mistake to assume that they necessarily choose this setting because academic requirements are lower. Many HE in FE students have a strong academic record (Avis and Orr, 2016; Welsh, 2020). By 2015, 55% of mature, part-time entrants to HE already had a degree or higher-level qualification (Callender and Thompson, 2018), so many of these entrants have previously experienced HE.

Another theme of this literature which creates a deficit view is the focus on negative experiences of school that many mature students have had. There is strong evidence for this (Askham, 2008; McCune et al., 2010; Reay, 2002; Reay, 2003), but as an explanatory framework for mature students' lack of confidence in academic settings, the fact that younger students may have similar recent experiences is rarely mentioned.

More empirical work is needed which studies mature students in HE settings, such as FECs, which specifically design courses for their needs (Callender, 2018; Smith, 2017; Smith, 2018; Woolhouse et al., 2009). My research does this.

Other research recognises that HE in FE mature students may not experience the same levels of alienation as those in elite universities, but their greater socioeconomic disadvantage is also frequently emphasised (Avis and Orr, 2016; McVitty and Morris, 2012; OfS, 2020a). Research in the field of mature students often focuses on social class, making use of Bourdieu's theories of habitus and field to examine the role institutions play in changing or reproducing social inequalities (Fenge, 2011; Merrill, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Reay, 2002; Smith, 2018; Tett, 2000; Tett, 2004). Tett's (2004) work is typical in claiming that working-class, older students experience a disjuncture in their habitus when they participate in HE which middle-class, younger students may not feel. Merrill (2015) acknowledges the tension between structure and agency in the theory of habitus and argues that it is universities that need to change their habitus to accommodate older students. It is perhaps inevitable that older students' difficulties with integration will emerge when research conceives of mature students in counterpoint to younger school-leavers (Lee, 2014; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Reay, 2002). Discussing mature students' identities in terms of their social class background is very important, but I think the use of Bourdieu's theory privileges this above other inequalities. This is a problematic feature of Bourdieu's work for some feminists (Hughes and Blaxter, 2007; Lovell, 2004) who argue gender is subordinated to class as a structuring principle. My work here uses a critical feminist framework to shed light on the complex dynamic of structural inequality in the everyday lives of HE in FE mature students.

2.2.2 Part-time HE mature students

It is important to acknowledge mature HE in FE students may also study part-time, a mode of study followed by over a third of my participants. By the nature of their engagement with HE, this group is often harder to engage in research and there is less academic interest in the category. HESA (n.d.) defines the part-time HE in FE student as someone studying fewer than 21 hours per week, or in the evenings. This is a heterogeneous group and often the only commonality is study mode. Although not all part-time HE students in England are mature, in 2018-19 only 6.5% were under 21 years old (HESA, 2020b), so part-time students are often assumed to have the same characteristics as mature students. Therefore the literature on part-time HE study often blurs the term *part-time student* with the term *mature* student (Goodchild, 2019). The larger number of full-time, mature students (HESA, 2020b) and the assumption that mature students prefer this mode of study (Edwards, 1993) may account for the relatively small number of studies of part-time HE, which shrinks further when the setting is FECs.

The vocational demand on part-time students and the extent to which this drives or inhibits engagement with part-time HE is a major focus within my research. Although the economic benefits of part-time HE are explicitly linked to social mobility discourses, this is a narrow conceptualisation of what it means to be a part-time student. Young, part-time students are more likely to be from disadvantaged backgrounds than full-time counterparts based on POLAR data (HESA, 2022) and 80% of part-time students are also in full-time employment which is likely to be low-paid (Callender, 2011). The sharp decline in the number of part-time students in England is often explained by economic modelling but this overlooks the part-time student who studies for personal enjoyment reasons (Callender, 2018; Callender and Thompson, 2018), a motivation which seems to increase with age (Darmody and Fleming, 2009). It is important to take a holistic view of the part-time student and not write off motivation which is unrelated to employability as there is evidence that part-time HE participation can lead working students to think

more critically about their workplace (Esmond, 2015; Lavender, 2020) and the social world in general (Callender, 2018).

As with mature students, the non-study commitments of part-time students are a prominent theme in the literature. Butcher (2015) and Goodchild (2019) contest the notion that part-time HE offers students flexibility because most of them are restricted to one institution based on their location and the timing of sessions. In a study of part-time HE in FE students, Esmond (2015) concludes that their decisions about study are strategic and involve fitting study round their lives; however, paid work and unpaid care work often take precedence over the formal elements of their courses (Butcher, 2015; 2020). Two thirds of part-time students are women (HESA, 2020b), a proportion which has remained static for a decade (Callender, 2011). Although data on the family responsibilities of part-time students are not collected by HESA, the high percentage of mature women in the part-time student population suggests care work is a likely feature in many of their lives.

2.2.3 Student parents

As with part-time students, there is considerable overlap between research on mature students and student parent literature, but the categories are not synonymous. However, as above, it is important to explore the ways in which students who care for others are represented in the field. Family responsibilities feature heavily in research with mature HE students, but the emphasis on the family can have an exclusionary effect on the experiences of some mature students. Not all mature students have care responsibilities, but the literature often foregrounds the experiences of student parents. Partnerships are heterosexual and caring responsibilities are for children (Edwards, 1993; Norton et al., 1998; Webber, 2015), so students in same-sex couples or those who care for elders are excluded in the dominant characterisations of mature students. As

with working-class, mature students, this research often focuses on full-time, undergraduate courses in universities (Brooks, 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). The research which focuses on post-1992 universities and FECs deals with student mothers, excluding male students who care for others (Callender, 2018; Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Smith, 2017; 2018; Woolhouse et al., 2009).

Although the literature on student parents in HE is fairly limited, little to no attention is given to the experiences of mature students who care for their parents and other elders. A substantially higher proportion of women of working age provide such unpaid care compared to men: 24% to 13% (Office for National Statistics [ONS], 2019). As most types of care work are undertaken by women (Bunting, 2020; Lynch, 2022; Moreau, 2016), this way of knowing is also set apart from academic knowledge and serves to marginalise mature, female students' subjective experiences (Edwards, 1993; Lillis, 2001; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009). My research includes mature, male students' experiences as this is noted as a missing perspective (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Gill et al., 2015). I argue that a broader notion of family care is needed, encompassing LGBTQI+ partnerships and elders.

I would like to further question the dominant portrayal of families and children in extant research as part of a 'wider narrative of disadvantage' (Callender, 2018: 91) and restore a more balanced view. For example, partners and dependants are seen to prevent full engagement in university life, to amplify existing financial concerns, to constrain social lives and to be unsupportive (Archer, 2003; Cree et al., 2009; Hutchings, 2003; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). In short, they are 'distractors from education' (Busher and James, 2020: 643) and 'barriers to study' (Tones et al., 2009: 506). Implicitly or explicitly, the research promotes a conceptualisation of mature students who face guilt and constraint because of their families (Burrow et al., 2016;

Webber, 2015). In my view and in my own experience as a mature, part-time HE student who cared for children and now has responsibility for my elderly parents, this misreads the lived experiences of many of these students. Black feminists (Carby, 1982; Davis, 1981) remind us the family is not always experienced as a site of oppression. The dominant conceptualisation of mature students' families underplays their importance as grounding and supportive factors for many older students (Askham, 2008; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Moreau and Kerner, 2012). Whilst the juggling and time-poor metaphors used by many researchers are apt (Burrow et al., 2016; Cree et al., 2009; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; Tones et al., 2009), Lowe and Gayle (2007) develop a more nuanced typology of balance to reflect the diversity of mature HE in FE students' experiences of family life, study and work. Their research acknowledges students are often giving support to family members rather than receiving it, but their approach avoids the trope of the self-sacrificing, heroic mature student which Moreau and Kerner (2012) critique as being a prevalent feature in the media and some university discourses.

2.3 Gender and the mature student

The next section explores the way in which gender features in research on mature students and the way in which traditional notions of gender structure our understandings. A focus on traditional families has often led to the exclusion of LGBTQI+ mature students and older women from the literature.

2.3.1 Gendered narratives

It is claimed that gender is at the heart of the way in which mature male and female students understand their experiences (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Tett, 2000). These studies, like mine, use narrative analysis, arguing that the stories people tell about their pasts are a way of constructing a sense of themselves and imposing meaning on their experiences. Identity formation is guided by discourses of race, class and gender;

however, both Tett (2000) and Britton and Baxter (1999) focus on social class and gender only. Tett (2000) uses Bourdieu's habitus as a lens, whereas Britton and Baxter (1999) use Giddens' and Beck's late modernity theories of the self as a reflexive project. In both cases it is claimed that different narrative scripts are available to men and women. This contrasts with Webber (2015) who argues that what is at stake is women's capability to take up new positions. She conceptualises this using Mezirow's transformation theory but overlooks the role social class and gender play in structural inequality. Researchers' use of this theory seems to lead them to draw wholly positive conclusions about the positive effects of HE on women's families (Callender, 2018; Webber, 2015).

Britton and Baxter (1999) take a more critical approach to the reflexive self theory, which they argue is based on male experiences of individualism. From this, they argue, an apparently gender-neutral model is constructed, but this is inappropriate for mature women whose lived experiences of day-to-day care are 'more consistent with the idea of a self in relation to others' (ibid: 190). I take forward this important claim in my research. Their insight is based on a small sample of 21 participants and the researchers carefully disclaim external generalisability, but their theoretical conclusion has wider significance when it is compared to 'the autonomous individual' (Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003: 599) conceptualisation of an HE student. Both are apparently genderless constructs but ignoring familial gender roles means that by default these are based on masculine models.

Although the decision to study can be triggered by traumatic life transitions for mature adults, for example divorce, unemployment or fleeing war (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Burke, 2007; Gill et al., 2015; Marks et al., 2003; Mojab, 2006), surprisingly little attention is given to a topic which tends to affect women rather than men: HE as a form of recovery following an escape from domestic abuse. Penny Burke (2012) narrates her own

experiences of this, and it also arose in my research (Welsh, 2020). Despite the prevalence of gendered violence, studies which relate it to the student experience tend to explore it as a feature of the university community (Anitha and Lewis, 2018; Phipps, 2020). The absence of this theme in research into the lives of mature students is surprising when one considers that in studies of this group, the samples usually contain twice as many women as men (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Tett, 2000). As an economic shock or an adverse experience often contributes to the decision to study, domestic abuse survival would appear to be a push factor for some mature women, although this is not widely reported.

Literature on mature students' access and entry into HE focuses on identity construction and finds gendered differences. Researchers find that contrasting reasons are given by male and female mature students for not entering HE earlier. Stories of romance, marriage and children are generally absent from male narratives (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Tett, 2000), and whereas women allude to gendered barriers, men cite social class (Tett, 2000). Yet gender does have a social class dimension, for example, female participants talk about escaping 'the dead-end of working-class, married women's jobs' (Britton and Baxter, 1999: 186). I think it is important to recognise that these women, like those in Mannay and Morgan's (2013) and Callender's (2018) research, have low socioeconomic status which is compounded by their gender (Fraser, 2003). Tett (2000) finds male participants are less aware than women of their gender category and its effects. Like being White, to be male is to be in the privileged group, therefore they do not experience their gender as an impediment to HE participation. This underlines the importance of a feminist theoretical approach which considers the impact of the intersection of class and gender on mature students when researching their lives (Archer et al., 2001; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013).

Stories of negative experiences at school are also interpreted as matters of gender (Burke, 2007; Golding, 2011; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Stahl and Loeser, 2018; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013; Tett, 2000). The research focus tends to be upon mature, male students' accounts of their schooling; in particular, experiences of bullying, being bullied and their fraught relationships with authority figures are foregrounded (Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Stahl and Loeser, 2018). These narratives foreground former rebelliousness and 'being on the wrong track' (Britton and Baxter, 1999: 183) as barriers to becoming an HE student. Older women may also have had difficult school experiences, but Reay (2003) interprets this as part of the disregard which working-class girls frequently experience at school. Men's previous unhappy relationships with secondary school seem to be characterised as more actively constructed by them and their behaviour rather than those of women, who are more passively presented and 'positioned as irrelevant within schooling' (ibid: 307).

2.3.2 Gendered representations of feelings

Mature students' feelings are central to their participation in HE as they often pursue studying after an emotional event, such as bereavement or divorce (Baumgartner and Johnson-Bailey, 2011), but the ways in which these are presented in the literature is gendered. For women, there is a focus on repairing previous low self-worth and the confidence-building which occurs as a result of participating in HE (Busher and James, 2020; Edwards, 1993; Fenge, 2011; Webber, 2015). Leathwood (2006) argues that this is an individualised deficit discourse which effectively obscures gendered and classed inequality because 'the confidence they lack is the confidence to fit into white, masculinist, middle-class educational arenas and values' (p. 45). In research dealing with male mature learners, what might be interpreted as low self-esteem in females is reported more dramatically as nihilism, despair and emptiness (Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Stahl and Loeser, 2018). Exclusion from lifelong learning is perceived as

threatening to the mental wellbeing of unskilled, unemployed men (Golding, 2011). A sense of crisis around adult, male students' emotional health is hard to avoid, but is more understated in research with mature women students.

Families provoke other sets of emotions for mature students based on gendered family roles. These too are presented somewhat differently. Feelings of selfishness and guilt about neglecting their families' needs are part of a gendered construct of female self-denial which applies to student mothers (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Edwards, 1993; Tett, 2000). How men's families and relationships impact on their feelings about their HE study is less well understood as it is not often researched (Gill et al., 2015). Nonetheless, both mothers and fathers describe a positive impact on their children's education as a result of their HE study. This may be because they are perceived as a role model or because they are better able to help children with homework (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Callender, 2018; Stahl and Loeser, 2018; Webber, 2015).

There is no doubt that for many HE mature students, increasing earning power is a primary motivator, but despite Tett's (2000) claim, this instrumental orientation is not simply a male script. Women are as keen as men to use HE qualifications to escape the long hours and low pay of precarious jobs (Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Smith, 2018; Welsh, 2020). Gaining respectability as a middle-class graduate, increasing one's earnings, and improving one's family status are common goals for both male and female mature students (Burke, 2007; Busher and James, 2020; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). However, the notion of breadwinning is absent from research on working-class student women, whereas studies that deal with working-class student men often draw on this model, slotting men and women's experiences into narratives about the provider/ nurturer role (Marks et al., 2003).

This seems to be part of a crisis in masculinity discourse, in which working-class men find studying self-indulgent or incompatible with the need to earn a living (Archer, 2006; Archer et al., 2001; Britton and Baxter, 1999; Golding, 2011; Marks et al., 2003; Stahl and Loeser, 2018). The presentation of the risk of HE participation for working-class men is often presented in financial terms by the participants (Archer et al., 2001), but these risks may be exaggerated in the literature. Zero-hours contracts, manual labour and self-employment are financially much riskier than the potential professional jobs which vocational HE gives participants access to. Deo, a 42-year-old Australian tradesman featured in a case study by Stahl and Loeser (2018), recognises this. His working-class male identity is characterised by 'heteronormative ideals of masculinity marked by notions of strength, power, control, able-bodiedness and a stable breadwinner status' (ibid: 610) which he realises must be relinquished in order to construct a new, acceptable student identity.

2.3.3 Heteronormativity

The focus on mature students' struggles with hegemonic forms of masculinity and femininity has also, thus far, excluded mature, LGBTQI+ students in HE in FE about whom there appears to be little or no research. Heteronormativity and laddishness are explored in other HE student research, but the approach often contrasts youth and maturity. Jackson and Dempster (2015) find mature students are intolerant of younger undergraduates' disruptive behaviour, which is characterised as immature and laddish. A gender-performative perspective, influenced by Judith Butler, informs this and other feminist studies which explore masculinity and HE (Archer et al., 2001; Burke, 2007). However, these studies find different attitudes prevail in younger and older students; what are missing are the perspectives of those in groups which are predominantly composed of mature students.

Heteronormativity can certainly prevail in mature student groups. The phenomenon is not acknowledged in extant research, but my teaching experience has demonstrated to me how such norms can effectively silence LGBTQI+ mature students in FEC settings. Britton and Baxter (1999) problematise hegemonic masculinity and its conflict with HE but question the existence of a hegemonic femininity. However, an important study by Mannay and Morgan (2013) effectively demonstrates the way in which normative notions of being a woman in a working-class community in Wales clash with HE participation because large amounts of time must be seen to be spent on domestic work and child care. Gill et al. (2015) raise the question: does becoming a mature student threaten traditional (male) gender roles? But I question whether this should be the true aim of work in this field. The question, in my view, is which types of work are afforded most value in society: those coded male, or those coded female? A critical feminist theory gives us this perspective in research on male and female mature students' lives.

2.3.4 Invisible older women students

The social construction of the university student serves to exclude a conceptualisation of an older female learner. Researchers working in the lifelong learning field claim the idealised HE student upon which policy is based is young, White, middle-class, and masculine (Brooks, 2012; Edwards, 1993; Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003). Although widening participation initiatives seek to expand HE access to groups who have traditionally not engaged in lifelong learning, inequality is not simply eradicated by the inclusion of older, non-White, working-class female students.

A group of women about whom there is only a sparse literature is older learners (Etienne and Jackson, 2011; Kamler, 2006; Percy and Frank, 2011). Care responsibilities for elders, the menopause or bereavement can have a tremendous emotional impact on older mature female students and, in my experience, negatively affect their HE

engagement. The absence of these themes in the literature could be because participants are reluctant to speak about them or because they do not align with the agendas of researchers who are often more interested in the lives of younger learners (Kamler, 2006). The absence may relate to a lack of interest in the learning of women who are near the end of their economically productive lives, because it does not fit with an HE/lifelong learning agenda of skills for employability.

2.4 The primacy of paid work in HE in FE

The final section of the literature review chapter examines the role of paid work in the promotion of HE in FE to mature students and how important work-based identities are to this group. However, I also problematise the gendered inequality inherent in the sector of work-based learning and finally consider social support.

2.4.1 Lifelong learning as employability

Mature students are at the heart of United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation's (UNESCO) vision of lifelong learning for 2050:

> *Promoting learning among older people requires a pedagogical approach that acknowledges their role in society and contributes to a more positive representation of ageing. This implies seeing education as more than an economic transaction and acknowledging its public and private value.* (UNESCO Institute for Lifelong Learning, 2020: 8)

Yet although UNESCO discourse has emphasised a holistic view of lifelong learning encompassing its social, economic and community benefits since *Learning to Be* (Faure et al., 1972), the concomitant formalisation of policy has led to an almost exclusive focus on its economic goals (Coffield, 1999; Biesta, 2006; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Callender and Little, 2015; McManus, 2011; O'Grady, 2013). An explicit aim of the UNESCO (2020)

report is to help individuals reach their potential, but in many international contexts this is narrowly construed in terms of learners' future employment and productivity (Blackmore, 2006; Darmody and Fleming, 2009; Merrill et al., 2020; Mojab, 2006). This restricted perception excludes the notion of students' unpaid work and the learning gained from it.

English FECs, like American community colleges, are strongly oriented towards workforce development (Further Education Trust for Leadership [FETL], 2017; Gadsby and Smith, 2023; Gleeson et al., 2015). The latest FE White Paper, *Skills for Jobs,* is unequivocal: 'the new core purpose of further education is to give people the technical skills they need to get good jobs and boost the UK's productivity' (Department for Education, 2021: 9). Foundation degrees offer a good insight into how employability underscores HE in FE provision. These English and Welsh qualifications, which are the equivalent of two thirds of a Bachelors degree, were launched in 2001. They are discursively placed in 'the demand-led skills agenda of local labour markets' (Burke and Jackson, 2007: 169) and are created in partnership with employers whose needs are foregrounded in policy documents (QAA, 2020). The emphasis on employer collaboration and WBL has led to employability taking on almost hegemonic status in HE in FE. In this context, the emancipatory role of HE is at risk of being subordinated to the dominant voice of the economic sector, with an insistence that individuals should take responsibility for their own self-improvement (Biesta, 2006; Darmody and Fleming, 2009; Lister, 2003; Robinson, 2012). There is an assumption that individual learners will necessarily accrue personal and career benefits as a result of their study, with little attention given to the role of structural disadvantage and its role (Merrill et al., 2020).

Vocational HE in FE follows the gendered order which characterises vocational work (Blackmore, 2006; Niemeyer and Colley, 2015; Skeggs, 1997). 71% of Postgraduate Certificates in Education and 66% of Foundation degrees were awarded to women in

2018/19 (HESA, 2020b). These qualifications form a large part of the HE in FE offer. Avis and Orr (2016) highlight the attention to feminisation in HE in FE research, which is particularly marked in the fields of teacher education and early years Foundation degrees. Gendered vocational norms are not challenged or overturned by studying HE in these settings. Researchers working in the field of mature women and Foundation degrees find graduation does not guarantee job or salary enhancement (Fenge, 2011; Lavender, 2020; Smith, 2018; Woolhouse et al., 2009). Avis and Orr (2016) rightly point out that the vocational focus of these qualifications can co-exist with a more expansive conceptualisation of occupations which play a civic and democratic role. I agree that it is important not to lose sight of this, as mature students themselves frequently recognise the transformative possibilities of HE in FE study (Lavender, 2020; Robinson, 2012; Welsh, 2020).

In lifelong learning discourses, the mature student is predominantly conceptualised as an enterprising, confident manager of their learning journey whose goal is becoming more productive. The learner journey metaphor is ubiquitous in FECs with its connotations of linearity, growth and choice, yet mature students' HE pathways are rarely straightforward (Blackmore, 2006; McCune et al., 2010). The metaphor overlooks the impact of structural barriers to HE learning such as gender, race and social class (Burke and Jackson, 2007). Moreover, the newly skilled, mobile worker identity which is positioned as the destination point is not available to those learners whose families, homes and work keep them rooted to particular places and whose self-efficacy depends on the feelings of security provided by them. Research often assumes that this is a restriction which affects women mature students rather than men, but this may be because the samples are exclusively female or because the research is out of date (Edwards, 1993; Gill et al., 2015; Reay, 2003). The influence of feminist post-structural theory can be seen in much of this research, which assumes the spheres of private and public lives in HE can be separated more easily for men than women (Archer, 2006;

Brooks, 2012; Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003). This may be the case, but my research attempts to avoid using cultural binaries to explore the role and importance of paid and care work in the lives of both male and female students. This inquiry requires a critical feminist theoretical approach which asks why lifelong learning policy privileges the economy and downplays unpaid care.

2.4.2 Gendered course choices and the problem with RPL

Mature students often study for vocational Foundation degrees in FECs. 65% of Foundation degree enrolments are women (HESA, 2020b) and their subject choices are consistent with occupations which are coded female: health and social care, childcare, beauty therapy and education courses. The notion of subject choice is contested by feminist researchers, as women's educational decision-making is frequently compromised by family care responsibilities (Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). In addition, individualised discussions of aspiration and choice which characterise widening participation discourses (Burke and Lumb, 2018) obscure the way gender operates as an organising principle in vocational work (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015; Skeggs, 1997), and therefore underpins vocational HE subject choices (Smith, 2017; Woolhouse et al., 2009). For example, women are much less likely than men to enrol on undergraduate construction and engineering degrees (HESA, n.d.). Webber's (2015) claim that 'women were no longer constrained by gender in terms of educational choices' (p. 233) when her female participants were studying an Early Years Foundation degree seems naive. Skilled 'pink collar' work has a lower status and is paid less than trades associated with men (Low Pay Commission, 2019; Niemeyer and Colley, 2015; Skeggs, 1997). These are not matters of mature women's personal attitudes despite the focus on raising aspiration evident in widening participation initiatives. This discourse directs public attention away from discussion of structural inequality based on gender, social class and race, and onto individual dispositions (Burke, 2012; Burke and Lumb, 2018).

Although feminist researchers argue that the neoliberal turn in HE means that informal learning is devalued at the expense of that gained in the paid economy, there are HE mechanisms which recognise informal, work-based learning. Some UK HEIs have formal processes which accredit students' prior experiential learning, which is variously known as the Accreditation of Prior Learning (APL), the Accreditation of Prior Experience and Learning (APEL) or the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL).

When considering RPL, which is primarily centred on WBL, it is essential to acknowledge that mature students' vocational lives are frequently gendered (Burke, 2011; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Skeggs, 1997; Stevenson and Clegg, 2013). Many women work in precarious jobs which are not recognised as skilled, such as elder care, because these fit with their family responsibilities (Mannay and Morgan, 2013). If this work is viewed as unskilled or they have spent time working as unpaid family carers, mature women have fewer WBL opportunities to put forward for RPL. When subject choices and caring responsibilities are taken into account, this can be read as discriminatory to women. Yet extant research tends not to theorise inequality from a gender perspective, and the focus is on participants who claim RPL rather than those whose experiences are ineligible (Brown, 2017; Hamer, 2012; Hamer, 2013; Houlbrook, 2012). In my experience as an RPL supporter, student applications are time-consuming and technical. Time is a resource which many mature student mothers in particular have in short supply (Brooks, 2012; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Reay, 2003), so they can be resistant to committing to RPL processes as there is no guarantee of success. As Houlbrook (2012) argues, RPL can operate as a technology which reproduces rather than challenges inequality. A process designed to allow mature students to articulate and reflect on informal learning delimits its definition in a way which disadvantages and marginalises mature women students. Learning is thus socially constructed in such a way that particular types of knowledge and experience which are gendered are discounted. From this perspective, the value of learning from feminised vocational

sectors, unpaid care work and informal contexts is subtly denied (Brooks, 2012; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Lillis, 2001; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009). These are likely to be the experiential learning contexts of many mature women entering and participating in HE.

Many women bring with them relevant experiences of paid and voluntary work which they believe are valid for discussion in seminar contexts: community activism (Mojab, 2006; Tett, 2000), health and social care (Edwards, 1993; Fenge, 2011), childcare (Smith, 2017; Smith, 2018; Wright, 2011) and education (Woolhouse et al., 2009). And yet, although their private experiences of parenting may also be appropriate, many student parents believe they are not suitable for HE learning (Edwards, 1993; Lillis, 2001; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Moreau, 2016). This is an issue which disproportionately affects women as they are the majority of student parents (Brooks, 2012; National Union of Students, 2009).

2.4.3 Mature students' attitudes to paid work

Neoliberal ideology's repurposing of HE as a means of restoring national competitiveness (Archer, 2003; Burke, 2012) can be seen in the way in which HE is cast as part of the effort to grow the UK's knowledge economy (Callender, 2011; Callender and Little, 2015; Callender and Thompson, 2018; Jackson, 2012). The emphasis on mature students taking personal responsibility for upskilling and employability is noted by researchers in the field (Biesta, 2006; Callender and Little, 2015; Darmody and Fleming, 2009; Esmond, 2015). HEI recruitment literature frequently emphasises the private rewards a graduate may expect, without any acknowledgement that structural inequalities are likely to see these very returns differentiated by class, age and gender (Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Merrill et al., 2020).

As employment is afforded an important role in the lifelong learning sector, mature students' attitudes to their paid work are an important strand in research in this area. Lowe and Gayle (2007) find that 61% of their HE in FE part-time sample rated their job as more important than their college work. Esmond (2015) also considers this theme for part-time HE in FE adults, acknowledging that new student identities have to be combined with those which are acceptable in work organisations. He finds that his participants 'other' full-time, younger students and strongly emphasise their own working identities. This stigmatisation is something I return to in chapter 5.

Some mature students have had educational experiences which have harmed their self-esteem (Askham, 2008; Waller, 2006), but have had very positive experiences of paid work. When the mature student strongly identifies with their job role, emotional barriers to learning can be difficult to overcome (McManus, 2011). In my experience, anxiety about the new role as a learner can occasionally lead to defensiveness, but it is also important not to overstate such negative feelings which may be expressed by mature students who nonetheless complete their studies (Askham, 2008; Clegg et al., 2006). It is vital for FECs to develop more nuanced understandings of students' relationships to their work because the relationship between learning and employment is not as seamless as lifelong learning policy assumes.

Notwithstanding the COVID-19 social and economic crisis, many HE mature students do achieve their HE degrees, which they perceive as having a very positive impact on their paid working lives. UK policy emphasises adult learning as a means to gaining better jobs with enhanced earnings, particularly for low-paid workers (Department for Business, 2017; Department for Education, 2021). This meritocratic discourse has the status of a 'canonical narrative' (Pegg and Di Paolo, 2013: 212) in the UK, but it is seriously challenged by research which finds HE mature students' finances are often not improved upon graduation (Callender and Little, 2015; Callender and Thompson, 2018;

Smith, 2018; Merrill et al., 2020; Woolhouse et al., 2009). Nonetheless, some mature students do gain better paid jobs and escape employment precarity (Esmond, 2015; Welsh, 2020). The non-financial gains range from a more informed perspective on practice to a much deeper, critical understanding of work informed by theory, leading to feelings of greater confidence and expertise (Askham, 2008; Callender and Little, 2015; Esmond, 2015; McManus, 2011). When the HE study is directly related to the workplace, Darmody and Fleming (2009) find completion and success are more likely. These are gains which are resistant to the performative culture which dominates FECs, as they cannot be easily rendered as quantitative outputs (Smith and O'Leary, 2013).

2.4.4 Role conflict or 'juggling'

For a variety of reasons, there are occasions when the combination of paid work and HE study becomes difficult to sustain and even untenable for some mature students. It is entirely understandable that students must prioritise their waged work when urgent employer demands clash with study (McManus, 2011; Pegg and Di Paolo, 2013).

When work and study become incompatible, HE in FE mature students sometimes make the decision to suspend studies or fully withdraw from their programme. The cost can be high if the employer has funded the degree and demands repayment. But the demand from the same employer to achieve an HE qualification in order to professionalise the workforce will not necessarily abate. This tension can cause great strain for the individuals who continue because they understand a degree may offer protection against employment insecurity (Esmond, 2015). This is particularly acute for part-time employees on casual contracts who have little power to resist employer demands (Smith and O'Leary, 2013). Employment precarity is more likely to affect women with care responsibilities, but there are little data on this workforce (Gleeson et al., 2015).

The psychological costs of withdrawal whilst working can also be high, as it can be interpreted as an individualised failure; however, Merrill (2015) makes an interesting feminist contribution to the HE in FE field by challenging this deficit perspective. One of her participants, Angela, who is in paid work, chooses not to complete her degree:

Withdrawal was not viewed as a negative process and this was a view expressed by other interviewees. She was determined to leave… In quitting her degree Angela was beginning another new biographical transition. (p. 1868)

Merrill is not arguing that non-completion is always a positive step, rather that it is important to recognise such decisions can be agentive. I would go further and argue that what is needed is a move away from individualised discourses to a more critical recognition of the UK's work culture and the impact this has on mature students. Excessively long hours are normalised and often expected (Lowe and Gayle, 2007). The juggling and balancing metaphors which abound in literature on this group, (e.g. Burrow et al., 2016; Cree et al., 2009; Darmody and Fleming, 2009) are problematic as they implicitly accept the premise that individuals are responsible for the careful management of paid work, unpaid care work and study. Yet at times of crisis, individuals cannot necessarily balance work in three domains (Pegg and Di Paolo, 2013), and although the problems may be particular and specific, the cause is systemic. The individualisation discourse upholds a deficit view, preventing a critical examination of society where the assumption is accepted that flexibility and skilful management will resolve conflicting expectations around paid work, unpaid care and study. Researchers note that this is an expectation which applies to women in academia rather than men (Lister, 2003; Utoft, 2020). HE vocational programmes which attract large numbers of mature female students are sometimes flexibly timetabled around potential care work responsibilities, for example they are scheduled within school hours. Whilst this recognises the reality that most care is carried out by women, it also runs the risk of cementing the notion that

care is women's work (Lister, 2003). HE cultures which take account of mature students' complex working lives play a large role in enabling employed students to succeed (Askham, 2008; Merrill, 2015; Tett, 2004).

Well before the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic, Blackmore (2006) argued that lifelong learning assumed a fluidity and flexibility between work, home, and education as work intensification took hold in OECD countries in the 21st century. 'Boundarylessness' (ibid: 22) intensified in lockdowns. International evidence is emerging that the pandemic rapidly rolled back gains in women's equality as women were disproportionately affected by job losses and income reduction (International Labour Organization, 2020). The demand for unpaid care fell more heavily on women than men (Nash and Churchill, 2020; Utoft, 2020) and gender-based violence in locked-down homes increased (Council of Europe, 2020; United Nations, 2020). Whilst the category of woman is not synonymous with mother or heterosexual partner and experiences should not be universalised (hooks, 1982), lockdowns reinforced and exacerbated gendered inequality.

2.4.5 Social support

The social support mature students receive is seen as a crucial enabling factor in research. This may come from their families and partners, but it can also come from their fellow HE students. Peers can play a key role in building mature students' resilience (Servant-Miklos et al., 2020). Such networks are often informally constructed by students themselves (Heagney and Benson, 2017; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Tones et al., 2009) and many informal online reading and writing groups were created to combat social isolation during the COVID-19 lockdowns. I also participated in them as a mature student. As the ethos of HE in FE favours mentoring schemes and group work, FECs

can also create supportive peer networks for mature students through their distinctive pedagogies (Avis and Orr, 2016; Cree et al., 2009).

The extent to which mature students use support services has also been researched (Clegg et al., 2006; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Merrill, 2015). Goodchild (2019) notes that institutions often exaggerate the extent to which formalised support services help mature students. At the very least, it should be noted that such services often close at 5pm when working students are available (Butcher, 2020). In fact, mature students are often reluctant to seek help from what may be perceived as an alien HE culture (Askham, 2008). They are most likely to stitch together their own informal support networks from peers, family members, friends and sympathetic academic staff (Clegg et al., 2006; Goodchild, 2019; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Merrill, 2015; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Tett, 2004). Many of these studies find that mature students are reluctant to use mechanisms designed to support them because they feel that difficulties are a normal part of life, and they take responsibility for dealing with them themselves. Yet the conclusions drawn by the researchers differ: in a Danish study, Servant-Miklos et al. (2020) conclude that more needs to be done to identify at-risk mature students and to raise their awareness of existing institutional support systems, whereas Clegg et al. (2006) argue that therapeutic understandings of the concept of support are inappropriate. This aligns with my own experience of some teaching mature students who regard such help-seeking as illegitimate or time-consuming. Mannay and Morgan (2013) argue that institutional policies on mitigating circumstances need to consider the complexity of mature students' lives. This must include affording equal value to both their paid and unpaid work.

It is important to challenge HE cultures which do not value as legitimate the knowledges that mature students bring to HE (Tett, 2004). Pedagogy in HE in FE is well adapted to work-based learning, but Avis and Orr (2016) urge college practitioners 'to produce

course and curricula that value situated knowledge, the 'not yet thought'' (p. 61). For me, the 'not yet thought' means connecting the situated knowledge of mature students which they learn outside paid work contexts, (i.e. their unpaid work) to the curriculum. The emancipatory potential of HE in FE is not realised if discourses which privilege paid work continue to dominate. A feminist approach which recognises that such an understanding of work is narrow and exclusionary is fundamental to my research.

2.5 Conclusion

In summary, I have argued for a more expansive definition of the mature student category for my research which explores their narratives without reinforcing a deficit view. My focus on HE in FE counters the tendency in the literature to emphasise the barriers or alienation this group may experience in traditional research-intensive university settings (Archer, 2003; Leathwood and O'Connell, 2003; Mallman and Lee, 2014; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). This thesis builds on previous work which explores the impact of family life and unpaid care on mature students' degrees; however, the focus on heterosexual mothers can inadvertently reinforce heteronormativity and perpetuate the invisibility of older women in this research field (Callender, 2018; Penketh and Goddard, 2008; Smith, 2017; Smith, 2018; Webber, 2015; Woolhouse et al., 2009). Whilst acknowledging that unpaid care can be burdensome, I am mindful not to present family life as part of a 'wider narrative of disadvantage' (Callendar, 2018: 91) and explore what advantages it can bring to HE learning. Families and care responsibilities encompass children, partners, elders and pets. Mature students may have multiple commitments, and studying may perhaps be subordinate to their family roles and/or work identities (Butcher, 2020; Esmond, 2015).

As much of this literature in this field uses Bourdieusian (e.g. Fenge, 2011; Merrill, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Reay, 2003; Smith, 2018), or modernist theories (Britton and Baxter,

1999) to make sense of mature students' orientations to study and work, I bring a different critical feminist theoretical approach. This new perspective problematises the prevalent 'juggling' metaphor in lifelong learning research with its roots in neoliberal notions of individualisation and personal responsibility. Critical feminist theory synthesises both paid work and unpaid care as productive labour, understanding women's lower socioeconomic status as a matter of gender (Fraser, 2003). My work adds to the field which explores the extent to which vocational demands drive or inhibit mature students' HE engagement (Askham, 2008; Esmond, 2015; Lowe and Gayle, 2007); however, it is necessary to explore and theorise the meaning and potential for learning of both paid and unpaid work undertaken by mature students. Gendered scripts about work are certainly used by mature students themselves to make sense of lived experiences (Britton and Baxter, 1999; Marks et al., 2003; Tett, 2000), but as this research is somewhat dated, I think it is time to reconsider the role gendered narratives may play in HE learning.

Institutional, familial and peer support have all been found to be of varied assistance to mature students, and there is certainly no unanimity about what works best. The issue became particularly pertinent in COVID-19 lockdowns when HE students faced a unique set of potentially challenging circumstances which research based in university settings acknowledges (McGivern and Shepherd, 2022; Savage, 2023). However, my research explores to what extent HE in FE provided support for mature students at that time and what lessons can be learned from this in the present as working from home has become normalised.

The discussion above informs my decision to use a critical feminist theory, which I turn to next. In chapter 3, I examine the work of critical feminist Patti Gouthro who proposes a theory of *homeplace* learning which challenges the dominance of neoliberal values in lifelong learning.

Chapter 3: The homeplace: a critical feminist theory

3.1 Introduction

In chapter 2, I argued for a research approach to mature students which is sensitive to gender, care work and paid work. Before the duration of COVID-19 restrictions was apparent, I intended to use feminist social reproduction theory to shed light on why mature HE in FE students are expected to do so much work; however, as continuing lockdowns placed a new emphasis on the home as a site for work and learning for mature students, I sought an alternative feminist theoretical framework which questioned the meaning of the home in lifelong learning contexts.

The home became the site of mature students' formal HE learning in March 2020 and for many it became the site of their paid work and ongoing care responsibilities (see appendix 1). Care work increased considerably for many people as disabled and elderly relatives were required to shield at home (Public Health England, 2021). Many mature students also supported children and young people's formal learning at home either when school and college premises were closed to most students, or when students were required to self-isolate. Worldwide, the impact of these changes fell disproportionately on women, who already shouldered most of the burden for unpaid care (Council of Europe, 2020; International Labour Organization, 2020; Kallitsoglu and Topalli, 2021; Power, 2020; United Nations, 2020).

With this in mind, a feminist theory of the home seemed more suitable to my inquiry to investigate its meaning as a site for learning, care and work. Critical feminist Patti Gouthro (2004; 2005; 2009) developed such a theory of *the homeplace,* drawing on Habermasian concepts of the system and lifeworld, whilst taking into account Nancy Fraser's (2020c) critique of critical theory's androcentric bias. Gouthro's theory troubles the dominance of neoliberal *marketplace values* in adult education and argues that *the*

homeplace should carry equal importance and weight in lifelong learning discourse and practice. Her theory elaborates on feminist arguments about who determines the boundaries of the public and private spheres and who is disadvantaged by this artificial division (Davis, 1981; Fraser, 2017; Fraser, 2020b; Weeks, 2011). It is a normative theory which advocates social justice for mature students. Across her writing, Gouthro does not espouse a particular learning theory but locates her critique of the prevalent neoliberal framework in lifelong learning within the critical emancipatory tradition. Key themes emerge in her work about the need for types of pedagogy and support which question dominant values and recentre *the homeplace* as a significant site for learning.

Gouthro's theoretical focus on life and learning experienced in *the homeplace* is appropriate for my thesis which seeks to understand how gender affects the experiences of mature students. My research values the narratives of marginalised students, an approach which is congruent with Gouthro's work (Grace et al., 2003). As the previous sections demonstrate, research literature on mature students tends to theorise their experiences using the theory of Bourdieu (Fenge, 2011; Merrill, 2015; Morgan, 2015; Reay, 2003; Smith, 2018; Tett, 2004), Mezirow (Webber, 2015), Wenger (Mallman and Lee, 2014; McCune et al., 2010) or Giddens and Beck (Britton and Baxter, 1999). Yet, I argue, a distinctive contribution to the field of research on mature students in HE in FE contexts can be made if critical feminist theory is deployed, because such a perspective is able to develop a discourse of challenge by asking what really matters in lifelong learning, and what matters to those who engage in it. Gouthro's theory, which concerns adult women learners and academics, has been taken up by one Education researcher who explored the invisibility of mature women who cared for children with learning disabilities in the UK (King, 2020); however, I make an original theoretical contribution to the field by exploring the significance of *the homeplace* learning for working mature male and women students who identify as heterosexual and LGBTQI+.

Before I discuss Gouthro's theory in detail, I will outline this chapter's structure. First, I review the problems inherent in dominant conceptualisations of the private and public spheres, which serve neoliberal and patriarchal interests by reinforcing gender roles and obscuring the significance of *the homeplace* for mature students' learning. I next turn to Gouthro's unique contribution to this theorisation as she argues that the interdependence of the public and private spheres in *the homeplace* can be understood through the lenses of *identity, relationships and labour* in the mature student's homeplace. I discuss and critically assess each of these aspects with reference to the theorists who have informed Gouthro's work. I then evaluate some of the ways in which Gouthro's argument on the need for lifelong learning to move towards an emancipatory approach to knowledge construction through critical dialogue can apply when the site of HE in FE learning is *the homeplace*. I discuss why feminist social reproduction theory was rejected and finally, I outline critiques of critical feminist theory and how I respond to them.

3.2 Feminist challenges to the separation of the public/private spheres

In academic feminist discussions, the terms public/private spheres are often left implicit (Edwards, 1993), so my discussion below focuses on the key notions which inform critical feminist research on these concepts in order to contextualise Gouthro's (2009) theory of *the homeplace*.

The separation of the private and public domains is understood in historic materialist terms by critical feminists (Davis, 1981; Fraser, 2020c). The public domain of production depends on the private domain of reproduction to supply, feed, clothe and socialise its workforce (Ferguson, 2020; Fraser, 2017; Weeks, 2011). Diverse feminist thinkers from Ann Oakley (1974) to Angela Davis (1981) carefully trace how processes of industrialisation and urbanisation in the US and UK made home-based productive work

such as cloth-making and food production untenable for men and women. This historical process initiated the ideological gendered division of the two spheres as women were excluded from the paid workforce in order to protect men's wages and jobs from competition. The public/private spheres were associated with masculinity and femininity respectively, and the creation of the housewife role in the 19th century instantiated this division (Casey and Littler, 2021; Ferguson, 2020; Fraser, 2017; Oakley, 1974). The world of paid work, in time, became associated with public spaces such as factories and offices, whereas unpaid care and domestic labour took place in the home, a private space. Whilst the public sphere has continued to be associated with masculinity and paid work, its association with politics, education and culture give it higher status and more authority than the feminine, private sphere of the home (Edwards, 1993). It is important to note this gendered splitting of labour into particular spheres has historically not applied to Black working-class women who have laboured across both domains (Carby, 1982; Davis, 1981; Ferguson, 2020; hooks, 1982; Teeple Hopkins, 2017).

The antithesis may be a construct, but nonetheless it forms the basis for the notion of the home as a soothing, private haven for the family, tucked away from the harsh and messy public world of competition and business (Casey and Littler, 2021). From this gendered binary, it is but a short step to argue that an essential component of the private sphere is its privacy. The conflation of the private sphere with the notion of privacy is a widely held attitude (Young, 2005), and so examining homelife can feel intrusive (Edwards, 1993; Gouthro, 2009). However, as *the homeplace* is an important site of both living and learning, to ignore it is to gloss over important issues which affect us all, but perhaps women in particular (Gouthro, 2002b).

The impact of neoliberalism and its globalised economic structures have had an impact on social structures such as the family, for example raising the number of hours worked in order to support a family and the need to offload care work onto less well-paid women,

creating globalised care chains (The Care Collective, 2020; Fraser, 2017; Lynch, 2022). Gouthro (2022) cites David Harvey's definition of neoliberalism to clarify her use of the term:

> *A theory of political economic practices which proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by the maximization of entrepreneurial freedoms within an institutional framework characterized by private property rights, individual liberty, free market and free trade.* (p. 113)

The fetishisation of personal property and individual rights conveniently seal off households from scrutiny. The beneficiary is the neoliberal order. Normative notions of privacy occlude discussion of who pays for the work which goes into reproducing the workforce: giving birth, feeding, sheltering, socialising, clothing and washing (Bhattacharya, 2017; Fraser, 2017; Ferguson, 2020). The Care Collective (2020) link the rise of neoconservative family values in right-wing populist discourses to an increased reliance on the provision of free family care by women. Feminist researchers have identified the way in which the COVID-19 pandemic has only strengthened the neoliberal order's dependence on unpaid women's care work and reinforced traditional gender roles (Casey and Littler, 2021; Yucel and Chung, 2021). Indeed, this care is not costless despite its unpaid nature: the need to care for others can oppress women and girls by decreasing their opportunities to engage in education and to be in full-time work (Fraser, 2020a). Caring for others can be rewarding, but it can also be unremitting and unpleasant. When I write that unpaid care often leads women into part-time work, lower wages, fewer promotion opportunities and decreased pensions, it is from my lived experience.

When discussions of care needs are raised, patriarchal forces seek to close them down. Fraser (2020b) theorises this as a deliberate move on the part of neoliberal order. She

argues convincingly that delegitimising needs which originate in households as public matters enables companies and institutions to avoid paying for them. Casting political matters as private and domestic depoliticises them, but Fraser argues that when these 'taken-for-granted' assumptions are challenged, a chain of associated relations is called into question. If unpaid care is no longer treated on an individual, case-by-case basis, it has the potential to undermine institutional dependence on it. Much better to present such work as a natural feminine behaviour within the confines of the family. Against such a background, Gouthro (2004; 2005; 2009) argues that a masculinised worldview enables *the homeplace* to be excluded from the discourses of lifelong learning. The interdependence of the public/private sphere in mature students' lives is disregarded and the concerns of *the homeplace* are supplanted by neoliberal or *marketplace values.* What Gouthro's theory offers is the opportunity to trace the 'myriad capillaries of social relations between workplaces, homes, schools' (Bhattacharya, 2017: 74) which constitute and sustain society.

3.3 The impact of Habermas' theory of communicative action

In developing her theory of *the homeplace*, Gouthro (2002b; 2005; 2009) draws on Habermas' (1987) theory of communicative action. Gouthro (2009, 2022) analyses Habermas's theory that in late capitalism *the system* (economic/political structures) increasingly colonises *the lifeworld* (family/socialisation/child-rearing) with pathologising effects: 'Localised, shared community-based understandings [are] eroded by inappropriate levels of intrusion from the larger social, political, and economic systems of society' (Gouthro, 2022: 110). In other words, Habermas argues that capitalism's pursuit of wealth and the state's political agenda mean that increasingly egocentric decisions are made based on money and/or power (Habermas, 1987; Murphy and Fleming, 2009; Sandberg, 2013). Gouthro's theory of *the homeplace* and lifelong

learning is grounded in Habermas's theory, but as a critical feminist she subscribes to Fraser's (2020c) critique of Habermas' social theory.

Fraser (2020c) argues that Habermas' characterisation of the family as a socially integrated domain (*the lifeworld*) and the paid workplace as a system-integrated domain (*the system*) reinforces the categorical division between the private and public spheres whilst simultaneously tending to overlook the similarities between them. Her influential essay rejects the proposition that a critical theory which draws a clear distinction between *the system* and *the lifeworld* is adequate for addressing questions of male domination and female subordination. 'From a feminist perspective, there is a more basic battle line between the forms of male dominance linking "system" to "lifeworld" and us' (ibid: 69). For example, the stigmatisation and devaluation of women's labour is a problem in *the homeplace* and the workplace. An androcentric bias in Habermas's work obscures the similarities and the interdependence of *the system* and *the lifeworld,* which leads him to neglect the question of how women might better participate as citizens whose concerns and perspectives are heard. This troubles both Fraser (2020c) and Gouthro (2022), but they have no desire to throw the baby out with the bathwater. They are at pains to show that Habermas' theory of communicative action is positive and useful for the development of their thinking. The work of Habermas leads Gouthro (2009) to insightful theoretical and empirical analyses of women's challenges in lifelong learning contexts, whilst she fully acknowledges its gender-blind weakness.

Like other critical educators, Gouthro (2010) is concerned about the corrosive impact of neoliberalism on lifelong education (Apple, 1999; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Coffield, 1999; Duckworth and Smith, 2018a; Mojab, 2006). Her focus of attention is on what she terms m*arketplace values.* These are defined as individualism, competitiveness and the adoption of business models into educational contexts (Gouthro, 2009). Gouthro views these as masculinised values which have ousted female perspectives. The appropriation

of lifelong learning by neoliberal values has reinforced the apparent dichotomy between the public sphere and the private sphere of the *homeplace*. Gouthro's contribution is to recognise that in lifelong learning the two realms are interconnected and by examining *the homeplace* we can reveal their interdependence.

The dominance of *marketplace values* leads to a narrow definition of productive work as paid work (Gouthro, 2002b; 2005). This can be seen in the way that benefits to the economy and employability have been adopted as a core purpose of HE in the UK by successive governments (Tight, 2023). There is a continued emphasis on individuals' personal skill acquisition to adapt to an ever-changing global marketplace (Ball, 2017; Biesta, 2006; Lister, 2003). Duckworth and Smith (2018a) note that:

> *When connected to educational discourse, the use of the terms "skills" operationalises education as a conveyor belt for the production of a flexible, adaptable and "skilled" workforce to make countries competitive in a globalised economy.* (p. 530)

It is remarkable that the consensus on lifelong learning, which coalesces around the need for the UK to become more globally competitive via an upskilled workforce, has persisted for over two decades (Coffield, 1999). Evidence that there are structural rather than individual barriers that debar people from employment and the fact that most workers in the gig economy do not necessarily need to be highly skilled has little traction (Apple, 1999; Biesta, 2006). Vocationalism in HE in FE compresses the space for discussion of alternative ways of living and being. Minority interests are silenced, disenfranchising those whose perspectives are traditionally absent in HE contexts (Gouthro, 2007; 2002a; Grace, et al., 2003; Mojab, 2006). The potential for education to have an emancipatory role seems to be deliberately stunted (Carpenter and Mojab, 2017; Lister, 2003) because the valorisation of *marketplace values* eliminates critical

examination of the structural factors which create social and gendered inequality in both public and private spheres.

Exploring the significance of *the homeplace* as a site for learning expands understanding of lifelong learning and enables students and teachers to question what is valued and the purpose of education. As Brookfield (2009) points out, these are goals of adult education. Habermas's (1987) theory of communicative action is pertinent to critical educators such as Gouthro (2009; 2010; 2019) and Brookfield (2009; 2017) because it supports the view that adults gain autonomy as they learn to critically reflect on the norms and ideology they learnt uncritically in childhood (Anderson, 2011). Communicative action is a result of dialogical consensus between adults which is both explicit and reflective; it is oriented towards social integration and is democratic in its nature (Fraser, 2020c; Heath, 2011). So, participation in lifelong learning has the potential to enhance democratic citizenship, explore work relations critically and tackle issues that affect gender equity.

3.4 Identity, relationships and labour in the homeplace

Gouthro's (2005; 2009; 2010) theory of *the homeplace*, which recognises the interdependence and interrelatedness of the public and private spheres, focuses on the experiences of heterosexual women with children. She proposes that learning experiences and the different values which constitute what counts as learning can be understood by examining three aspects of women's lives in *the homeplace*: *identity, relationships* and *unpaid labour*. In later writing, she extends this conceptualisation, arguing that the three aspects of *the homeplace* experience are lenses through which we come to understand the interconnectedness of the public and private spheres.

These three focal points inform women's learning in *the homeplace* and affect their ability to access and participate in lifelong learning. Although they are divided in her work, their

conceptual boundaries are porous. Her discussion of *identity* and *relationships* both centre on gendered family roles, such as motherhood. Similarly, her elucidation of *unpaid labour* turns on gendered expectations of work which are tied to *relationships* within the homeplace. *Relationships* are imbued with family commitments and the distribution of work brought in their train. In other words, Gouthro somewhat blurs *identity* with r*elationships* and her definition of both *relationships* and unpaid *labour* reflects the extent to which these are determined by gendered roles. I capture this complexity in figure 3.1.
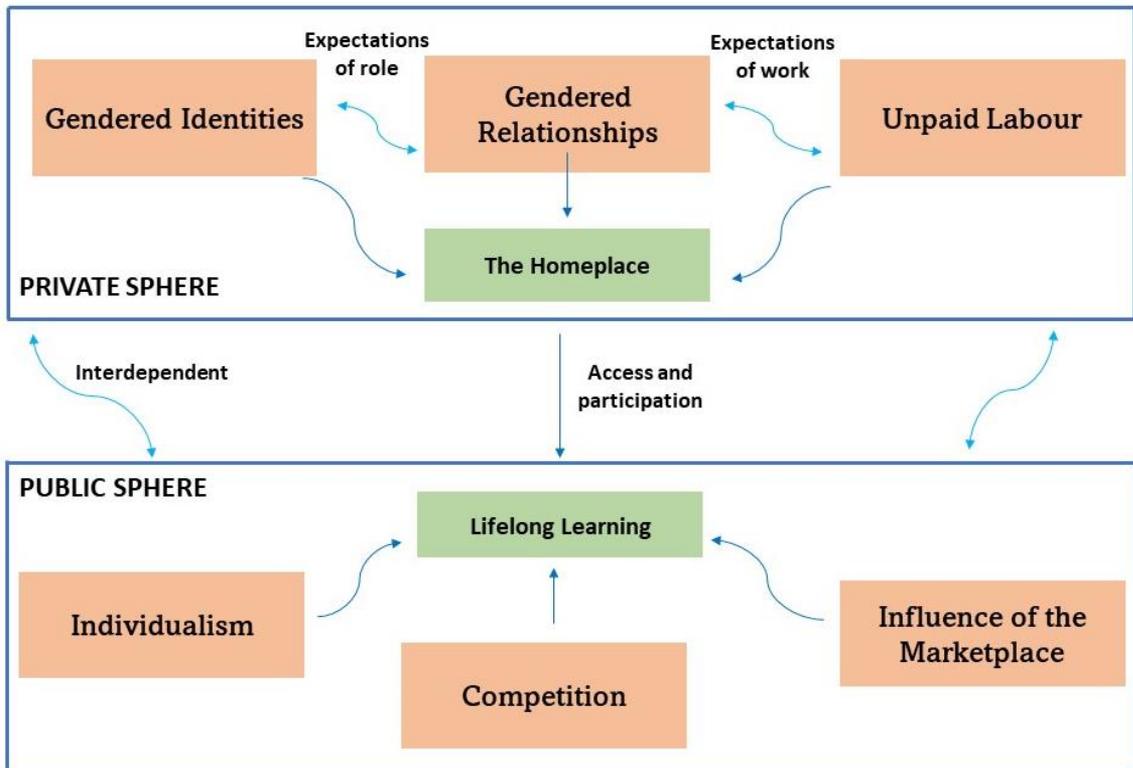
Figure 3.1: Conceptualising interrelationships in Gouthro's theory

Next, I discuss and critique each aspect of her *homeplace* theory before moving onto Gouthro's (2019; 2022) vision of a theory of learning*.*

3.4.1 Identity

The first aspect through which to understand the interdependence of the public and private worlds is *identity,* according to Gouthro (2009). Many aspects of *identity* are tied to gendered roles in *the homeplace*, such as husband, mother and daughter. *The homeplace* is the first site for individual learning experiences and it is here that people's values and attitudes are often shaped. This aspect of the theory recognises the important role played by *the homeplace* in the socialisation of children and teenagers, therefore its study can make sense of mature students' orientations towards work and education. *The homeplace* also confers a sense of *identity,* for example the gendered expectations around the *identity* of the mother as the primary caregiver are learnt here (Gouthro, 2004; Mannay and Morgan, 2013). In contrast, the ideal student *identity* is frequently discursively constructed as an independent and self-directed individual (Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003). This means a student *identity* remains elusive or peripheral for some mature women as it is family ties which confer a sense of *identity* (Edwards, 1993; Gouthro, 2002a; Gouthro, 2002b; Mannay and Morgan, 2013). Garcia (2017), who draws on Gouthro's *homeplace* theory, explains that for Mexican American girls and women, to deny the reality of being a daughter/sister is to not exist, so rooted is *identity* in family connections. In lifelong learning contexts, gendered aspects of *identity* are designated private matters. This effectively screens out factors such as family ties which impact on individuals' capacity to participate in education (Gouthro, 2009). Placing *the homeplace* centrally in a theory which looks at the interdependence of the public/private spheres means the impact of gendered *identity* is foregrounded in lifelong learning contexts.

Yet whilst Gouthro's theory acknowledges that many aspects of *identity* are tied to women's conflicting roles within *the homeplace*, these concepts often seem to be conflated in her work. *Identity* is not defined. Edwards' (1993) influential study of mature women students distinguishes the concept of *identity* from role theory, arguing that tying the effects of study to domestic roles depoliticises the structural influences on women's

positions. Although Edwards' conceptualisation of *identity* is not operationalised, its meaning for her is more substantial than the meaning of role, which falls back on stereotypical notions such as motherhood. The complexities of both normative and individual attitudes around roles and the ambivalences individuals feel are glossed over, if being a mother is accepted as having a core set of behaviours shared by all who inhabit this role. Edwards arrives instead at an unstated concept of *identity* which she implies is less reductive than familial role: experiences, material and structural circumstances and struggles must all be considered.

In my analysis, I choose not to operationalise the concept of *identity* despite it forming part of Gouthro's theory of *the homeplace.* The differentiation between different *identities* already covered in the extensive literature on mature student *identity* was less prominent in the data than I expected. This may have been because the liminality of available *identities* is blurred when one is not able to leave one's home in lockdown. In addition, the concept of *identity* incurs a tendency to essentialise (Edwards,1993; Walby, 2023). Gouthro's lack of clarity around the *identity* concept and the fact that gendered *identities* such as father, husband, mother and wife are not applicable to mature students who are single or childless made this an unhelpful analytical tool. Perhaps the reach of Gouthro's *identity* concept as a lens is limited to student mothers, the group she studies. Whilst Gouthro advocates extending her *homeplace* theory to other groups, is this lens of *identity*, which is perhaps inadequately theorised, a helpful tool for the students who are not heterosexual mothers?

3.4.2 Relationships

Homeplace relationships are the second aspect highlighted by Gouthro as a way in which to understand how the private and public domains interconnect for many mature students*. Relationships* often determine their access to and choices regarding

education. Decisions in *the homeplace* can reproduce the gendered patterns in wider society and as such, reflect the lesser power held by women (Gouthro, 2009). Whilst Gouthro concentrates on women, it is important to recognise that interpersonal *relationships* also have an impact on male participation in lifelong learning (Gill et al., 2015; Pegg and Di Paolo, 2013). Gouthro (2004; 2005) argues that men often claim and receive the resources that support them in their studies unconditionally and contrasts this with the support female students expect from male partners, which is often contingent on their working long hours to minimise the impact of their study on *the homeplace*. She speculates that conflict around study may be less acute in LGBTQI+ relationships and in single parent households (Gouthro, 2004). However, alternative *homeplace relationships* are not theorised in detail by her and she is careful to acknowledge that her qualitative research is not designed to be generalisable.

Gouthro (2010) urges educationalists to recognise that gendered family roles may mean women prioritise relatives' wellbeing before their own, but these *relationships* can still have a powerful place in their learning. This is not to argue that women are intrinsically caring (Gilligan, 1982) which can 'be construed an ethic of work' (Weeks, 2011: 67). Rather it is a recognition that women are frequently socialised to take on the family care-giving role and this may affect their engagement with lifelong learning. Such *relationships* must be recognised and valued rather than stigmatised as personal deficiencies in HE discourses. Gouthro (2010) claims valuable learning can arise from relational qualities and care. Past *homeplace* experiences can significantly enhance and deepen mature students' understandings of social theories; for example, caring for an elderly relative, adopting a child or a divorce are experiences which may be less available to younger HE students (Lister, 2003; Wright, 2011). Gouthro calls for a reassessment of what counts in education, which would lead to the valuing of forms of learning which occur from homeplace *relationships*.

61

Although Gouthro discusses the influence of hooks' (1990; 2004) theorising on the meaning of *the homeplace* for marginalised people, she does not consider this in light of the importance of relationships. However, in my reading of hooks, *relationships* with others in one's community and family are central to her theory. hooks' *homeplace* concept has been very influential in feminist research. Those who experience discrimination and stigmatisation by dominant groups in societies view *the homeplace* as a safe space (hooks, 1990; 2004). Davis (1981) also argues that it was only in their *homeplaces* that Black slaves could live as subjects, not objects. hooks' conceptualisation is different to the Eurocentric narrative of the home as a castle into which one can retreat (Gurney, 2020), as she emphasises the practice of dignity and care within the *homeplace* as radical actions. Gouthro (2005; 2009) explains the importance of this theory and links it to research on female Black academics in the US whose homes and communities offer support and love; this empowers them in work environments where they feel marginalised. Whilst the emphasis on care and its meaningful potential is taken up by Gouthro (2002b), who highlights the undervalued learning that arises from looking after others, the political dimension of these practices emphasised by hooks is absent from Gouthro's work. *The homeplace* as a safe space is not a concept which Gouthro analyses in great detail, yet this concept is valuable when mature students' *relationships* are under consideration, as I show below.

hooks' (1990) theory is developed by other feminist education researchers who draw on Gouthro's work to examine girls' creation of *homeplaces* in schools (Garcia, 2017; Kelly, 2020). In this work, the *homeplace* is a site for supportive *relationships* which is both outside individual dwellings and is collectivised. In a study of migrant workers in Montreal, Teeple Hopkins (2017) also extends the definition of a home: 'churches and faith-based friendships can provide [a] sense of home in a physical location outside the traditional boundaries of the home' (p.145). In education environments which feel hostile, minority groups may also build collective *homeplaces*. Kelly (2020) uses *the homeplace*

concept to explore how Black female students escape the 'terrifying whiteness' (hooks, 1990: 41) of the US school system; the 2017 inauguration of President Trump increases the racist oppression they experience. The girls' response is to construct digital and physical *homeplaces*: they create a group text message thread, and they meet in the school library. Garcia (2017) also theorises that a single-sex Catholic school is constructed as a *homeplace* by Chicana girls and their teachers. They escape and resist patriarchal social relations there. In these examples, resistance to objectification is brought about by strengthening bonds with others. These are caring *relationships* between peers and in some cases their teachers.

Relationships between mature students themselves also do not form Gouthro's conceptualisation of *the homeplace*, but research into mature students' experiences suggests peer support may be just as important for them as it is for younger students (Heagney and Benson, 2017; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020). They too form a minority group in HE in FE settings. The literature on collective *homeplaces* in which disadvantaged women and girls of colour feel safe and supported by one another adds an important dimension to the concept of *relationships* in *the homeplace*. There is potential for expanding the boundaries of *a homeplace* for mature students in the COVID-19 era: it need not be physical. It can be an intentional, collective space in which they 'come together to question and critique oppressive positionalities and develop counter-narratives and alternative identities' (Garcia, 2017: 27).

Gendered power *relationships* are also an important area for consideration. Gouthro (2009) acknowledges adult education can destabilise asymmetrical power *relationships* and lead to violence against women in *the homeplace,* but she does not elaborate this beyond acknowledging inequality outside the home can also play out within it, leaving many women with little power to make decisions about their education. Central to Fraser's (2020c) critique of Habermas' theory of *communicative action* is that he

overlooks gendered power in the *lifeworld.* Other scholars in the field of lifelong learning have studied the impact of gendered violence on mature women students and its role in propelling some female survivors into HE (Burke, 2012; Edwards, 1993; Welsh, 2020). The abusive household can be a space of fear, danger and vulnerability for women and children in *relationships* (Gurney, 2020; Young, 2005; Zielke, 2021). This is pertinent as data from the ONS (2021) reveal that a fifth of crimes recorded by UK police forces were related to domestic abuse in the first COVID-19 lockdown between April and June 2020. As *relationships* are under the lens, it is clear that gendered imbalances in power can render mature students' *homeplaces* unsafe and unsuitable as a space for learning.

3.4.3 Labour

Gouthro's (2009) third lens to aid understanding of public/private sphere interdependence in mature students' lives is their *labour*. The difference between paid work and unpaid work is often read as representative of the division in the two spheres; however, lockdowns blurred the boundaries for many UK-based mature students as many paid work roles shifted into people's homes. The average daily time spent by a woman on unpaid household labour was 3.5 hours and the average time for a man 2.4 hours (ONS, 2020b). This gendered difference in unpaid domestic *labour* and care work matters because although it supports and benefits the economy, it is rarely acknowledged as productive work (Fraser, 2017; Fraser, 2020a; Gouthro, 2002b; Gouthro, 2009).

Examining what factors affected mature students' paid work in *the homeplace* during lockdowns and how this shaped their HE study suggests Gouthro's theory is ripe for renewed focus. Gouthro is concerned with women's unpaid domestic and caring *labour* in *homeplaces*. My research broadens the gaze to encompass how mature students' HE learning is affected when paid *labour* shifts into the *homeplace* which is also a site for

64

learning. This aspect of home-based *labour* in the pandemic was gendered and classed. Although many mature students were able to work from home, the greatest share of flexible working arrangements went to men in professional and managerial roles (Warren and Lyonette, 2020). Working-class men and women were least able to access flexible work arrangements, indeed only 9% of women in routine and semi-routine job roles were always working from home in June 2020 (ibid). The intersection of study and *labour* in the home, both paid and unpaid, and how mature students managed boundaries which were breached in the COVID-19 pandemic is an area which extends the scope of a theory of *the homeplace*.

The *labour* involved in maintaining a very clean home or making it cosy is often intrinsically oppressive as it can confine women to their *homeplace* and reinforce gendered stereotypes (Casey and Littler, 2021; Young, 2005; Zielke, 2021). Mannay and Morgan (2013) find that Welsh ideals of working-class femininity centred on motherhood and housework are inimical to the HE degrees of mature women living in an area of high deprivation. There is simply not enough time for study when houses are expected to be immaculate. In June 2020, 19% of UK working-class women in paid work did more than 21 hours of housework a week, compared to 9% of women in managerial and professional jobs (Warren and Lyonette, 2020). If maintaining the *homeplace* as a safe space for the family entails very high levels of hygiene and decoration, gendered inequality at home is likely reinforced (Gouthro, 2004).

The systematic exclusion of women's caring work from the public sphere is not accidental but is intrinsic to neoliberal economies which frame domestic labour, including all forms of care, as belonging to the private sphere. 'Public' roles such as the paid worker are granted higher status and visibility than 'private' roles such as the caregiver which are often trivialised as not being real work (Fraser, 2020a; Fraser, 2020c; Gouthro, 2009). In lockdowns, the erasure of private care work from the public world of paid work

65

and study became harder to maintain in *the homeplace* when children interrupted work-related video calls. The private sphere could not always be effectively tucked away from public view. But Gouthro (2009) argues that care work concerns, which impact more on women and affect their engagement with education, should be visible and their potential for learning should be seriously considered. Her perspective on *labour* leads to questions about what constitutes valuable learning.

3.5 The value of learning theory for *the homeplace*

Gouthro (2019; 2022) does not espouse a particular learning theory, but she is clear that the practice of lifelong learning must be underpinned by the learning of critical theory in order to enhance education for democratic citizenship: 'to address social justice issues it is important to also examine social structures that sustain inequities' (Gouthro, 2019: 65). Theory which helps students understand how power shapes their living and working contexts is crucial in her view. Again, a Habermasian framework informs her understanding and critique of dominant pedagogies within the lifelong learning sector. She explores approaches to adult learning through the lens of Habermas' (1975) three constitutive interests: technical-rational, practical-hermeneutic, and emancipatory.

Whilst a technical-rational orientiation to knowledge is of course necessary in vocational and adult education in the lifelong learning sector, it has become the predominant form (Gouthro, 2019). It informs the notion that knowledge and skills should be acquired in order to enhance employability. *Marketplace values* dictate the discourses of lifelong learning, which has meant the sector has prized vocational learning above all other forms and has led to the dominance of credentialised education (Gouthro, 2009; Duckworth and Smith, 2018a; Duckworth and Smith, 2018b; Lister, 2003; Pegg and Di Paolo, 2013). This agenda is characteristic of HE in FE discourses, and indeed it has held sway in the UK for three decades (Coffield, 1999; Department for Education, 2021). An emphasis on

measurability, represented by behaviourist learning outcomes, is prescriptive. This limits the possibility for students to question dominant power structures. Gouthro draws on the work of other critical educators such as Freire (1974) and Brookfield (2017) to reject pedagogies which do not create opportunities for mature students to question and reflect on the powerful ideologies which shape their lives.

Although the second approach, the practical-hermeneutic, offers the possibility of a more humanistic approach to adult learning, Gouthro (2022) raises questions about learning theories based in individualised student need. The emphasis on self-actualisation and self-directed learning in the work of Abraham Maslow and Malcolm Knowles are valuable, but they run the danger of promoting the idea that adults gain success and satisfaction by realising their potential through personal choices. Whilst Gouthro welcomes the humanistic focus of such theories, the notion that self-reliance and choice can overcome systemic barriers such as the gendered dimensions of work in the workplace and the homeplace is an illusion. A theoretical framework to address the question of social change is needed.

Whilst acknowledging that technical-rational and practical-hermeneutic approaches have value in lifelong learning contexts, Gouthro takes issue with the way in which both approaches reduce the space in which critical questioning can develop. She advocates an approach to learning firmly situated within a critical or emancipatory tradition. She does not abandon the ideal of personal growth for students, but she argues that through dialogue and reasoning adult learners must develop the capacity to question 'taken-for-granted assumptions' (Gouthro, 2010: 466). This might entail examining the predominant worldview that financial wealth leads to happiness, or that learning must be connected to the workplace rather than *the homeplace*.

Extending the scope of learning to also encompass and privilege forms of learning which take place in the community and *the homeplace* (Grace et al., 2003) challenges 'the parameters of discussion' (Gouthro, 2007: 150) on what constitutes full and equal participation in society. Gouthro is clear: if educational barriers that affect minority groups remain unacknowledged and unaddressed then their citizenship is denied. She argues that it is crucial that learning environments are created in which power differentials are considered. Raising awareness of social issues through dialogue and encouraging participation through listening and learning from one another is a crucial part of this project. This involves structuring learning spaces so students can critically explore their lived experiences and think about how social justice issues might play out in their communities. Grace et al. (2003) observe that their students have found this 'very difficult work, with few clear-cut answers' (p. 69). Skills-led approaches to education may avoid this discomfort, but they also narrow the possibility for students to consider how gender, sexuality or social class may have shaped their decision-making.

Considering *homeplace* work as a source of HE learning needs to be underpinned by a clear theoretical stance, otherwise there is a risk that a skills-led, technical-rational approach will dominate (Gouthro, 2009). The potential for HE students' critical literacy development is enhanced when lecturers teach from an identifiable framework which allows students to distil 'the essentials from their experience and make connections with new situations' (Lister, 2003: 134). Furthermore, Gouthro (2019) argues that 'theory helps us to name or rename aspects of our experience that elude or puzzle us (p. 5) Grounding educational practice in critical feminist analyses of oppression creates opportunities for dialogue and change.

3.6 Other theories considered for this thesis

At the thesis proposal stage, I intended to use feminist social reproduction theory (SRT) to explore my research questions. SRT understands unwaged labour as a means to support the capitalist economy by ensuring there is an adequate supply of labour power (Fraser, 2017). Further to this, educational institutions are understood as sites of social reproduction (Arruzza, Bhattacharya and Fraser, 2019; Ferguson, 2020; Welsh, 2022). As feminist scholars (Ferguson, 2017; Skeggs, 1997) conclude that schools and FECs play a vital role in training students to become work-ready, SRT seemed a suitable lens to explore how different forms of work were valorised for learning within HE in FE. As I began to research the concept of value, I became interested in employing Kathi Weeks' Marxist feminist theory which corresponds with SRT but includes the right to refusal of work. She argues that work is the most direct experience of power and decision-making that we experience on a daily basis and therefore 'a rich object of inquiry' (Weeks, 2011: 3). The workplace is also the site where gender is enforced, performed, and recreated. Domestic work is undervalued, according to Weeks, because of its association with degraded femininity.

Weeks' (2011) theory has potential for exploring the valorisation of waged work within FEC cultures and the gendering of vocational HE, but like Bourassa (2020) I am aware that she does not consider education. As a consideration of what counts as knowledge is a fundamental aspect to this thesis, this made her theory less useful. In addition, WBL is narrowly construed, and I wanted to explore other types of learning which can arise from both paid and unpaid settings. Her theory is grounded in an 'ontology of labor' (Weeks, 2004: 184), and whilst I fully recognise that *labour* is central to provoking questions of social value, I also sought a theory which conceptualised how interpersonal *relationships* affected learning. This led me to Gouthro's work.

3.7 Criticisms of critical feminist theory

Gouthro's theory provides important conceptual thinking on the significance of *the homeplace* and mature women's learning, but it has not been widely adopted (King, 2020). Because there is a lack of critique of her specific theory, I respond more broadly to anticipated challenges.

Discussions of social class and gender are a prominent feature of empirical work on mature students' engagement in lifelong learning by feminist education researchers (e.g. Archer, 2006; Merrill, 2015; Reay, 2003; Skeggs, 1997; Tett, 2000), but Gouthro's theorising on mature women students does not consider social class. Working as an HE in FE lecturer in England, I found sensitivity to social class positions was prominent in British adult students' classroom discussions. Therefore, although my research is not primarily an analysis focused on social class, I acknowledge the class identifications provided by my participants, as some of them ascribe their educational histories and early working lives to their family's class position. Social class and gender are not distinct realms of experience (Brah and Phoenix, 2016; Skeggs, 1997).

A postmodern/poststructural perspective also raises a helpful note of caution about Gouthro's call for the recognition of *homeplace*-situated knowledge. In an exploration of the application of Foucault's theory to adult education, Brookfield (2005) takes the example of RPL. He demonstrates how although this process began as an oppositional practice, it has been co-opted by HEIs into a codified regime. Certain forms of experience are credited, particularly technical vocational skills, which support the dominant system. In this way, experience becomes commodified and exchangeable for credits towards a qualification. Skeggs (1997), who also uses Foucauldian theory, finds that FEC evaluative frameworks applied to working-class women's learning from home can actually devalue and discredit prior care experiences. Gouthro only considers the positive ways in which situated knowledge could be assessed, but there is a real risk of

homeplace learning being judged deficient with the potential for guilt and damage to mature students' self-worth if their *homeplace* practices are deemed inadequate.

Whilst acknowledging the importance of insights from postmodernist/poststructuralist theory, Anyon (1994) and Merrill (2021) argue for normative critical feminist educational research which is situated in the reality of disadvantaged people's lives, because ultimately theory should be 'socially useful' (Anyon, 1994: 129). I agree and I argue that deploying Gouthro's normative *homeplace* learning theory allows mature students' lives and their work to be considered in political terms in order to advocate for change.

3.8 Conclusion: *the homeplace*: a critical feminist theory

A critical feminist theory of *the homeplace* has the potential to question what is valued in lifelong learning contexts. Gouthro's (2009) normative theory has an unforeseen yet vital dimension in the COVID-19 era and beyond as the meaning of *the homeplace* shifted for HE in FE mature students. The physical boundaries of *the homeplace* have been challenged by the digital intrusion of paid work and synchronous online teaching. New theoretical insights about the complexity and ambiguity of the public and private spheres in mature students' lives can be generated by exploring experiences of mature students' *homeplace* as sites for learning. Whilst Gouthro's concept of *identity* may be complicated by understandings of familial role, her focus on *relationship*s and *labour* within *the homeplace* are valuable and these can be deepened further to consider collective *homeplac*es. Gouthro's theory can be extended to consider *the homeplace* learning experiences of adult learners who are not in heterosexual relationships with children but who may still struggle with oppressive social structures. Her advocacy of critical learning theory supports the development of learning spaces where, through dialogue, wider social issues of equity can be examined and questioned in order to enhance genuine participation and full citizenship.

Chapter 4: Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses my research methodology. I restate my research aims, followed by my ontological and epistemological assumptions. I explain my positionality and the rationale for my narrative research design. I then move on to the participants, my sampling strategy and how I recruited them for the study, before discussing my research methods. Firstly, I discuss life history interviews and then my research diary. Next, I outline why and how I used the Listening Guide to analyse data. The final sections justify the choices I made about research ethics and the data presentation.

4.1.1 Research aims

As outlined in chapter 1, the overall aim of this research is to explore the following question which is supported by two subquestions:

How did work in the home during lockdowns shape the learning of HE in FE mature students?

1. *How does their learning at home interact with their care work and paid labour?*
2. *To what extent are FECs providing support for HE mature students who labour at home?*

The questions were developed to give voice to these students' lived experiences and perspectives on their domestic and paid labour whilst studying. Their stories can go unheard in an HE in FE landscape dominated by younger students and vocationalism. Furthermore, whilst the interaction of care work and/or paid work with study can represent a threat to some mature students' HE learning, it can also have a positive influence. For this reason, I was also interested in understanding mature students'

perspectives on the support they valued when their learning was based at home during lockdowns.

4.1.2 Ontological and epistemological assumptions

Critical feminist ontology is based in experiences of social lives and understandings of these, wherever they may derive from. It is predicated on socially constructed categories such as men, women and social class, but these are not essentialising categories (Stanley and Wise, 1993). Feminist research projects aim to produce authoritative knowledge about gendered lives which challenges unjust subordination (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Frost and Elichaoff, 2014; Letherby, 2003). Ramazanoğlu and Holland (2002) are clear: 'feminist claims to know what people's lives and relations are like are politically charged' (p.16). Against the charge that this commitment is biased, feminist researchers (Harding, 2004: Hesse-Biber, 2014a; Letherby, 2003; Naples and Gurr, 2014) challenge the notion of objectivity in research. In purportedly neutral projects, the very choice of topics and operationalisation of abstract concepts can support unquestioned androcentric attitudes.

My work is grounded in feminist standpoint epistemology which examines the meaning of experience (Hughes, 2002; Ramanzanoğlu and Holland, 2002). Hartsock (2004) argues that a standpoint enables an oppressed group to have a wider vision than those who hold power and can only see social relations from their own perspective. Whilst I accept this epistemic position, it is also problematic: women's shared experiences of oppression have their limits and are affected by race, social class, age and sexuality (Brah and Phoenix, 2016; Carby, 1982; Collins, 2004). Like Skeggs (1997), I do not wholeheartedly accept a feminist standpoint position, but the debates within the field have produced important lessons for my feminist epistemological assumptions: firstly, that a focus on the analysis of experience and engagement with social theory is

legitimate; secondly, although I do not presume my research plays a liberatory role, my modest goal is to shift 'the standpoint to knowers whose vantage point has been ignored or discredited' (Naples and Gurr, 2014: 25), namely HE in FE mature students; thirdly, feminist standpoint epistemology carries with it a crucial insight, which is that all knowledge is situated in the knower and the position from which we speak and decide what to study is subjective (Hughes, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). This brings me to consider my own positionality.

4.1.3 My positionality

My experiences as a working mature student studying in my *homeplace* also informed this research. Edwards (1993) wryly notes that whilst we may present our interest in a topic in a detached, academic terms, we are often interested in aspects of our own autobiography. 'Investigators carry their identities with them like tortoise shells into the research setting' (Riessman, 2008: 139). My personal story has affected my interest in mature students. My first degree and PGCE were as a traditional student at a red-brick university, but I was in my forties when I completed a part-time Masters degree. I was also teaching in an FEC and bringing up my children. In my fifties, I started a part-time PhD whilst still teaching. These were distance learning programmes, chosen in order to accommodate my family and paid work. Although I had identified as a feminist since my teens, it was only at the start of my PhD that I had an epiphany when I first read about feminist research practice. Reflexivity was a valuable resource. I began to apply theory to my own life and education, questioning why I left postgraduate study so late despite enjoying academic learning.

My professional role gave me a differently positioned insight into the experiences of mature HE in FE students. I taught mature students in an FEC for 22 of my 33 years as a teacher. Here, I saw that mature students' degrees were both enhanced and

threatened by their *homeplace* circumstances. Whilst I supported my students as best as I could, there were few formal mechanisms to recognise the impact of their *homeplaces* on their learning, in contrast to their workplace experiences.

My *homeplace* and work perspectives granted me different forms of 'insider status' (Hesse-Biber, 2014a: 210) which allowed me some understanding of the participants' situations. I frequently felt empathy as they described experiences in interviews. But as I read the interview transcripts, I would sometimes question how genuine this feeling was, given I was primarily motivated to talk to them for research purposes (Cohen, Morrison and Manion, 2011). I responded sympathetically to the women home-schooling young children, but I was relieved my own children are grown up. Several participants commented on my postgraduate studies, but generally I did not allude to my own status as a mature student or my early retirement in 2020. These were forms of privilege when compared to their need to gain a degree, which was often described in terms of increasing job satisfaction and pay. Whilst on the one hand I was trying to be sensitive to our relative different social positionings, on the other it sometimes felt insincere. I chose which of my own experiences to disclose, whereas I expected them to tell me theirs (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004).

Feminist researchers (Edwards, 1993; Skeggs, 1997) before me have discussed the uncomfortable ebb and flow of insider/outsider status as they conduct research interviews. My status felt complicated and I wrote about it extensively in my research journal following interviews. After I had conducted six, I decided to use a tool to map my own social identity (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019) to keep this at the forefront of my mind. It was important not to make assumptions about our similarities and to be aware of our differences, including education, social class, gender and sexuality. The need to separate my own social and cultural expectations from the narratives influenced my

choice of the Listening Guide (LG) (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Edwards and Weller, 2012; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011) as a data analysis tool.

4.2 Research design: a narrative inquiry

My research into HE in FE mature students' learning in *the homeplace* during lockdowns was conceived as a case study but became a form of narrative inquiry. In this section I reflect on how the case study design was abandoned to embrace a narrative research design, arguably a form of case-centred inquiry (Riessman, 2008). Both research designs have elusive definitions, so here I explain my own decisions about my mode of inquiry to enhance transparency.

Case studies and narrative research share a preoccupation with looking afresh at everyday details in order to understand contextualised social phenomena. The advantage of a case study approach to research is its in-depth nature and its ability to focus on everyday social practices which may be taken for granted (Stake, 2011). I also had a clear object for my case study: an analysis of how FECs viewed and treated mature students' learning in *the homeplace*. However, as my planning got underway, I began to question this objective. My interest lay in the narrated experiences and life stories of the students themselves.

I began to explore the potential of a narrative research design (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Riessman, 2008) because I was 'interested in how individuals, through their own actions, exercise agency in ways that include efforts to avoid, challenge or resist perceived policies or practices' (McAlpine, 2016: 38). Human beings tell stories about their experiences, which is the tap root of narrative research no matter what the discipline. Moreover, 'narrative detail (the little things)' (Riessman, 2008: 194) reveals insights into social practices which are taken for granted, such as the gendered division of labour within *homeplaces* which affects HE learning. I therefore began with a 'respect for

ordinary lived experience' (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007: 42) and the understanding that experience is often conceptualised as a narrative.

What distinguishes a narrative inquiry from a case study is that it encourages the researcher to look for the way in which individuals impose order and meaning on their life stories (Miller, 2017; Riessman, 2008). Individual narratives are affected by the narrative frameworks that are available at the time and producing 'culturally recognisable and acceptable accounts of events is an important feature of the storied human life' (Miller, 2017: 43). Although narrative researchers emphasise people's lives are affected by structural factors, such as gender, age or social class, they also acknowledge that individuals' lives are not socially determined by them (Clandinin and Rosiek, 2007; Fraser and MacDougall, 2017; Merrill, 2020). When teaching mature students, they had often given me to understand that their late entry into HE was a result of negative schooling experiences, or they ascribed it to their working-class family's unfamiliarity with HE. 'Emplotment' (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019: 290), which denotes the way narratives imply that one thing happened because of another, led me to a life history approach to my narrative inquiry. I sought the participants' educational and working life histories, starting from secondary school to the present day: the past, the present and the future of mature students' lives are visible in biographical methods (Hodkinson and MacLeod, 2010; Merrill, 2020).

A potential limitation of narrative research is the authenticity of participants' reported experiences. This is addressed by the concept of 'the narrated subject' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 403). The story is created by the person for a particular audience, so rather than argue there is a direct relationship between the telling and the experiences, a compromise position recognises the complexity which emerges between the narration and the actual experiences (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019; Riessman, 2008). In addition, any narrative analysis is produced by the researcher whose own bias and

background play a part in the interpretation of participants' life histories (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Edwards and Weller, 2012). The positionality mapping tool (Jacobson and Mustafa, 2019), a research journal where my thoughts and feelings about the interviews were developed, and my use of the LG for data analysis constituted attempts to be systematic about monitoring and reflecting on my subjectivity.

4.3 Participants

There are no clear rules about the size of samples in qualitative research (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Hesse-Biber, 2014a), but narrative research often focuses on a very small group of individuals who are interviewed more than once (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Riessman, 2008). I decided that asking for a second interview was unethical as I knew many people were overwhelmed in the lockdowns. Therefore I planned a sample of 15-20 people who would do one interview.

I used a snowball sample, a type of purposeful sample (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011; Creswell and Poth, 2018). Using my own professional networks and those of my FEC colleagues, I located undergraduate degree classes which contained suitable participants. As time passed, I found it unethical to press colleagues who were working in pandemic conditions to help me find participants who fitted my criteria for inclusion. One existing participant volunteered to ask friends if they would be willing to be interviewed by me, so I added two more participants into the sample in this way.

I recruited participants via email messages to undergraduate groups which contained mature students. My email briefly outlined the research, what involvement entailed and how to contact me. I was unknown to ten of the participants, but five of them knew of me because I had previously worked at their FEC. I sent the volunteers the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) (appendix 3) and a consent form (appendix 4). Related to the issue of consent was the offer to pay an Amazon £10 e-gift voucher for participation.

Although I was aware that such a payment could be construed as inducement, I believe it was ethical to recognise the respondents had given up their time for me (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011), particularly as my research explored some students' paid work. I informed volunteers that my research might benefit future mature students, but tangible benefits to the participants were less clear. Ultimately, I gain the reward of a qualification, not them (Letherby, 2003; Skeggs, 1997). I believe the payment mitigated this unevenness somewhat, as it established reciprocity and respect for their time (Creswell and Poth, 2018; King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). I deemed that the value of the voucher was not such that it was likely to persuade people to be interviewed against their better judgement. I paid for the vouchers and emailed them after each interview.

Despite hoping to recruit equal numbers of men and women and part-time and full-time students, the proportions reflected national mature student demographics (AoC, 2022; HESA, 2023; Hubble and Bolton, 2012). There is little educational research on male students' care responsibilities, so I wanted to explore the value of this work for them. I was anxious to avoid cementing the notion that this was women's work only (Lister, 2003) and had come across several instances of mature men whose studies were affected by care work when I was teaching; however, I could not recruit more than five men. I also hoped for equal numbers of full-time and part-time students but only six participants are part-time.

The participants had begun their undergraduate degree programmes before March 2020, with the exception of George who started his degree in September 2020. The 15 participants share four salient characteristics: they are all over 25 years of age, they are studying an undergraduate degree at an FEC, they live at home, and they all work in a paid and/or unpaid capacity. They were at different stages of their degrees in three FECs. The subjects and awards varied. Ten of the group are in full-time paid work. Nine are parents, two of these are single mothers and one father does not live with his

children. One cares for her elderly mother and is also a grandmother. Nine live with a spouse or partner, two live with friends and four live alone with or without children. Four of the participants identify as LGBTQI+. Two speak English as a second language and one student receives the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). Enumerating these characteristics demonstrates they are a heterogeneous group. All the participants live in northeast England and travel fewer than 15 miles to college, in line with the average distance travelled by HE in FE undergraduates (AoC, 2022; Henderson, 2020).

The following table gives the reader some relevant contextual information about the participants.

Pseudonym	Gender, age, declared disability	*Homeplace and care work*	Degree FT/PT	Paid work	Self-identified social class	Previous HE experience
Stephen	Man 52	Husband and dog	Top-up BA (Hons.) Education PT	FT manager	Working class	Cert Ed at an FEC
Sue	Woman 52	Husband, elderly mother with a physical disability and mobility issues, a grandchild and daughter's dog	Top-up BA (Hons.) Education PT	FT manager	Working class	Cert Ed at an FEC

Kate	Woman 47	Female partner with cancer and 2 children: one has a visual impairment, and one is transitioning	Foundation degree Education and Training PT	FT trainer	Working class	None
Nicky	Woman 47	Single parent with 2 children: eldest is at university	Foundation degree Children and Young People FT	None	Working class	Started at university at 18 and withdrew in year 1
Liz	Woman 37	Husband and 3 children	BSc (Hons.) Sports Therapy FT	FT legal assistant; PT personal trainer	Upper middle class	None
Luke	Man 36	Single. 2 children who live with their mother, but youngest occasionally stays at his house	BSc (Hons.) Sports Therapy FT	FT office manager	Working class	Achieved B.Eng whilst in the British army
George	Man 35	Wife and 2 children	Foundation degree Cyber	None	Working class	Started university

			Security FT			at 18 and withdrew
Amber	Woman 34	Single parent with 2 children: one child is autistic	Foundation degree Children and Young People FT	N/A	Middle class	None
Nina	Woman 34	Male partner	Top-up BA (Hons.) Education PT	FT FEC lecturer	Upper working class	Started at university at 18 and withdrew in year 1
Rosie	Woman 34	Single with a cat and a dog. Rosie has a declared disability: fibromyalgia	Top-up BA (Hons.) Education PT	FT trainer	Between the middle and working classes	Started university at 18 and withdrew. In her mid-twenties completed 2 years of a BSc at a different university.
Richard	Man 33	Lives with ex-partner and dog. Shopped for grandmother in lockdowns.	Top-up BA (Hons.) Education PT	FT officer for an awarding body; PT hairdresser	Working class moved up to middle class	Foundation degree at an FEC

Kim	Woman 32	Husband and 2 children	Foundation degree Children and Young People FT	None	Working class	None
Jess	Woman 31	Male partner and dog	Foundation degree Supporting Teaching and Learning FT	PT call centre operator	Working class	Started a degree at a university in her mid-twenties and withdrew.
Yiannis	Man 28	3 friends	BSc (Hons.) Sports Therapy FT	PT hotel receptionist	Middle class	None
Emma	Woman 25	Female partner and one child who has a developmental delay	Top-up BA (Hons.) Health and Social Care FT	PT restaurant server	Working class	Foundation degree at an FEC

Table 4.1: the participants

4.4 Research method: life history interviews

Each participant agreed to be interviewed about their educational and working histories.

I designed a semi-structured interview guide (appendix 2); this allowed the interviews to

be conversational whilst the question prompts ensured I covered the salient topics (Cohen, Manion and Morrison, 2011). There was enough space to elicit stories about schooldays, previous jobs and talk about their families. I probed to draw out attitudes to employment, study and care. I began each interview with the elicitation of some neutral personal information and rejected the approach of opening the interviews with a single initial question such as, 'Tell me about your life' which some narrative researchers (Guha, 2019; Malcolm, 2012) adopt. I felt this could be off-putting and construed as strange.

Listening attentively and responding to the participants' concerns was an important aspect of the interview process (Hesse-Biber, 2014b; Oakley, 1974). I was not always successful and as I transcribed the data, I would note silences I had unnecessarily filled or occasional abrupt topic changes. The shortest interview was 53 minutes and the longest lasted 1 hour and 55 minutes. Some participants were quite reticent whilst others relished the opportunity to speak about their lives: '*I talk a lot, sorry. I've thoroughly enjoyed it!'* [Kate]

COVID-19 restrictions dictated my decision to interview participants remotely. All 15 interviews took place online using Microsoft Teams and were recorded. By April 2021, the participants had been using this type of platform for their learning for over a year so were familiar with it (Kobhakhidze et al., 2021). The interviews took place between April-June 2021 during a phased exit from the third national lockdown in England (see appendix 1).

Online research interviews have a number of advantages. At a time when many people under 50 had not yet been offered a COVID-19 vaccination (National Audit Office, 2022), this mode reduced the risk of spreading the coronavirus. Online video interviewing makes research more accessible and democratic as participants do not need to spend

time or money on travel to an agreed location (Hesse-Biber, 2014b; Lo Iacono et al., 2016). Being in one's personal space can also help participants feel in control of the interview (Letherby, 2003), for example:

> *KIM: OK, will I just tell you everything? Will I just tell you my history, why I came into education at 30, what I'm doing?*
>
> *SALLY: Yes, and if there are any gaps in what you tell me that I would like to know about, I'll ask questions, but I'm happy for you to tell me.*
>
> *KIM: Tell you my life story? C'mon Sally, get yourself comfortable! [Laughter]*
> [Kim transcript]

Nonetheless, the interviews were also disadvantaged by issues which would not have happened in face-to-face interviews in a neutral space. Whilst researchers are advised to request participants choose a quiet space alone in which to be interviewed (Seitz, 2015), being in lockdown meant this request was unfeasible (Kobhakhidze et al., 2021). There were frequent on and off camera interruptions from children, partners and work colleagues. The risk of being overheard by partners and children troubled some participants. Nicky and Kate got up to close doors, so their children could not hear them discuss their pasts. Kim confessed embarrassment talking about her youth because her husband was nearby.

Finally, rapport may have been affected to some extent by video interviewing. In three interviews, screens were frozen for some time which disrupted the flow of conversation (Seitz, 2015). One participant did not explain why her camera was turned off which could have been because she wanted to protect the privacy of her home (Kobhakhidze et al., 2021) or the identity of her child who was sitting on her lap for much of our conversation.

I found the lack of nonverbal visual cues disconcerting as I could not really assess the 'emotional climate of the interview' (Hesse-Biber, 2014a: 221).

4.5 Research method: research journal

An additional method used is my research journal, which began as a way to record my decisions. I knew that these would otherwise be forgotten as my ideas developed. The journal contains experimental writing, lists and candid entries about the research process. For example, I had a broken arm when I conducted the interviews, and my father was poorly:

> *13.7.21 I was struggling a bit with wrist, dad. Plus, [interview] data didn't seem to fit my RQ and Kathi Weeks no longer seems appropriate especially as pandemic was so prominent and the problem of how to study at home with everything else going on…So I reread data, tried NVivo, rejected it. Started again on RQ. Realised it was messy and I felt uneasy/uncomfy cos a) I'm learning how to a PhD b) it is messy, not neat!* [Research journal]

The journal became a source of data as I realised it was also an unstructured method for me to critically reflect on my relationships with participants. Feminist research importantly brings to the surface questions about power hierarchies between researcher and participants (Hughes, 2002; Letherby, 2003; Mauthner and Doucet, 2003; Naples and Gurr, 2014; Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). The journal demonstrates how I would sometimes try to negotiate the similarities and differences between us with self-disclosure (Edwards, 1990), although this did not genuinely unbalance my power as the researcher.

I sometimes experienced strong emotions in the interviews e.g. Kate's story of her partner's brain tumour provoked sadness as it reminded me of my mother's. I concealed negative feelings on this occasion, and on others:

> *SALLY: Do you think that your gender influenced the course or the career path that you took?*

> *LUKE: I don't. I don't think gender had an impact… Back then, I mean, it was the army, do you know what I mean? It was the army, so I don't think gender played a part 'cos there was no gender segregation. It was just like 99% men.* [Luke transcript]

I later wrote:

> *Astonished when Luke said this! I am not sure why I didn't ask more. I find that I am quite hesitant about these topics as I don't want to alienate participants by being overt re.my feminist research stance.* [Research journal]

Thinking about how the researcher's reactions may have influenced the participants' stories is crucial in qualitative interviewing (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Upholding interview conditions for yielding information was paramount but this led to complicated feelings of complicity (Letherby, 2003; Malcolm, 2012). The research journal data allows me to elaborate my analysis by gaining insights into my own thoughts and feelings as I conducted the interviews.

4.6 Data Analysis: an overview of The Listening Guide

My method of data analysis was The Listening Guide (LG), but at the proposal stage of my research, I intended to conduct a thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2019). After I had transcribed three interviews, I trialled analysis using NVivo software. Whilst this

yielded an initial framework of themes, the categorisation of experiences into codes led to a fragmentation of the narratives (Inckle, 2020). The important connections and relationships that the participants had spoken about in their life histories were no longer paramount. Moreover, I wanted to 'preserve a focus on the individual' (McAlpine, 2016: 44) and to make sense of the intertwined relationship between researcher and researched which produces the account (Riessman, 2008).

The LG was developed by Gilligan (1982) as part of a broader narrative turn in qualitative research. It originated with psychology work with women and girls and is part of the feminist movement's second wave. Gilligan and colleagues privileged relationality in analyses of lived experience (Mauthner, 2019). They developed a feminist method which systematically attends to a range of different voices in a participant's transcript and gives the researcher's involvement meaning (Mauthner and Doucet, 2011; Woodcock, 2016). The LG enables the interdependence of the individual to larger social relations to be acknowledged (Golding and Hargreaves, 2018). This aspect of the resolutely feminist method also connects to Gouthro's (2009) theory of *the homeplace* and learning.

4.6.1 Transcription

The production of interview transcripts involves many decisions, yet this step is often presented as if it were objective (Riessman, 2008). I transcribed the video recordings in full, listening carefully and repeatedly. I did not tidy up the transcribed talk (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). Repetitions, interruptions and features of non-standard English dialects were retained. Whilst some researchers have argued this can make participants' accounts look 'simple' (Letherby, 2003: 119), I disagree. I do not wish to suggest that their spoken English is less valid than the academic discourse I use when writing here. My English language teaching and examining background and my MEd in Applied Linguistics have undoubtedly influenced this decision.

It was also important to maintain my questions and reactions in the transcripts as I played a role in the construction of the participants' narrated self (Doucet and Mauthner 2008; Riessman, 2008). Luke's interview transcript extract illustrates this as his explanation of working life was crafted for a middle-class woman with no shared experience of the army. A prior concept (gender) shapes my question and how I listened to him.

4.6.2 Reading 1: restorying, recurring language and reflexivity

The first step of the LG is to read, or listen, reflexively to the interview for the narrative. I broadly followed the sociological approach of Doucet and Mauthner (2008). I read the interview transcript for the main plot of the life story, noting aspects of language such as recurring words and metaphors which were a resource used by participants to express complex feelings or ideas. I then wrote a detailed chronological summary of each participant's narrative (see appendix 5 for an example) which allowed me to identify their influential experiences and turning points (Golding and Hargreaves, 2018; Riessman, 2008). The 'restorying' (Creswell and Poth, 2018: 72) immediately raised questions about my own personal background and political commitments as I recognise that the emphases in my retelling inevitably reflect these. Simultaneously, as I worked through each interview transcript, I explored my reactions. The LG traditionally suggests a worksheet technique where a respondent's words are laid out on one side and researchers' responses are written adjacently. Instead, I used the review feature of Microsoft Word and annotated my utterances as well as the participants'. Mauthner and Doucet (2011) argue that their version of the LG enables researchers to not only reflect on their social location and emotional responses, but to also consider how their theoretical commitments influence our interpretations. I felt this was crucial as I identified with Skeggs (1997) who admits her desire for control led her to sometimes map her theoretical framework onto participants' experiences. In documenting and articulating the process in the first reading and in my research journal, I aimed to lay down evidence

of my responses and strengthen the validity of my research (Mauthner and Doucet, 2011). My reactions were then explored as prompts for my thinking and analysis (Woodcock, 2016).

4.6.3 Reading 2: I-poems

The second reading of the LG focuses on the way in which respondents speak about themselves, their feelings and experiences (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008). In practical terms, the researcher writes I-poems, which are a distinctive feature of the LG (Woodcock, 2016). When the participant talks about themselves all the phrases which use *I* are highlighted or underlined, and important associated verbs or phrases are retained (Edwards and Weller, 2016; Golding and Hargreaves, 2018; Inckle, 2020). I did this electronically and then cut and pasted these in sequence, placing each verb phrase on a separate line, like the lines of a poem. I included the use of *we* and *you* as alternative uses of the first-person pronoun. Extracts from Stephen's transcript when he talks about his degree and an I-poem demonstrate the process:

STEPHEN: Realising that I needed, I have to have it. If I'm gonna reach that next level, I have to have it. And obviously thinking maybe that maybe in 10 years' time I want to retire then I wanna reach that next level of and it's having it. You think, 'Yes, actually I've done it at last'.

SALLY: Did you did your previous school experience make you feel like that?

STEPHEN: Yeah, yes and working. It's like, 'Finally!' It's almost a bit of validation. 'I've done it finally.' So yes, ''Actually maybe I should be in this job after all', you know. I mean, it's yeah, they place a lot of emphasis on education. And in certain roles, even if it's not necessarily the pinnacle of what you need, especially in work-based learning, it's not always relevant to what we need, that's the experience in the

90

workplace, more than the qualification, but they place their emphasis on it so much that <u>you feel that you should have it</u>. [Stephen transcript]

<u>That Next Level</u>

I needed,

I have to have it.

If I'm gonna reach that next level,

I have to have it.

I want to retire.

I want to reach that next level.

You think,

'I've done it at last.

I've done it finally.

Maybe I should be in this job after all.'

I mean

What you need

What we need

You feel you should have it. [Stephen I-poem]

I-poems can attune the reader to different voices in participants' stories that they may not have been aware of in a verbatim transcript. For example, I noticed the voice of instrumental motivation when I read the transcript, but the I-poem led me to another perception as I heard Stephen voicing feelings of workplace inadequacy. The centrality of the participant's voice during the second reading helps the researcher to 'stand alongside' participants rather than 'gaze at them' (Edwards and Weller, 2012: 215).

Like other LG researchers, I restricted how much data I used for the second reading. I did not create one lengthy I-poem for an entire transcript, rather I looked for 6-8 sections from a transcript which related to my research questions (Woodcock, 2016). For reading 2 LG researchers advocate detailed attention on a select number of cases to 'tune your ear' (Edwards and Weller, 2012: 206) rather than choosing the whole data set (Carter et al., 2018; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011), so I analysed ten transcripts using the I-poem method. I began with the first two interviewees, Nina and Luke, but thereafter I chose to focus attention on the participants who were the primary carer for other people or had financial dependants in *the homeplace* because this seemed to be a central story of my data. Although I felt some concern that I was short-changing the other five participants who were not primary carers or breadwinners, I had begun to reach a saturation point and I was mindful of time limitations (Mauthner and Doucet, 2011).

LG Readings	Participant Transcripts
1, 2, 3 and 4	Amber, Emma, Kate, Kim, Liz, Luke, Nicky, Nina, Stephen, Sue
1, 3 and 4 only	Jess, George, Richard, Rosie, Yiannis

Table 4.2 LG readings of participant transcripts

4.6.4 Reading 3: The self in relation

The third reading of the LG systematically examines how participants speak about their interpersonal relationships and social networks. In this reading, individualist conceptions of agency are replaced by a feminist understanding of the self in relation (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011). This was an important aspect of my analysis as it relates to Gouthro's (2009) theory of the role of *homeplace* relationships in learning. In Microsoft Word, I used the highlighter function to mark the words used about partners, children, parents and siblings in different colours. Their networks at college encompassed tutors, support staff and other mature students. Examining how they spoke about different relationships enabled me to distinguish between positive and more constraining relationships. This reading countered the prevailing notion of the self-sufficient, independent student which pervades HE discourses.

4.6.5 Reading 4: Enabling and disadvantaging structures

In the final reading, people are placed within broader cultural and social contexts (Golding and Hargreaves, 2018; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011). I read for the ways in which structural factors, such as social class, gender, age and sexuality, were seen by the 15 students as either enabling or disadvantaging structures. I was also interested in whether they were recognised as such or seen as private issues. For example, Nina and Liz describe instances when male colleagues belittle their academic qualifications. Whilst these can be understood as personal insults, as a feminist researcher I locate these in a larger social world in which the public world of work is a masculine domain (Mauthner and Doucet, 2011).

4.7 Ethical considerations

As a qualitative social researcher, it is important that the processes and decisions which guided my choices and my conduct are transparent and accountable (King, Horrocks

and Brooks, 2019). I adhered to The British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical code, and I was granted ethical clearance by Lancaster University.

The volunteers emailed their signed consent to me. The form (appendix 4) explained that they could withdraw their data up to 14 days after the interview without giving any reason. At the start of each interview, I reiterated this, checked the participant was happy with my recording it and gave time for questions. Afterwards, I returned to the matter of consent by asking them if they would like me to email the transcript for reading and comment. Pseudonyms were chosen by participants or by me if they did not want to choose a name. Likewise, family members, tutors and FECs were given pseudonyms and place names were made generic as I transcribed the data. Although this sounds relatively unproblematic, life histories generate large amounts of highly specific information, so in the chapters that follow I have made individual contextualised decisions to protect participants' anonymity (Brooks, Horrocks and King, 2019; Golding and Hargreaves, 2018).

Research ethics can often be presented as static and orderly (Letherby, 2002), but as I moved through different stages in my project, questions regarding my responsibility to the participants ambushed me. For instance, I wrestled with the ethics of sharing the products of my data analysis with the participants. Some LG researchers offer up the texts they produce for member-checking (e.g. Golding and Hargreaves, 2018; Inkle, 2020). Although this had not featured in my ethics submission, I began to think that the participants ought to see them (Woodcock, 2016). I recorded my thoughts in my research journal, which led me to interrogate my motives. Whilst I wanted confirmation of my analysis, I knew it was untenable to think they could just do this. Indeed, why bother doing the analysis at all if this is the case (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019)? The sharing of my interpretations would be a strategy for increasing participant inclusion (Letherby, 2003; Ramazonoğlu and Holland, 2002), yet sharing transcripts with the eight

people who requested them had not elicited any responses. The participants had effectively exited the research field at least seven months earlier. I decided that asking them to read and comment on the LG texts constituted more work and as many were overwhelmed, this was unethical. Finally, I was aware that feminist researcher interpretations of participants' lived experiences can be contentious (Bell, 2014; Ramazonoğlu and Holland, 2002; Skeggs, 1997). If participants disagreed with my interpretations, how would I resolve our differences? If two conflicting interpretations were merged, would this imply there is a 'true self' at the intersection? The 'narrated subject' (Doucet and Mauthner, 2008: 403) concept rejects this notion. I had to be honest and admit that the worst that could happen was that I might produce an interpretation which a participant did not identify with, but that this was unlikely to cause them harm (Bell, 2014; Letherby, 2003). I therefore decided not to share my analysis of the data with the participants.

4.8 Presenting the data

As a matter of social justice, I am committed to demonstrating the value of the mature students' narratives to HE discourses, so I grappled with how best to present these. An influential model was imaginative feminist storytelling; this challenges the dominant narratives which occlude marginalised people's life stories (de Nooijer and Sol Cueva, 2022; Woodiwiss et al., 2017). Burke and Jackson (2007) use this method to explore lifelong learning experiences, creating imaginary characters and texts. I admired this audacious disturbance of academic norms which Burke and Jackson deliberately position as an attempt to disrupt HE's authoritative 'literacy practice which is bound up with the workings of a particular social institution' (Lillis, 2001: 2). This model was also attractive as it avoids story fragmentation, and it facilitates communication with non-academic audiences (Duckworth and Smith, 2021). However, unlike Burke and Jackson (2007), I interviewed real people. Reducing them to amalgams of characteristics seemed

unfair; indeed, this was a reason why I resisted thematic analysis as I wanted to honour their life histories. The social arrangements which brought the mature students into HE in FE can be traced in the narratives which also act as a lens on how *the homeplace* affects their learning. Therefore I wanted to include extracts from the transcript and I-poems in the findings. Readers can then 'see representations of the different voices on a page and can interrogate them, questioning (perhaps) the meaning…or decisions made' (Riessman, 2008: 137). I accept the choices made are an exercise of my power as researcher (Ramazanoğlu and Holland, 2002). As narrative research explores the way researcher and participants create stories together (Fraser and MacDougall, 2017), I also include some extracts from my research journal.

Choosing particular narratives to discuss was a complex process dictated by my understandings of narrative in social research and my research questions. I was influenced by Frank (2015) and Miller (2017), both of whom discuss the availability of narrative resources to social actors. Therefore as I read the 15 transcripts multiple times, I began to note in my research journal the types of narratives that appeared. This was a recursive process which continued well into the drafts of the next two chapters. I clustered together participant stories which had similar plots or characters (Fraser and MacDougall, 2017; McAlpine, 2016) and although I discerned patterns, I also noted outliers. I next categorised the participants' stories according to how they spoke to my research questions. I noticed that certain ones 'call out as needing to be written about' (Frank, 2015: 10). Identifying the storylines led me next to label them (Miller, 2017). I use these labels as the subheadings for the narratives in chapters 5 and 6, which each address a different research subquestion.

How did work in the home during lockdowns shape the learning of HE in FE mature students?

Chapter 5: How does their learning at home interact with their care work and paid labour?	Chapter 6: To what extent are FECs providing support for HE mature students who labour at home?
The changing *homeplace*	FEC peer relationships
Care work as a threat to women's learning	Collective *homeplaces*
Problematising strong women, guilty mams	Staff understanding of mature students' lives
The rewards of care work	Reimagining learning from work
Living without care work: freeing up space to learn	Developing critical social literacies
The colonisation of *the homeplace* by paid work	Sharing the mature student experience
Homeplace resistance: reclaiming spaces	
Looking for *homeplace* stability	

Table 4.3 Labels for the storylines

4.9 Conclusion

In summary, this chapter outlined my research aims and the ontological and epistemological assumptions underpinning my methodology. I considered the importance of my positionality and explored why a narrative inquiry was the most suitable research design. I introduced the participants, discussed my two research methods, the data analysis method, and ethical considerations. Finally, I justified the presentation of

texts in the findings and discussion chapters which follow. In the next two chapters, I represent the participants' stories using extracts from the transcripts, I-poems and my research journal.

Chapter 5: Learning in *the homeplace*: findings and discussion

5.1 Introduction

The two chapters which follow present my findings and discuss them in relation to my research aims. This chapter focuses on the participants' experiences of learning in *the homeplace* and how these intersected with their paid work and care work during the lockdowns of 2020-2021. Chapter 6 focuses on the extent to which FECs are providing support for HE mature students who labour at home.

This chapter begins with a definition of *the homeplace* as a learning space and how this changed in the lockdowns for the mature students. I show through my findings and discussion that for mature women students with dependants, gendered relations ensured that care work was their responsibility. Their care work expanded with the closure of school premises. Notions of individual choice about when and where they would study were emptied of meaning. Existing gendered narrative frameworks intensified feelings of burnout. However, giving and receiving care was also pleasurable at times and opportunities for learning expanded for those with no care work responsibilities. *The homeplace* is therefore a key site for relationships which can both support and threaten the HE learning of the participants. I give attention to the way in which paid work digitally colonised *the homeplace* and the conflict with study this occasioned. I look at how the mature students renegotiated and reinstated the boundaries between public and private spaces, resisting the 'boundarylessness' (Blackmore, 2006: 22) of lockdowns in their *homeplaces.* They exercised agency as they constructed spaces in which they could reclaim their *homeplaces*. Although withdrawal was a possibility for the mature students, their life histories and family relationships sustained their degrees as they sought a future stable *homeplace*.

5.2 The changing *homeplace*

Home is not conceptualised easily. Whilst Gouthro acknowledges the affective meanings of home, hers is a material concept: a physical, private space bounded by walls. In this chapter I adopt her definition of the *homeplace* as 'a central site of living and learning' (Gouthro, 2009: 160).

COVID-19 lockdowns fundamentally changed the nature of the mature students' learning activities in the home. Their experiences were dominated by the impact of three English national Coronavirus lockdowns in 2020-1, and two additional regional lockdowns in 2020 which affected the 7 local authority areas in northeast England where they lived (appendix 1). Until March 2020, all the participants had attended sessions at their FECs, apart from George who enrolled on his degree in September 2020. Therefore they were accustomed to attending face-to-face sessions with their lecturers and other students. The full-time students also studied in college libraries and dedicated HE study spaces. The part-time students attended twilight sessions after leaving work. The Foundation and BSc Sports Therapy degrees also included work placements. Those students who had paid jobs were required to work from home, although Yiannis, Liz and Emma were furloughed during the first lockdown.

Until lockdowns closed their colleges and workplaces, *the homeplace* was often a marginal space for learning. Studying at home usually took place at weekends or in the evenings, although research on mature students has demonstrated that for female students with dependent children, finding time to study at home before the pandemic was extremely challenging (Brooks, 2012; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Marandet and Wainwright, 2010; Reay, 2003). Several of the participants who were not parents of young children also avoided study in *the homeplace* outside of lockdowns because of distractions: '*I wouldn't have done it. I'd have thought, 'Ooh that ironing needs doing''* [Sue]. At the time of the first lockdown, none of the participants had a dedicated or protected study space at home. This reflects the fact that *the homeplace* was seen as a

space for living rather than as a learning space: *'My space was sitting on the bed with my laptop with the door shut in my bedroom'* [Kim]. *'I didn't have a desk. I'd be sitting on the couch or sitting on my sitting room floor typing away on my laptop'* [Luke]. In lockdowns *the homeplace* became the sole learning space. Their experiences of learning were affected by whether they had care work and paid work to do within the same space. I will begin with a discussion of the findings about the learning of those with care responsibilities and why this was a gendered issue.

5.3 Care work as a threat to women's learning

The time which was available to the participants to study was largely determined by their unpaid care responsibilities and paid work. All the participants worked, but not all of them cared for other people, and they did not all have paid jobs. Amongst the 15 participants, care work was unevenly distributed: seven of the ten women have dependants, and they did most of their care work. Luke and George both have children; however, Luke's children do not live with him. Male references to caring for others are limited to Richard and George. Richard shopped for his grandmother in lockdowns: *'my mam would go one day in the week, and I would go on the Saturday or Sunday'.* George shared childcare with his wife:

> *She's very supportive on that front and well, if I have a deadline and I really need to just learn, she will stay with the kids and will keep them downstairs and I'll be upstairs and working… when one of us needs time, the other one will kind of try and do everything else.* [George transcript]

The dominant story from the transcripts was that care work for elderly people and children fell mainly to women, which negatively affected their learning, but this was not an outcome reported by the men. So although men in heterosexual couples may have increased their share of childcare and housework in lockdowns, women's unpaid

101

workload also increased, leaving gender role attitudes undisturbed for the most part (Derndorfer et al., 2021; Yucel and Chung, 2021). My findings bear out a widely noted trend in the lockdowns, many UK heterosexual couples moved to a 'back to the 1950s' (Chung et al., 2021: 219) division of labour.

Liz works full-time as a legal assistant, studies full-time and has three school age children. She describes the strain of domestic work and childcare not being shared with her male partner in lockdowns:

> *Things haven't been great in that respect... a lot being put on me with the housework… the majority of the housework which is an absolute state at the moment. It's just with papers everywhere. But yes, housework, making sure that the children are fed, and they go to activities, so I'm taking them to activities and so a lot a lot falls on me. He'll put the dishwasher on occasionally.* [Liz transcript]

Gouthro (2009) emphasises that in many heterosexual relationships the weight of domestic work and care is assumed to be an essential aspect of being a mother, wife or adult daughter. In other words, 'a gendered division of labor morph[s] into a gendered definition of work' (Weeks, 2011: 63). Sue regards caring for her elderly, disabled mother as daughter's work, and she also has wife's work. She works as a full-time manager, and studies on a part-time degree course:

> *Really what I should be doing is claiming Carer's Allowance or something, but I don't because to me, she's my mam. So obviously I do all the housework. I do her ironing and washing and make sure it's all done. My husband's a surface cleaner, so bless him, he'll keep it tidy throughout the week. But on the weekend, I go home and do my own cleaning. He won't iron.* [Sue transcript]

Gendered roles within *the homeplace* had a profound influence on the time available for mature women to study. The participants' life histories draw on cultural scripts which have moulded their expectations about gendered roles and labour in *homeplaces* and beyond. These 'taken-for-granted discourses' (Riessman, 2008: 3) determine how it seems both natural and even correct to divide work into female and male categories:

> *My mam stayed at home. And dad was a labourer, he grafted. He worked really, really hard…. My mam, when she had us obviously, she stayed at home which back then was the done thing, I think. It was like the norm, and I remember going home from school to lovely home-cooked meals and lovely, you know, just she was a proper mam.* [Sue transcript]

> *Dad went out to work full-time. My mam spent most of her life caring for my grandma, so she didn't work. Didn't go into work when we were kids. She was a proper stay-at-home mam.* [Kate transcript]

The terms 'a proper mam' and 'full-time mam' recur in the transcripts. They have a prescriptive force: a mother should stay at home, cook and care for family members. A learnt-at-home ethic of paid work can be discerned in the interviews, which valorises masculinised employment and defines family care as feminised 'non-work' (Weeks, 2011). Whereas male labour is both public and paid, feminine childcare is deemed 'unproductive' (Gouthro, 2009): '*One [sister] used to be a teacher, but she doesn't do anything now. She's a mam'* [Luke].

Existing gender-normative assumptions laid the ground for another form of care work to be added to the mature female students' workloads: home-schooling. From March 2020, pupils were required to learn at home as their schools closed, remaining open only to certain groups of children. By May 2020, women in the UK were spending an average

of 22.5 hours per week on home-schooling and childcare, whereas for men the time spent was 12 hours (Xue and McMunn, 2021).

> *She [his wife] does more, she mostly did the home schooling, especially last year when I was at work, she was doing a lot of it. I tried to do more because I'm better at maths than her, so I tried to help on that side.* [George transcript]

Although 47% of all UK workers were working from home in April 2020 (Chung et al., 2021), the opportunity for a more equitable distribution of care work provided by working from home was not evident. As home-schooling was largely a gendered form of labour, the capacity for HE learning of many women students with school age children was negatively affected. For student mothers who had paid jobs, the supervision of home-schooling added a fourth dimension to their 'triple shift' (Smith, 2017: 107). Home-schooling was only discussed in detail by Liz, Amber, Nicky, Emma and Kim. These student mothers all told me their own learning was at times pushed aside by the need to help children with home-schooling and some also shared a laptop with their children. All described how they had considered withdrawing from their degree programmes as they simultaneously tried to study, work and help their children learn. Whilst the children's school days at least had some parameters, in order to accommodate home-schooling, their own study time began sometimes as early as 5am and, for some, regularly went on past midnight.

The student mothers felt isolated as they attempted to continue their own studies whilst also supervising home-schooling. Although online video conferencing sessions granted them access to learning, they were often unable to participate fully. Their children needed help and interruptions would occur:

I would have to maybe pause what I was doing to help them out with something. If she [child] needed us, I would have to say, sorry to the tutor: 'I'm going to have to nip off for a minute.' [Nicky transcript]

Liz found home-schooling three children very disruptive for her own learning, '*I'm stopping and starting for to help the kids with their work.*' She calls the periods of lockdown *'horrific'* and applied for mitigation because she could not sustain studying, '*It was just the home schooling... I ended up, cos I was working as well, I ended up working late at night.*' Kim also felt she was reaching breaking point:

My husband was working in the supermarket, and he was working full-time, you know. So, I had my children, and I had my degree absolutely on my own and that was the first point that I thought, 'I can't do this. I'm gonna have to throw the towel in or something'. [Kim transcript]

Although online sessions allowed the women carers equal access to HE learning, their relationships to others and their labour inhibited their full participation. The lack of boundary between *the homeplace* and place of study created unpredictable interruptions which often prevented meaningful engagement with learning. Video conferencing with lecturers and other students reinforced rather than relieved feelings of isolation for some of them, *'I felt I was watching everything, and I wasn't concentrating enough'* [Sue]. '*I struggled... No cameras on. It was just staring a blank screen, so I found that really off-putting'* [Liz].

Using Gouthro's (2009) framework enables this problem to be conceptualised as a gendered structural issue rather than an individualised choice on the part of the carers. Their ability to learn was hampered by the expectation that women prioritise care for others in *the homeplace* above their other duties. Gouthro's theory highlights that a failure to acknowledge this in lifelong learning contexts sustains inequality for mature

women who have care responsibilities. This denies them full citizenship where their perspectives and views are heard and discussed. By becoming mature students, some of the women had begun to embrace a form of autonomy in which care work and studying could be managed, albeit with some difficulty, but this was being threatened.

The creation of I-poems as part of the LG analysis of the life history transcripts illuminates Gouthro's (2004) theoretical argument that for many care-giving mature female students, their student identity is almost peripheral to their central familial identities. However, my argument is that what is at stake is not so much the conflict between a new identity and a residual one, rather it is their work in relation to other people that threatens their HE learning.

Kim's autonomy was threatened by the imposition of a full-time care role in *the homeplace* in lockdowns. She explains how becoming a full-time HE student in 2019 made her feel complete, *'my brain was turning on. I wasn't just a mam, I was Kim'*. Her I-poem shows her enforced pivot to 'full-time mam' in March 2020:

And then COVID happened.

I wasn't Kim.

I was a full-time mam.

I was

I was home-schooling two children.

I had

I had my children.

I had my degree.

I thought,

I thought,

'I have to,

I have to stop the degree.

I can't say,

I'm not going to be a mam.' [Kim I-poem]

It was the home-based labour associated with both roles which threatened Kim's studies as prior to lockdowns she had accommodated full-time studies and motherhood. Amber also considered withdrawal because child-rearing was irreconcilable with learning in the *homeplace*:

I can't

I can't deal with all of it.

I don't,

I can't even explain.

You don't want you try

You sort of

You try to eliminate the things that

You can. [Amber I-poem]

The pronouns shift between *I* and *you* as Amber moves from describing the particularities of being a single mother with two children *[I],* one of whom is an autistic child, to possible strategies anyone *[you]* facing stress might use. These changes in voice perhaps reflect the difficulty of holding one position in an intolerable situation. Expressing how her own motivation for learning was sabotaged by her children's care taking place wholly within *the homeplace* is testing for Amber. In the whole transcript of Amber's life history interview, third person subject pronouns prevail. This makes it hard to trace the phrases using *I* and renders her I-poem texts notably shorter than those of other participants. This is perhaps because the emplotment of her life history is largely shaped by Amber's role in relation to other family members: her parents, the fathers of her children, and most notably her children. Whilst Gouthro (2004) identifies a tendency for women students with care responsibilities to put others before themselves, the data show that this gendered pattern of labour became an expectation when lockdowns moved many forms of care into *homeplaces*.

Amber, Nicky, Liz and Kim are well aware that they do not fit the dominant conceptualisation of an HE student: 'an autonomous individual unencumbered by domestic responsibilities' (Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003: 599). They all contrast their own *homeplaces* with those of younger students on their full-time courses. Comparing her current self with childfree students makes Amber feel unintelligent, whilst the voice of her younger self is confident:

I'm older.

I'm thinking,

'I feel really stupid.'

They made us feel stupid.

108

I struggle now.

When I was younger,

I wouldn't have had that.

If I had done it

Before I had both children.

Amber believes younger students stigmatise her and feels frustrated by their perceived lack of understanding. Liz also complains that students with no dependants cannot appreciate the amount of care work she has in addition to her degree. Liz's I-poem shows two competing voices, the committed student versus the frustrated student who does not think her care responsibilities are a sufficient explanation for why she has not been able to focus on her own studies during the third lockdown:

I've managed fine the last two years.

I've been on track,

I managed absolutely fine.

I don't know what happened.

I just,

I haven't coped in all honesty. [Liz I-poem]

Because their care work is mostly invisible to those outside their *homeplaces*, Amber and Liz are negatively affected by commonly held views about what work is 'productive' (Gouthro, 2010: 464). They know parenting labour affects their engagement, but there

are no mechanisms to formally acknowledge it, so they feel they do not measure up as students; this causes distress as I discuss below.

An outcome of the female mature students' care work in lockdowns was potential burnout. The increase in care with the concomitant reduction of time and space for female mature students' own learning in the *homeplace* led to stress and exhaustion. Kate felt pressure building to communicate her distress:

I'm a resilient woman.

I was getting to that point-

If I do not speak about this,

I'm just gonna burnout. [Kate I-poem]

Nicky also teetered on the brink of degree withdrawal. Her studying was affected by the impact that *homeplace* care and her isolation as a single mother had on her mental health. In the poem her voice oscillates between suppressing her misery and taking action by withdrawing from her degree in order to relieve her suffering:

I mean my mental health.

I just wrote.

I basically said,

'I'm ready to throw the towel in.

I can't cope.'

I got an extension.

I was trying to keep it together.

I emailed my tutor.

I said,

'I can't do this.' [Nicky I-poem]

The I-poems' concentration on verb phrases which foreground the women's feelings and thoughts reveal the see-sawing they experienced in lockdowns. Their work as caregivers and their work as students is felt to be incompatible when all their labour is concentrated in *the homeplace.*

5.4 Problematising strong women and guilty mams

Two gendered narratives further complement the dominant discourse which casts the maintenance of *the homeplace* and childcare as a private issue set outside the circuit of what is deemed economically productive: the trope of the strong, independent woman who is expected to surmount all challenges, and the narrative of female guilt when studying is prioritised over time with children. These are critically analysed in relation to transcript and research journal data.

Research on mature students has shown that discursive constructions of student parents by lecturers sometimes cast them as heroic figures (Brooks, 2012b; Moreau and Kerner, 2012; NUS, 2009). Such expectations paved the way for feelings of personal failure when some of the student mothers found that the space to learn became more remote in lockdowns. Sue, Liz, Kate and Nicky all comment ruefully on their lowered grade profiles as the lockdowns took hold, but they blame themselves for not having managed their time better and for not being more resilient:

I could not find the time [for an assignment] and usually I can get up at 4 o'clock in the morning...I just didn't feel like I had the physical space to do it, or the emotional space and my head just wasn't up to it. Every time I tried to do it, you know, that overwhelming thing where you just can't. [Kate transcript]

In her life history interview, Kate proudly describes her working-class mother as '*a strong, independent woman*'. She uses the same phrase again to describe her own parenting, and her relationship with her female partner is similarly characterised: '*people say there's not much you two lasses can't do*'. However, the 'strong, independent woman' narrative leaves Kate and Liz questioning their personal capacity when they find paid work, care for their children and study crushing in lockdowns. Naturalising care as a feminine trait, strong or otherwise, allows institutions to rely on unpaid women's care. The framing of a failure to cope as an individualised problem actively works against the recognition of the interdependence of the so-called private sphere of family care and the public sphere of paid work and education (Gouthro, 2009).

The amount of work faced by many of the female carers in *the homeplace* also leads to another story familiar in research into the experiences of mature students. References to feelings of guilt about studying (Butcher, 2015; Edwards, 1993; Norton et al., 1998; Webber, 2015) pepper the narratives because children receive less of their mothers' and grandmothers' time and attention: '*That's when I've probably felt the most guilty as a mam, mind*' [Nicky]. '*He's [grandchild] my priority and my daughter would say, 'I'll not come around.' But then I felt guilty*' [Sue]. Intensive parenting has become a commonplace and recognisable cultural script in the UK (The Care Collective, 2020; Lynch, 2022; Miller, 2017), demanding that more time and money are spent on children than was expected in the past. That the children '*always come first*' [Liz] is axiomatic, but this idealised narrative of parenting 'remains largely about mothers' (Springer, Parker and Leviten-Reid, 2009: 439). Indeed, guilt does not at all occur in the narratives of the

student fathers, George and Luke. As I reflexively annotated the transcripts, I became aware of how implicated I was in this mothering script. I realised I had colluded with this dominant narrative by only asking the female carers about whether they ever felt guilty. Methodologically, my question and the responses highlight the performative and relational aspect of life history interviews (Doucet, 2016; Mauthner and Doucet, 2011; Riessman, 2008).

My question about guilt is all the more surprising when I examine my own story:

> *When I did my MEd, I didn't really feel guilty about not spending time with E & B [my children]. Was I socialised differently by my mum? She took time for herself and made dad do his share. Or was it my self-conscious feminism that protected me from this female form of guilt?* [Research journal]

So why did I ask the women carers this question? Perhaps its prevalence in the literature on this group (Burrow et al., 2016; Gouthro, 2011; Webber, 2015) heightened its prominence and led me to expect it. Perhaps it also reveals my preoccupation with the normative scripts which are available to male and female mature students (Britton and Baxter,1999; Tett, 2000). That women are often socialised to prioritise their family roles over more public ones such as paid worker or full-time student is a perspective that needs to be recognised (Gouthro, 2009; Gouthro, 2010). Yet these gendered *homeplace* scripts only applied when care work for dependants was at stake. Despite this, the mutual dependence inherent in care work is beneficial to the participants who do it.

5.5 The rewards of care work

Whilst primary care for other humans in *the homeplace* is demanding and at times threatened some of the female participants' learning, it is also rewarding. Lynch (2022) terms this type of family care 'love labour' and distinguishes it from more generalised

forms of caring, arguing that it is 'affectively driven work that enhances humans as relational beings' (p. 67). Bunting (2020) also highlights this aspect when she quotes a family carer who believes 'care…enriches the giver as much as the recipient' (p. 64).

Whilst the work of care compromises study, it can be very pleasurable: '*The bairn was off [school] all the time and, 'Oh he wants to play,' and instead of uni work I'd be like, 'Aw ok, let's do it'* [Emma]. Kim also expresses her delight: '*The little pop ins, 'I love you mam,' and you can't ignore that!'.* Sue tells me, '*Now my grandson is here, I like to have him one night a week if I can because he just brings me so much pleasure'.* The moral imperative to be attentive to dependants' wellbeing is extremely important in these relationships. Loving and caring entail being responsive to another's needs which can involve difficult physical work, for example Sue and Amber help their elderly mother and teenager respectively with their personal care. The level of commitment and responsibility are tiring, yet the carers feel loved and trusted so there is satisfaction in 'love labour' (Lynch, 2022: 4) even if they feel they have little choice about it:

> *My oldest with the learning disabilities and things doesn't understand as much, so I've been at college all day, and they usually come in to food cooked and ready to eat. And on the day that I'm at college all day, it's not. So it causes meltdowns, so then I can't do work from home because I have to sort of take care of the meltdown, tidy the mess up, things like that…I mean, I wouldn't change anything.* [Amber transcript]

> *Is it fair? I don't know whether that's the right word to use. I feel like I just think she's my mam and I've got to make sure she's all right. My sister would see it as being unfair, but I don't.* [Sue transcript]

Some of the participants cared for animals. Stephen, Richard, Jess and Rosie all had pets. Sue looked after her daughter's dog and took her to visit her mother, '*my mam*

loves to see the dog'. Interacting with pets and walking dogs is seen as life-enhancing and healthy:

> *I like walking, taking the dog to the beach and stuff like this. The peace and quiet, the fact that you can clear your head and get your head out of that space. I find that actually is quite destressing.* [Stephen transcript]

> *I think sometimes just getting outside can be very replenishing. If you need to divide your day. 'Alright, I've stopped work, now go out for a 20 minute [dog] walk. Right, now I'm studying.'* [Rosie transcript]

There were also high levels of interdependence in the caring relationships. The mature students who lived with others report frequent acts of practical care from the people they lived with which sustained them and their learning. Emma, Jess, Kate, Nina, Stephen and Sue appreciated their partners cooking meals for them whilst they studied. Kate's partner, Mel, made her *'a gorgeous desk'* and *'the kids do work in the house'*. Kate and Liz's children brought them drinks and snacks when they wrote assignments. Richard tells me his ex-partner helped him study by sharing pet care, '*I would come in on a Sunday and lock myself away and he would just get up and take the dog out for an hour'.* Whilst Liz was frustrated that her partner had not discussed agreeing to overtime whilst she was writing her dissertation, he made helpful gestures, *'If he sees I'm really low on paper, he'll pop to town and buy some and he'll make all the cuppas'.*

Participants' *homeplace* relationships also provide them with invaluable affective care. Yiannis appreciates his flatmates who helped him, *'by exchanging ideas, opinions and basically ways of how we can make our study more effective'*. Encouragement came from children, *'I've got lovely kids. And yeah, you know you have those moments and they're like, 'Come on mammy, you can do it. It's only a thousand words''* [Liz]. Nina and Richard tell me how their parents and grandparents often called and texted them in

lockdowns to enquire about dissertation progress. Relationships with partners, parents, sisters and children are all credited with providing crucial emotional support so that an imminent decision to withdraw from a degree was not taken. '*My husband said, 'Sue, you've got to do this.' He said, 'Get a grip' … Oh yeah. He really did, 'Get a grip!''* [Sue]. '*My partner…she's quite hmmm, she'll just tell us. She'll be like, 'Well, you could stop but then what are you gonna do?''* [Emma]. These stories demonstrate that the capacity to care is not determined by gender and that caring for others and being cared for improves lives (The Care Collective, 2020; Lynch, 2022). However, whilst the lockdowns opened up a learning space for both male and female mature students in the *homeplaces* where care work for humans was not needed, the absence of mutual care was difficult for those who lived alone.

5.6 Living without care work: freeing up space to learn

The outcome of lockdowns on *homeplace* learning was generally seen as positive by the participants who were not unpaid carers, but those who lived alone did not experience the care from other people which can be sustaining and nurturing. Students who did not have to care for dependants make explicit comparisons to their colleagues who did, '*I often wonder how anyone would manage it with family responsibilities*' [Rosie]. '*I'm quite lucky because I live on my own. If I didn't live on my own, I would've been struggling to maybe get the workload done*' [Luke]. In stark contrast to the women who were caring for children or older relatives, these students experienced an opening up of space in which to study within *the homeplace*.

Nina and Richard live with a partner and ex-partner respectively. Both students work full-time and study part-time. Nina's voice is reflective as she considers how lockdowns were '*a blessing*':

> *I think*

I was able to concentrate,

Work a lot more than I would have.

I think

I might have found it more difficult

If we hadn't had the pandemic.

I'd be sacrificing more,

I think.

I haven't had a choice

I'm in the house. [Nina I-poem]

The private space of *the homeplace* was sealed off but Nina was able to exercise autonomy as a learner because of this. Richard explains how the enforced withdrawal from the public world made space to learn:

> *The thing that got me through this BA has been the lockdowns. These bursts of where you cannat leave the house, you cannat. Like I've been confined to the house, so I've then turned on the laptop.* [Richard transcript]

In contrast, Yiannis, found the lack of structure in lockdown days difficult to manage and fell behind with written assignments; however, his tutors supported him to catch up. For most of the mature students who did not have care responsibilities for dependent humans, confinement to their *homeplace* allowed their learning to flourish in the physical absence of family and friends:

My mam's back to work now, but she was furloughed for a long time, and she kept sort of messaging to say, 'Shall we go for a walk?' or, 'We're allowed to meet up outside now.' And I'm like, 'No, mam, I'm busy. I have to do this [BA dissertation].' [Nina transcript]

Gouthro does not theorise the *homeplace* experiences of single people. Her thinking concerns mature women whose *homeplaces* are busy with care. Her conceptualisation is influenced by hooks' (1990) assumption of nurture and care from others within the safety of the home. Although the single people may have been unencumbered by care for other people, they were also not recipients of care at home. Rosie and Luke both live alone. Luke explains, *'I split up from my partner. That was one of the things that led sort of to depression and so I live on my own'*. It is important to recognise that whilst single life or life without dependants may have allowed mature students more time to study, being alone in *the homeplace* during lockdowns could be lonely. Rosie cares for her pets, but nobody cares for her, so whilst she had time and space to learn in lockdowns, she was often too debilitated by fibromyalgia to study, '*I find it difficult to be seated in the same position...sometimes I find it can be quite isolating 'cause I don't drive and live alone*'.

The absence of care work provided more space within the *homeplace* for learning, but this gap was also filled by paid work for some students. Paid work entered the students' *homeplaces* digitally in lockdowns and the colonisation of the private sphere by the public began in earnest, leaving little room for HE studies, as I discuss in the following section. This affected both the students who had care responsibilities and those who did not.

5.7 The colonisation of *the homeplace* by paid work

The closure of schools, FECs and the UK government's guidance that people should work from home where possible in March 2020 loosened the sense of privacy attached to mature students' *homeplaces*. This space 'is often perceived as a refuge or place of solace' (Gouthro, 2009: 162). Critical feminist theory views the division between public spaces of work, school and college and the private space of home as artificial; nevertheless, the boundaries between them are generally understood (ibid). Although the dominant neoliberal discourse insists that the home is conceptualised as a private space (Fraser, 2017), *the homeplace* simply could not operate as a private space of retreat from the harsh public world of work when it was colonised by the mature students' paid work.

Jess, Kate, Luke, Nina, Richard, Rosie, Stephen and Sue were required to work from home during lockdowns. Although they spent no time commuting, some of them found that paid work expanded to fill this time, as other FE researchers have found (Gadsby and Smith, 2023). However, Rosie feels, '*I've been gifted time from not commuting, not having to travel this extra three hours every day'*. Being at home alleviates some of the impact of her disability on her paid work:

> *My job did use to involve travel across the northeast… so that's made my job a hell of a lot easier because I didn't use to take a lot of sick days, but if I'm having a bad day pain-wise or fatigue-wise I can still come into my spare room and start work at 8am rather than having to start later or take the day off.* [Rosie transcript]

For Sue and Stephen, the intrusion of workplace activity into *the homeplace* pushes social reproductive activities of renewal, like sleeping, eating and drinking to the margins:

> *He [husband] would come in the dining room and say, 'Right, you need to move away from here and come and have a sandwich and a cup of tea.' And I'd say, 'No, wait a minute.' I kept thinking, 'Oh, something else has popped up!' When*

you're at home and things are popping up, you think, 'Oh, I'll just leave that on, because when I've done that, I'll just nip back to it'…So it was really, really difficult, a really difficult time and I had the uni work on top of that as well, and I just thought, 'I can't do all this.' [Sue transcript]

Before when I was in the office, I would finish at like 5 or 6 o'clock. You'd finish. You'd go home, right? But your home life and your work life merge into one and so you're at the desk at 8 o'clock. [Stephen transcript]

The public domain of work was able to penetrate the students' *homeplaces* so comprehensively, precisely because social reproductive needs such as nutrition and rest can be overlooked if they are deemed private. Paid work took on a parasitical aspect: it found an opening in these students' *homeplaces* and gradually took over. Two participants said their managers did not take any account of their home lives, expecting responses to emails in the evenings and at weekends. Disregard for employees' domestic sphere is commonplace (Davis, 1981; Fraser, 2020a; Gouthro, 2009) but in lockdowns digital communication intensified as many institutions tried to maintain their pre-pandemic routines (Gadsby and Smith, 2023). The pressure to be online became draining and intolerable:

I tend to start work about 7am and so I tried to do 7 'til 3, so the thought of coming back on [to online BA sessions] for those three hours on a night…it was crippling, especially when you've got your own stuff going on. [Richard transcript]

I tried very hard to set some times that I could do it [BA], first thing in the morning and stuff like this, but then I just wouldn't. It [paid work] would be nonstop the days where I'd block out the morning. I'd think, 'Right I'll block out the morning,' … and other things, everything would go to pot. [Stephen transcript]

I've struggled in the evenings and weekends to have the energy and enthusiasm to then pour as much brain power into my degree work because by the time you've got to Friday afternoon you feel like, 'Phew! I need to not look at a computer for two days.' [Rosie transcript]

Paid work swelled and stifled some participants' HE learning opportunities regardless of their care work. The mental spill-over (Yucel and Chung, 2021) from work encroaching on the spatial territory of home affected Nina, Richard, Rosie, Sue and Stephen's capacity to study.

Whilst the domestic realm and the public realm are interdependent, maintaining separate physical spaces for the two domains rendered the mature students' lives more manageable. The blurring within *the homeplace* of public and private was *'really, really difficult'* [Sue]. However, despite many negative potential outcomes caused by the intersection of care work and paid work in their homeplaces, all of the participants had sustained their degree studies. None withdrew or suspended their studies. Below I examine how the mature students practised resistance to the encroachment of the public realm in *the homeplace* and reaffirmed boundaries.

5.8 *Homeplace* resistance: reclaiming spaces

Resisting the 'boundarylessness' (Blackmore, 2006: 22) between the private and public spheres engendered by lockdowns involved the creation of separate physical spaces for different types of relationships and labour. At the start of the pandemic, many of the mature students found their study was pushed into marginal spaces in *the homeplace*, '*I was sat on a chair with the laptop on a windowsill'* [Richard]. '*I always took myself upstairs or in a different room to shut the world out*' [Kate]. Fraser uses the term 'boundary struggles' (2017: 25) in an abstract sense to discuss the delimiting of the economic from the social, but as the lockdowns continued, the students negotiated ways

to make their *homeplace* boundaries more concrete. In time, they constructed new sites within the home to study and new spaces for their laptops. '*All my college study stuff is in here now. This laptop and everything's in here'* [Kate]. Rosie and Jess used separate laptops in different rooms to demarcate their paid work and their study time:

> *I have my work laptop plugged into a monitor in my spare room, again I feel very privileged that I have a spare room. And my laptop, that's my personal laptop, I have my college work on. I wouldn't. I wouldn't sit in my spare room to use that.* [Rosie transcript]

> *In work's time I went out and bought like a cheap desk which is just in my living room. And that's where I'll do company work. And that's what happens there and then upstairs in the spare bedroom, I've sort of changed that into my study.* [Jess transcript]

The construction of these spaces allows them to reaffirm boundaries, so they begin to regain a sense of control which reduces the stress associated with finding time and space in the home to study. Separating physical spaces is not always possible but Nina uses a physical activity to demarcate work and study:

> *Now I've got a bit of an office space which I use for work and my degree, but I just shove my work stuff off the desk and bring up my degree stuff, so it feels like a different place but it's not.* [Nina transcript]

The separation of different domains was also threatened by the supervision of home-schooling, but some of the student mothers resisted this. They reclaimed *the homeplace* as an affective domain, representing nurture and renewal for their children:

122

The home schooling! Oh, it nearly tipped me over the edge. I mean, it was just, they were frustrated, I was frustrated…and there was often times where my youngest would get so upset. And I would say, 'This is not healthy. This is our home. This isn't a school environment. This is not healthy. Put it down and leave it. And we're not going back to it.' [Nicky transcript]

He just wouldn't do it [schoolwork], so with him being so little we just put on a note saying, 'We tried, he didn't want to do it. We tried again, he still didn't want to do it, so we gave up.' [Emma transcript]

For some of the students the loss of car journeys to colleges and workplaces also represented a loss of their autonomy and privacy. These trips were important 'spaces of transition' (Gadsby and Smith, 2023: 13). Unlike some critical feminist literature which presents driving mothers and unpaid carers as harried (Fraser, 2017; Gouthro, 2002b), these journeys are viewed by the students as a welcome opportunity to separate the private domestic sphere from the public one. As the lockdowns disrupted the boundaries between the public and private domains, their cars remained a truly private space. Kate describes her parked car offering seclusion for counselling from her FEC, *'I got in my car and from 3 'til about 5:30, I had two and a half hours of this woman's time'*. As the lockdown restrictions began to loosen, Liz used her car as a quiet space for study, *'I'll sit in the car. So, say an hour, just sit in the car'*. For Sue, her car journeys to and from work represent the clear division which she thinks should exist between the private and public spheres. The car is therefore a liminal space where privacy and independence from work and family responsibility can be claimed, albeit briefly. Fighting 'boundarylessness' (Blackmore, 2006: 22) and making the abstract notion of separate spheres concrete is an important agentive strategy for the mature students to maintain their degree study.

5.9 Looking for *homeplace* stability

Many of the participants in this research have experienced *homeplace* instability. Private renting, homelessness, frequent house moves, problems securing a mortgage and mortgage arrears have led to insecure accommodation for several participants. Gaining a degree is a means to securing a better-paid job and a more stable *homeplace*.

Jess, Kim, Stephen and George directly link the completion of their degrees to the potential for owning a better home: *'We're renting…in five years, we will be homeowners'* [Jess]. *'Sometimes I'm thinking, you know it comes into your mind, 'Ah it would be nice to have a bigger house''* [George]. This apparent instrumental orientation towards studying is also discernible when Kim and Liz talk about their degree motivations:

> *I'd look at the children all the time and I'd think, 'No, there's gotta be something else, we gotta do something else.' And it was all of that, those years of thinking, 'You need better,' that made me go ahead and really dig my feet in about this degree.* [Kim transcript]

> *It's a worry having a mortgage...That's my biggest worry - keeping the house for the kids and not falling in arrears. And I think, hopefully if I'm successful and do well, I can help all three of them.* [Liz transcript]

At first sight, these mature students seem invested in the meritocratic discourse of UK adult learning policy which promotes study primarily as a way to improve earnings (Department for Education, 2021). Pegg and Di Paolo (2013: 212) term this a 'canonical narrative'. This links to 'the commodified home' (Young, 2005: 131) as they are clear that they want to own homes in desirable areas of the northern English cities and towns they live in. Yet this public narrative about graduates' enhanced earnings intersects with their private life histories and the impact of neoliberal financial frameworks on their lives.

Their motivations can also be read as a very powerful expression of agency in the face of the *homeplace* instability that some of them experienced as young people:

When I was 18, me and my partner were struggling with wor first house and so we were struggling then and…when I had the children and my partner's business, and he was self-employed, he lost his business and where he was, they shut down, so we had to move out. [Liz transcript]

I don't have parents, so I lived with my grandma…I left school when I was 16. I needed to go into full-time work and bring some money in. Gran was on benefits. I didn't have a lot. We didn't own a home. [Kim transcript]

I've got seven siblings below me. I'm from a large family, a divorced family, so a separated family…so like I said I was self-independent from 18. I managed in my own home. [Jess transcript]

I was 17 when I stopped [hairdressing]. I needed to get a job and earn some money. By that stage, I wasn't living at home as well. I'd moved out…Hospitality was one place where I could work well, just be myself 90% of the time. [Stephen transcript]

Liz and her partner lost the first house they bought due to a business failure, and she is frightened of this happening to her family again. Kim grew up in an impoverished household in a deprived city ward. The breakup of Jess' family meant multiple home moves and attendance at nine different schools. Stephen told his parents he was gay at 17: '*You see the lovely stories now where people say, 'You are our son, and we love you.' So, it wasn't any of that sort of stuff.*' He left the family home and worked in hotels. Kate experienced homelessness during the lockdowns. Her family of four was forced to move house three times. After being given notice to quit by a private landlady, they were rehoused by the council. A neighbour's anti-social actions drove them from this house,

but with nowhere to go they moved in with her parents into their two-bedroomed house. Finally, they secured a privately rented house. These participants' decisions to continue with their studies are in large part driven by their *homeplace* relationships and a need for stability.

Whilst this is recognisably a time of economic risk and uncertainty, as theorists of late modernity argue, these *homeplace* narratives are not about 'individuals striking out afresh, like pioneers' (Giddens, 2002: 28). Nor is it fair to characterise their decisions as part of an individualistic focus fostered by lifelong learning policy contexts. As Gouthro (2005) emphasises, whilst gaining a sense of independence and autonomy are often part of the goal when adults enter education, this does not mean they wish to abandon their connectedness to their families. A secure *homeplace* is one in which mature students and their families are protected from future precarity. Recognising and understanding the importance of relationships for full-time and part-time mature students is a crucial task for HE in FE providers.

5.10 Conclusion

This chapter argued that English lockdowns changed the nature of mature students' learning because they were no longer able to leave their *homeplace*. This had a greater impact on the women students with dependants than on men, as home-schooling was added to an existing gendered division of *homeplace* labour. As a result, some of the mothers almost withdrew as they experienced burnout. The women in gay couples experienced similar feelings to the women in relationships with men. Existing narrative frameworks employed to make sense of parenting only exacerbated this feeling. However, the giving and receiving of care was also rewarding. Those who lived alone did not experience this, but lockdowns conferred more freedom to study on students without care responsibilities.

Paid work threatened learner autonomy as digital forms of communication allowed it to colonise their homes in lockdowns. If paid work entered *the homeplace,* it squeezed the space available for learning, no matter whether the participants studied full-time or part-time. Working from home benefited Rosie as a disabled person in some ways, but it exacerbated her fatigue and concentration problems, which had a negative effect on her ability to study.

As lockdowns progressed many students reclaimed their *homeplaces* as private spaces and resisted some of the intrusions of home-schooling and paid work. Finally, gaining a degree for some of the participants represented a way to secure a safe *homeplace* for them and their families.

Chapter 6: FEC support for mature student learning and labour in the homeplace: findings and discussion

6.1 Introduction

This second chapter of findings and discussion addresses both the overarching research aim which explores how labour in the home shaped the learning of mature HE in FE students in lockdowns and the second subquestion: to what extent are FECs providing support for HE mature students who labour at home? I examine the participants' attitudes towards HE in FE peer support and their attitudes to mature and traditional-aged students. I argue for an expansion of the *homeplace* concept in lifelong learning to envision the usefulness of a collectivised safe space (Garcia, 2017; Kelly, 2020; Teeple Hopkins, 2017) for mature students. A discussion of the importance of vocational learning to the students follows, but I critique restrictive understandings of this term. I also argue for the role of criticality about workplace relations in VET. I explore how the dominant FEC skills discourse could be reimagined to encompass important relational skills. Finally, I show through the case of one student parent how the category of 'mature student' can be celebrated, and that new narrative frameworks are possible.

6.2 FEC peer relationships

Relationships with their FEC peers hold different degrees of importance for the 15 participants. The status of the relationships before the lockdowns affects the strength of bonds once opportunities for face-to-face meeting end; however, an absence of peer relationships is not necessarily perceived negatively. Some of the mature students are not invested in relationships with classmates:

> *We're all girls.*
>
> *I'm gay*

They're all straight.

I wouldn't say that's what set us apart

I think it's just personalities.

I think

Someone who was gay but a bit more femme would fit in really well

Which is not me.

We do

We haven't actually been there

We just kind of

We got back.

We just kind of

We needed to

I think it was lost the kind of crossovers between people. [Emma I-poem]

The subject pronouns shift in this I-poem, with the focus moving from *I* at the start to *we* as it progresses. The referent of the object pronoun *us* in the phrase *'That's what sets us apart'* is ambiguous as it could mean Emma's separation from her peers, or the distances between all the students. In the final line of the poem, she thinks everyone's physical absence from the college premises has led to a breakdown of any connections that existed before lockdowns. Emma is not unhappy about the situation she describes. Nina feels a similar detachment:

I'm a bit removed from them.

I'm not really sure

I've not really

Probably because we're online

I've not really built very good relationships with some.

I don't know a lot about them.

129

I am a bit of a loner as well,

I only have a small friendship group

I don't know why. [Nina I-poem]

There is no discernible regret in Nina's I-poem either, but both women think their distance from other mature students may be because of their own personalities. Both attribute a lack of connection with peers to being offsite and online. Yet the impact of digital learning does not necessarily produce this outcome: five participants tell me their existing peer relationships have not suffered during lockdowns. Amber has email exchanges with another student parent who also has children on the SEND register about their assignments. She says this contact is *'really helpful'*. Kate has kept in touch with another mature student from her class who has had *'a tough couple of years'*. Kim, Luke and Nicky also have frequent online conversations with other mature students. These connections appear to arise from a shared experience of studying at home in challenging circumstances.

Peer relationships offer support and a feeling of belonging to a group, which does not necessarily consist wholly of mature students. Jess, Luke and Nicky are all happy that they have formed friendships with both mature and younger students.

We're all sort of in the same boat, even though we're different ages and the group I tend to sort of socialise with are about 10 years younger than me…I mean, we have a WhatsApp group. All big each other up. And, you know, someone will pop in there, 'Oh our assignments are up. Good luck everyone.' [Jess transcript]

You had a group of the older people and a group of the young kids, the ones that come up through the college a little bit. Then there's me slap bang in the middle sort of and even now I'm sort of the bridge between the older people and the younger people 'cause I've a rapport with everyone. [Luke transcript]

I am the oldest on the course by 17 years, which is quite a bit. But I've got friends that are the same age as my daughter, and I never thought that would happen…We've formed like a really close-knit little group of five. [Nicky transcript]

These peer relationships are supportive and provide them with a sense of belonging to a community; however, some participants are critical of younger students.

Amber, Liz, Luke and Nicky, who are full-time students, stereotype the traditional aged HE students in their classes and in the wider FEC community. They assume their younger peers are having easier HE experiences. Liz feels they negatively judge her without any understanding of her life:

When you're younger with no responsibilities, it's so much easier just to get on with things. A lot of the younger students, they've got all their assignments in, they haven't applied for mitigation. They're like, 'I don't know why people are struggling.' [Liz transcript]

She tells me many of the younger students lack a work ethic and that their conduct is often unprofessional. Luke is not discomfited by the younger students' behaviour, but he characterises them as carefree and does not consider they may also have jobs:

It's a little bit different for us as a mature student. Ye knaa, I'm not going out drinking and socialising and trying to find a partner, so I feel as if I'm in a different position to most of them. I mean everyone I know that's mature, they all work as well. [Luke transcript]

Nicky describes the threatening behaviour of some younger students in her class:

There's been times where we've been trying to listen to what the lecturer has been saying, and there's just a lot of ridiculous talking going on. I think one of the girls that I'm friends with, she just glanced over and then there was this effing, 'What the eff is she looking at?' [Nicky transcript]

She contrasts this disruptiveness with her own commitment to the degree, saying she wants her *'money's worth'.* Amber also thinks the younger students in class are boorish: '*They're very childish, still not very mature, and they're sort of loud'*. The participants' stories are based in experience, but also in notions of young students having carefree lifestyles which render them unable to sympathise or understand the lives of mature students in FECs.

This stigmatising of their younger peers and the stigmatisation mature students may feel is congruent with other findings (Esmond, 2015; Mallman and Lee, 2016). In particular, the social construction of the category 'student' as young and childfree (Brooks, 2012; Edwards, 1993; Leathwood, 2006; Leathwood and O' Connell, 2003) has an exclusionary force for older women learners who are aware their maturity makes them conspicuous:

My perception of a student was all the young people going in with their parents on this enrolment day. I was thinking, 'People are gonna think I'm a lecturer. People are gonna think, "What are you doing here?"' [Kim transcript]

Can FECs take action to avoid HE mature students feeling excluded? In the next section, I consider the usefulness of the collective *homeplace* notion.

6.3 Collective homeplaces

When Kim is in a space with other mature students, she feels comfortable:

A woman came and sat next to us. She was like 40 something and I smiled thinking, 'What are you doing here?' … She was there doing this degree and she was a mam of two and there was a mam sitting behind us and there was a mam sitting in front and I was sort of looking around, like there was tears in my eyes thinking, 'Oh my goodness, this is like somewhere I can be.' [Kim transcript]

The marginalisation Kim feels because of her age and status as a parent is mitigated when she is surrounded by others who share some of her characteristics. Nicky also comes to believe her FEC is a fitting place for her to study because there are other mature student parents in her class. Forming alliances with peers makes the students feel supported in an environment in which the majority of students look different and perhaps behave differently (Edwards, 1993; Kelly, 2020).

Before lockdowns, some of the mature students formed physical collective *homeplaces* which included refectories and easy chairs outside classrooms. Kate and Sue both say they enjoyed classes before the lockdown as they *'gelled'* with others. They and the four other part-time students Nina, Stephen, Richard and Rosie are in part-time degree evening classes. As these are exclusively mature student spaces, the slights or the hostility from younger students felt by some of the full-time students is absent. They have the sense of a collective space which does not include younger students*:*

It doesn't necessarily feel part of a sort of buzzing college community, which I suppose I was happy enough with. I didn't really want to be sort of climbing over 17-year-olds to get to the library. [Rosie transcript]

Some collective *homeplaces* were already on digital platforms:

We started a Facebook support group, less of a support group more of a community group for [student] parents…everybody from the college is liking it quite a lot and we've got 40 parents on there at the moment. [Kim transcript]

Not all the participants felt peer relationships could survive the transition online in lockdowns:

NINA: We did try and set up a Teams group which just sort of flopped.

SALLY: Did it? Do you think do you think it would have been different if you had continued face-to-face?

NINA: Um, I think so…the before and after chit chats and that sort of thing's just gone really. [Nina transcript]

Rosie had only joined her degree group two months before her FEC closed its doors:

I didn't have a lot of face-to-face interaction with them before the pandemic. Yeah, so that made it quite difficult to establish those relationships…and they had already had an entire year together. [Rosie transcript]

Liz, Sue and Richard also had difficulties engaging and sustaining peer relationships digitally. Sue and Richard tell me they enjoyed the contact with other students before the first lockdown, but when they attended online sessions from home, they turned off their cameras to mask the lack of connection they felt.

The homeplace theory (Gouthro, 2009) rightly emphasises women's family relationships and their impact on their learning; however, the stories above are also about the self in relation to other students within an educational setting. Recognising that mature students with and without dependants may need relationships with peers in order to thrive as learners is an important support mechanism which FECs must consider.

Placing mature students in spaces without other mature students can increase feelings of marginalisation:

> *I know one other person on the course… Unfortunately, I'm the oldest in group and everybody else is like 23 at the oldest. So, I'm like ten year older than everybody else.* [Amber transcript]

Ensuring that wherever possible full-time mature students are put into groups with others who share some of their characteristics could lessen feelings of isolation and exclusion because the part-time mature students do not seem to experience the same feelings.

In an extension of Gouthro's theory, research by Garcia (2017) and Kelly (2020) found that members of racialised groups may experience US schools as indifferent or hostile to their concerns, therefore they create their own collective *homeplaces* where they feel protected by one another and form strong bonds. The data here show that collective *homeplaces* may also positively affect mature students' feelings of belonging in an environment which feels exclusionary to some. These spaces may arise organically, but HE in FE providers can help to remove barriers when they ensure mature students do not feel isolated in college spaces. Emma appreciates '*a whole different building for mature students'* at her FEC.

Visibility of other HE in FE mature students is crucial to decrease a sense of not belonging:

> *It was the open evening. There was loads of young kids, you know, that were like 16, 17 looking into doing further education, degrees, you know it wasn't just for the university. It was for the college as a whole and I did feel hugely out of place.* [Kim transcript]

Encouraging collaborative working with partners can also be a step towards helping mature students to form relationships with peers: '*We had phone numbers and things like that when COVID hit because we worked on the first assignment with partners'* [Sue]. In the next section, I look at other ways in which FECs support the learning of mature students' learning who labour at home.

6.4 Staff understanding of mature students' lives

Participants express gratitude that FEC staff often have knowledge of their lives beyond the classroom rather than just their student persona. Jess compares her FEC experience to her year as a mature student at a post-1992 university where, like Edwards' (1993) participants, she felt the lecturers did not want a relationship with their students:

> *When it's in FE it's a bit more personal... because the tutor knows us and sees us once a week for that four hours, she sees us, and she understands what's going on and she'll have an interest in us where in the university you're sat in the lecture halls.* [Jess transcript]

Reversing the I-poem focus on the subject pronoun and looking instead at the object pronoun '*us'* highlights the importance of the verbs in the following phrases about Jess's FE tutor: *'knows us' 'sees us', 'sees us', 'understands what's going on'* and *'will have an interest in us'.* Her use of these stative verbs suggests Jess feels there is an important permanence and durability about the relationship between tutor and students. This feeling of connection matters to her and enables her to talk to her tutor when she encountered problems which affected her degree.

Tutor understanding of the interdependence of their *homeplace* relationships and their learning in the public realm during lockdowns is valued. Kim, Jess, Liz, Luke, Nina, Stephen and Yiannis speak gratefully about occasions when tutors enquire how they are

or encourage them to make use of institutional support. Lecturers' knowledge of participants is also frequently referenced in the interviews. In 2020-21, my students' personal issues included marriage breakdown, redundancies, an unplanned pregnancy and the death of a partner in a foreign country. My tutorials with mature students both before and during the pandemic often concerned advice on navigating college systems. A thorough working knowledge of HE procedures such as mitigation rules and mental health support services was a crucial part of my role. In addition, I believe my experiences of combining paid work with postgraduate study and responsibilities for children and elderly parents enhanced my empathy for my students. Understanding something of mature students' lives and the impact their interdependence with others has on their studies is an important part of the HE in FE lecturer's job.

The mature students who used FEC institutional support valued it when it addressed their needs in relation to their whole lives. Whilst some studies have found mature students may not use such services at all and are inclined to rely on their own networks (Clegg et al., 2006; Goodchild, 2019; Heagney and Benson, 2017; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Merrill, 2015; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Tett, 2004), the data here show some do make use of them. Kate narrates her story of burnout. Her tutor referred her to the FEC's counselling team and one of the support workers phoned her at a time they mutually agreed. Kate was experiencing simultaneous challenging family, housing and work situations which were overwhelming her. One particular issue was her struggle to support her child who was transitioning. She did not know how to safeguard them in online spaces and this worry preoccupied her. The support worker was empathetic and sent Kate a number of links to national and local organisations: *'This one phone call I think stopped me going over the edge'.* Rather than treating Kate as an autonomous individual, the counsellor recognised her in relation to others and the interdependence of her private world and the wider public world through which she moved for work and study. Mannay and Morgan (2013) contend that institutional understanding of the

complexity of mature students' lives is crucial. As Gouthro (2004; 2005; 2009) argues, an absence of this perspective is not uncommon, but in order to succeed mature students need support that deals with them holistically.

Five participants used their FEC's academic support services but on the whole, these are not highly regarded. Luke, Emma, George, Nicky and Yiannis used FEC academic writing support. George and Yiannis speak English as a second language; Emma and George are dyslexic. With the exception of Luke, who made use consistent use of the service, the other four discontinued the support at an early stage. Luke is positive about the help he received with academic writing and referencing, *'the lass, she's helped, and I've used her for about a year now and she's been quite good'*. Nicky persisted but her shame about her difficulties means she also ended the support: '*I don't know if I just felt a bit embarrassed talking to a younger guy about me being worried about what I'd wrote'*. Emma, George and Yiannis allowed the support to fall away as they did not find it useful. Stephen and Sue would have liked to have used academic writing support but their part-time classes were in the evenings and the service was only available in the daytime (Butcher, 2015; 2020).

Nicky, Stephen and Sue, who are the oldest participants, all carry the 'deficit-based, spoilt identity of a failed learner' (Duckworth and Smith, 2021:31) which pushed them towards wanting academic writing support. Feelings of inadequacy and humiliation originating in their schooldays resurfaced in their forties and fifties when they restarted formal learning. Sue was labelled *'thick'* at school:

> *I'm not very good at referencing.*

> *I'm not very good at this,*

> *I'm not very good at that.*

I remember

I remember being honest

I am

I am very honest.

I remember saying,

'I won't even get on the course.'

I thought.

I think

I think

You have past experiences with you

It's stayed with me for ever. [Sue I-poem]

The I-poem shows the intrusive and forceful voice of self-doubt and a more tentative voice which expresses her integrity. Stephen was bullied at school and similar feelings of inadequacy affect his capacity for learning:

I felt

I was very stupid.

Throughout my career I thought,

'Should I really be in this job?'

I hated school

I could have done better at school.

I haven't got wonderful memories,

School was atrocious. [Stephen I-poem]

Nicky's learner confidence is also fragile and collapses when she does not understand a new concept:

I just had to get up,

Leave the room,

Go and have a cry.

I just felt

I

All that self-doubt was just there.

'I can't do it' [Nicky I-poem]

Consideration of mature students' life histories is crucial when FECs provide academic support. Although the barriers which marginalise mature learners may not be immediately apparent, it is important that educators acknowledge the possibility of them (Gouthro, 2007). The stigma attached to being 'a failed learner' at school can return, so sensitivity about mature students' feelings about their academic writing is advisable. FECs must also recognise that the private realm of family and past experience positions how a student occupies the public realm of HE (Gouthro, 2002b).

6.5 Reimagining learning from work

FECs specialise in vocational and technical education, offering courses ranging from level 2 to postgraduate degrees (Avis and Orr, 2016; FETL, 2017; Social Mobility Commission, 2021). All Foundation degrees contain work-based learning (WBL) modules which may be part of a student's paid work if their degree is in-service, which was the case for Kate. Liz, Luke and Yiannis' BSc Sports Therapy degree requires a significant number of hours of practical experience if professional body accreditation is sought. Top-up degrees contain no WBL, but students are expected to draw on their experience of work to analyse theory.

The contextualisation of knowledge and skills gained in the curriculum is viewed as an essential component of their degrees by some of the participants, so the lack of opportunity to undertake WBL in lockdowns frustrated Amber, Luke and Yiannis. *'You cannat get the placement hours that you need due to COVID'* [Luke]. Yet as chapter 5 demonstrates, six participants were in fact undertaking a brand-new form of unpaid work within *the homeplace*, in the form of home-schooling:

> *I've not been on any work placement in Level 5, any formal one, and they're gonna mark us as saying we haven't been on any placement due to COVID, but actually I'm fairly sure that as parents we could probably say, 'Well, can I give you how many thousand hours of this experience that I've had home-schooling?'*
> [Kim's transcript]

Amber, Kim and Nicky were required to complete WBL modules on their Children and Young People Foundation degree. The students all worked at home-schooling in the lockdowns, but this labour was formally disregarded by their FECs despite its clear relevance to their degree. 'Within academia, raising children and attending to family needs are treated as concerns that are incidental and inconsequential (rather than as

primary *productive* work)' (Gouthro, 2002b: 11). Edwards (1993) also finds mature women at university feel their experiences in the public world of work are useful to understanding the social science issues they are studying, but their family experiences are not formally valued. Her participants were often in paid public roles which could be termed caring work, such as nursing or secretarial jobs. This disjuncture is amplified in the lifelong learning sector because its adoption of a technical-rational approach to learning (Gouthro, 2019) leads to an emphasis on employability. Life experiences with relevance to both the world of paid work and degree learning may be discussed in class, but they are not part of formal assessment (Allatt and Tett, 2021). Kim birthed and breastfed two babies. She believes her social reproductive work could certainly be reimagined as a form of WBL:

> *I done a whole module on pregnancy, breastfeeding.*

> *I got 94%.*

> *I'm laughing,*

> *I've twice been on that work experience placement!* [Kim's I-poem]

The participants frequently emphasise how important their maturity and life experiences are in guiding their degree study, but with the exception of Kim, they all reject my contention in the interview that their informal, family-based relational learning could be applied formally to their current learning in lockdowns. Although 'workplace learning does not just happen in waged situations' (Brookfield and Holst, 2010: 18), Amber, Richard and Stephen think there can be no relationship at all between their situated *homeplace* knowledge and their degree study. Vocationalism is so firmly linked to *the marketplace* in HE in FE discourse that my question seems to strike them as strange. Conceptually, the term 'skills' in the FEC landscape is attached to the notion of work-

readiness and industry (Duckworth and Smith, 2018; Smith and O'Leary, 2013) so skills gained in *homeplaces* are seen as unrelated to the dominant notion of what work is. Yet a different worldview is possible, and education can provide ways to think about the established social order differently (Gouthro, 2019).

The 'Great Interruption' (Rikowski, 2021: 33) of norms caused by the pandemic is an opportunity to rethink aspects of HE provision. Established rhythms in FECs were disrupted with expectations of flexibility on the part of staff (Gadsby and Smith, 2023). In my *homeplace,* which became my workplace, I adapted face-to-face teaching, dissertation supervision and tutorials to online platforms. The FEC softened evidential requirements for HE mitigation as sick notes and death certificates were hard to procure. A reduction in the hours required for WBL modules was also agreed. Yet rigidity around the classification of what counts as work stubbornly persisted despite the government's stay-at-home orders. Other forms of relational labour and skills learnt outside workplace settings could be considered as potential sites for relevant learning in vocational degree subjects such as Health and Social Care, Children and Young People, Sports Therapy and Education.

A failure to recognise that *homeplace* labour hinders carers' capacity to work in an external setting for assessment is unjust. Amber cannot do any paid work because she is supporting her autistic child who is experiencing a difficult transition into secondary school. As schools were closed to volunteers in lockdown, she could not undertake a voluntary work placement. Here she reflects on a pre-pandemic placement:

> *It was in a mainstream school, but it had a high number of SEND children. I didn't like the way they were sort of tret, not that they were tret badly, just sometimes the way they were spoke to… It wasn't nasty or anything, I think it was more of a command and control, 'you-will-do-as-I-say' sort of thing, but I still just didn't*

agree. I mean, especially autistic children who don't follow the same path. [Amber transcript]

As a parent Amber has a nuanced understanding of educational issues which may affect a young person on the autism spectrum. She has developed specific skills to help her child with educational transitions (Vincent and Fabri, 2022). These particular skills are transferable to workplaces, because although there are significant differences between placement learning and families, nonetheless commonalities of experience do exist. These help students with relevant family skills, like Amber, on care-orientated vocational programmes to understand and be empathetic to children, parents and other service-users (Lister, 2003). The tacit expectation that carers, in particular women, will perform a care role in *the homeplace* in addition to undertaking similar work for the state, for example in schools or nurseries (ibid), is one reason why this experience does not count formally.

Some participants had adverse adolescent experiences and they shape their life histories to make direct links between these and their entry into the field of paid care-related work which eventually leads to their degrees in care-related subjects. For example, Kim grew up in poverty and was largely estranged from her mother who had drug and alcohol addictions: *'My life was extremely chaotic by the time 15,16 came'*. However, after having children, she worked for a breast-feeding charity, and this led her to a Children and Young People Foundation degree: '*I worked with lots of disadvantaged mothers that needed to breastfeed. That was what they needed to do 'cause they couldn't afford otherwise*'. Stephen tells me: '*I was bullied all through senior school, called names, spat at, kicked as I went into classrooms. All sorts of things used to go on, and I just hated school*'. Adults did not protect Stephen; instead he was told to fight back. His degree is Education, as is Sue's, who believes school *'failed'* her as a youngster. Later she worked *'for an organisation where they supported troubled*

teenagers who'd had a bit of an experience like me at school. I related to them very well'.

Jess was living independently at 18 and she reflects on growing up*:*

> *I've got 7 siblings below me… I've got a sister who had speech and language issues. I went through it. I've got so much personal experience from being in the home and seeing sort of the effects of what divorce does as a child, experiencing it.* [Jess transcript]

Her family experience has developed Jess' understanding of the effects on children of parental conflict which is valuable in her subject (Supporting Teaching and Learning). Like Kim, Stephen and Sue she has acquired subtle relational skills as a result of her own teenage experience which are necessary in educational settings when dealing with children or young people who are also experiencing difficulties or trauma.

Amber, Emma, Kate, Sue and Yiannis all have experience of the needs of a family member who has a disability or learning difficulty, which has enabled them to develop a range of different skills. The organisational skills carers need to deal with a range of professionals and the bureaucratic procedures involved in applying for funds are considerable (Lynch, 2022). For example, Kate does '*a lot of fighting'* for her visually impaired child, such as trying to gain local authority funding for a school transport taxi. The potential for conflict with professionals who are increasingly tasked with managing shrinking budgets affected by austerity is ever-present (Bunting, 2020), therefore carers must also develop interpersonal skills to advocate for their loved one in a non-confrontational manner. The participants do not view this 'love labour' (Lynch, 2022: 4) as work despite the physical and emotional demands it makes on them, but they do recognise it grants them particular insights and skills which have great value on their degrees. Reimagining 'what counts' (Gouthro, 2002b:1) in HE in FE and valuing these skills formally would lead to a more just FEC environment for mature students who may

not have had the opportunity to build a WBL portfolio because of their private care responsibilities, yet have a considerable bank of skills arising from their relational labour.

The commitment to objectivity in the public sphere perpetuates the marginalisation of family life experiences in HE settings. Edwards' (1993) participants accepted these experiences were not valuable HE assets. Similarly, experiences of care work in the private realm are not valued in the same way as workplace experiences on Education, Childcare, Sports Therapy and Health and Social Care degrees. Why is workplace experience deemed to be objective and legitimate for assessment, whereas unpaid care is illegitimate because it is subjective? The inconsistency stems from the positioning of paid work as superior to unpaid care and, given that FE has long been characterised as subservient to UK industry (Duckworth and Smith, 2018), it is not surprising that this notion is perpetuated in HE in FE assessment. The erasure of meaningful discussion of private care in the public realm is part of the adoption of 'marketplace values' (Gouthro, 2002b: 2) which walks hand in hand with the dominance of objectivity in HE. Yet the view that care work in the home is costless and its contribution to the economy negligible is a neoliberal sleight of hand (Fraser, 2017; 2020a) which enables work mostly undertaken by women to be denigrated and unpaid. Bringing forms of critical theory into mature student education can raise awareness of such gendered injustice, as I discuss in the next section of findings.

6.6 Developing critical social literacies

That education's core purpose is employability is widely accepted in HE policy discourses (Merrill et al. 2020; Rikowski, 2022; Tight, 2023). An uncomplicated relationship between regional economic development, individual prosperity and vocational achievement is promoted in both national and transnational policy documents (e.g. Department for Education, 2021; The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and

Development, 2016; QAA, 2020). Despite UNESCO's (2020) holistic view of lifelong learning, economic goals tend to prevail in English policy (Biesta, 2006; Burke and Jackson, 2007; Callender and Little, 2015; McManus, 2011). As the effects of the first lockdown were being felt, the pressure on non-elite HEIs was intensified by the Department for Education, who instructed them to reorientate learning towards regional and local economy priorities (Department for Education, 2020; Rikowski, 2022). This panacean, economistic discourse helps to determine how employability is read in an approach described as 'sociologically naïve' (Merrill et al., 2020: 165). Luke also thinks a one-size-fits-all approach to employability initiatives is simplistic:

> *We do have modules on work-related learning which are aimed at putting you into practice once you leave and, as mature student, that is a massive waste of time... I've got a lot of business experience; I don't feel as if the college or the course I'm on is drawing from any of the mature students to get their feedback on how career development and work-related learning is relevant.* [Luke transcript]

Employability modules which assume little experience of paid work cause some mature students frustration, because they are typically associated with helping younger graduates gain a foothold in the labour market (Lavender, 2020). Employability discourse also defines the workplace as a place of waged labour, thus excluding unpaid work from the formal curriculum (Allatt and Tett, 2020; Brookfield and Holst, 2010). The pervasive 'worldview' which the neoliberal context has naturalised is that adult learning should be shaped to the needs of the market (Biesta, 2006; Gouthro, 2019). However, the vocational HE in FE curriculum has 'the emancipatory potential of mobilizing critical thinking…outside the educational site' (Lavender, 2020: 146). Critical feminist theory can play a role in considering the legitimacy of different forms of work for learning and the

147

causes of social inequality which exclude certain groups from participating in both education and work.

Not all participants' attitudes to theoretical HE learning are positive. The academic backgrounds of tutors or universities carry less weight than relevant vocational history. Kate is dismissive of a former tutor with a doctorate: '*he couldn't stop going on about his PhD level'.* Luke is aware that university-based HE has a more academic reputation than HE in FE, but he sees it as inauthentic: *'The glitz and glamour don't wash with us*'. Two participants tell me they are uninterested in their subjects and only enrolled on their degree to further their careers:

> *Being totally honest, I never wanted to do this BA. I had no intentions of doing it. I did it because it was free. I was offered it as a [FEC] lecturer, as personal development in my role to do it.* [Richard transcript]

> *If I do [more HE], it'll be in a subject that I'm really interested in. Yeah, rather than doing it just to have a degree and for my work... Helps you to achieve more and go up that the ladder if you know what I mean.* [Stephen transcript]

They study top-up degrees, but they dislike the theoretical learning and even find it overwhelming:

> *I think now that I'm done with it [BA], I can now look to see what job roles are in the organisation…You know, it doesn't interest us. I don't ever want to hear the word theory ever again!* [Richard transcript]

> *I really like our tutor but she's very academic, so she sometimes forgets we're not at that level with her. Sometimes she's in a different world to where you are, an academia world, she really is. I want to say to her, 'Hey, come back down to where we are.'* [Stephen transcript]

Abstract theory is certainly challenging to read and learn (Lister 2003), and these students view it as irrelevant to their real needs (Brookfield and Holst, 2010). However, Gouthro (2019) argues it is absolutely necessary in lifelong learning because:

> *Theory focuses attention on significant issues, explores difficult ethical and moral questions, challenges existing conceptual frameworks, and advances ideas… Theory is important for understanding both broader social contexts and the development of the individual adult.* (pp. 63-4)

The focus on behaviourist learning outcomes and measurability in lifelong learning has led to a diminishment of the role of critical theory in adult education (ibid). Adult learners may feel that they require a practical skill set in order to progress in a changing global economy and new theory which challenges taken for granted assumptions can cause disorientation. Whilst it is unquestionably vitally important to learn vocational skills, the goal of lifelong learning should be to enhance citizenship and democracy (Biesta, 2006; Carpenter and Mojab, 2017; Elliott, 2000).

Although notions of WBL are narrow, the HE in FE classroom can be a site for mature students to develop their critical capacity to question and challenge structural inequalities, such as gendered forms of work. The life experiences of the participants often mean that they have direct experience of unjust power relations in the workplace, such as gender-based stereotyping. Liz tells me two stories about senior male colleagues underestimating her capacity to achieve a higher paid role because of her motherhood. In contrast, Jess, a former TA, was told by her female headteacher she was not a suitable applicant for a pastoral role because not being a mother meant she had no insight into children's problems. Nina works in a staff training role in an FEC:

> *How can I put this?*
>
> *Some departments that I work with are very male-dominated.*

I think they don't always appreciate

I can understand things.

I'm like, 'Yeah, but.'

I have had a few not really issues, just comments.

I've never been a hairdresser.

I don't know the first thing about hairdressing.

I'm not a hairdresser.

I think sometimes it's just a mindset or the culture.

I don't know if it's me

I don't know. [Nina I-poem extract]

The poem's three lines about hairdressing show the persistence of the attempts to disparage her qualification to lead staff training because of her gender. That such comments are designed to demean her should not be in doubt, as female-coded or 'pink collar' vocations are often denigrated in androcentric cultures (Welsh, 2020). Nina resists this by asserting her subjectivity *(I can understand things)* in the face of this objectifying gendered assumption. The poem shows Nina's voice oscillating between an understanding of the normative construction of gender in FEC culture (Niemeyer and Colley, 2015; Skeggs, 1997) and an individualised understanding *(I don't know if it's me)* which underplays the structural injustice she faces in her workplace. Developing critical awareness of injustice brought about by structural issues at work can take place in the mature student classroom, as Lister's (2003) research shows. She teaches her students from an identifiable feminist theoretical position which enables them to distil elements from their experience and make connections to new situations. Gouthro (2019) also discusses the way in which developing abstract thought through the exploration of theory allows students to link personal issues to social, cultural, political and economic factors. I argue that teaching from a critical feminist position means that oppressive social conditions can be more readily analysed as systemic rather than individual.

Experiences of structural barriers in workplaces have valuable learning potential if FECs are prepared to place questions of citizenship and inequality (Gouthro, 2019; 2022) under the lens. The interviews with George, Jess, Liz, Nina and Kate contain instances of xenophobic, sexist and homophobic discrimination at work. Kate narrates a story about her paid work in a school. When a teenage boy queries her partner's name, she tells him she is gay and he in turn comes out. Although Kate self-identifies as a *'quiet gay',* she believes part of her role as an educator is to counter heteronormativity. Kate is distressed by a senior manager's response to her stance:

> *I was told categorically not to disclose my sexuality.*

> *I mean,*

> *I've been educating people.*

> *I was like, 'Really? OK.'*

> *I was juggling living at mam's, dealing with the kids,*

> *I didn't have the fight.*

> *I normally would stand up there and then.*

> *I just sort of shelved it*

> *It had a massive impact on us*

> *I didn't know where to go with that*

> *I didn't know where to go with that.* [Kate I-poem]

She feels silenced by the argument that keeping her sexuality secret is to safeguard her and is aware this constraint would not apply to a heterosexual worker. Kate tells me she is in favour of the Prevent duty which aims to counter radicalisation, extremism and to promote 'fundamental British values' (Department for Education, 2015: 5). A particular conception of the good democratic citizen is implicit in the Prevent duty and Kate had felt that this was inclusive. But whilst 'the liberal ideology of democracy creates the appearance that a progressive, emancipatory educational project is at work, in reality something else is happening' (Carpenter and Mojab, 2017: 145) here. Her queerness is authoritatively delegitimised, and Kate is shocked: *'it had a massive impact on us'.* In discussion with her lecturer about an assignment in which she writes about this incident, Kate's personal experience of unjust social relations is contextualised. His advice means Kate broadens the lens on the prejudicial treatment she was subjected to. She is able to see how ideological thinking on the heteronormative family drives this attempt to marginalise her queer family model. Her dismay moves to a critique of the positioning of LGBTQI+ people in educational settings. Her analysis is supported by her tutor who suggests further research. She says the result of this learning is *'a real boost for my confidence'.*

Gouthro's (2019) thinking on the need for critical theory in lifelong learning settings is important because it points to the ways in which everyday experiences of working lives can be examined and leads to new ways of thinking. Gouthro (2007) also emphasises that although a technical-rational learning approach for mature students in lifelong learning is necessary, it is inadequate if there is no focus on unjust social relations within workplaces. Indeed, ignoring such injustice is interpreted by some feminist researchers (Gouthro, 2007; Lister, 2003; Mojab, 2006) as a deliberate action which closes down the possibility of educating for a different model of citizenship beyond the work-ready subject. Contextualising individual experiences and critically examining them through a theoretical lens is crucial. This involves first describing a social problem rooted in the

reality of everyday life and then explaining and questioning the power in our lives which frames the problem (Carpenter and Mojab, 2017). Equipping mature students with the tools to engage in critical social analyses of work and 'widening the parameters of discussion' (Gouthro, 2007: 150) to address what constitutes full and equal participation in society is possible for HE in FE educators.

Questioning the assumptions underpinning work is rich ground for developing the critical learning of mature HE in FE students. Nina and Rosie tell me that this is one of the most rewarding aspects of their learning on their degrees, as they have revaluated their roles at work. They both refer to assessed work on their degrees in which they have discussed issues which influence leadership practices and policy enactment in their workplaces. Examining the evidence for claims made about work practices makes them consider critically how much is based in expediency rather than principle. Such questioning is inherently political because 'the work site is where we often experience the most immediate, unambiguous, and tangible relations of power that most of us will encounter on a daily basis' (Weeks, 2011: 2). FEC education often depoliticises issues by focussing on discourses of marketplace skills acquisition, but HE in FE mature students can be encouraged to reflect on and critique work relations (Lavender, 2020). A space to develop critical social literacy is then opened, up rather than closed down in the predominant skills-led approach (Duckworth and Smith, 2021). This has emancipatory potential. It can also be extended to life in *the homeplace*, prompting questions around the gendered division of labour which prevailed during lockdowns. Making use of previous experience can result in new understandings and improvements in confidence.

Past experience and expertise can be positioned as valued knowledge and examined for critical insights in adult education (Duckworth and Smith, 2021; Leathwood, 2006; Lister, 2003). The tutors' celebration of Nicky's age and skills has motivated her:

They've been a massive inspiration to me, being able to say, 'Don't let your age

be a barrier. It is actually a benefit, not a barrier.' They've been very, very

supportive and they kind of made me realise that, you know, just because I'm 47,

it makes no difference to how I perform. [Nicky transcript].

Nicky has also learnt to bring her *homeplace* learning into dialogue with theory:

Being a mum has helped me.
We've had to,
I've been able to relate it to situations
I've been through. [Nicky I-poem]

Here Nicky's reflection on her experience (*being a mum)* takes place in class (*we).* She is then able to analyse her own experiences in discussion with others. However, she finds an assignment on safeguarding difficult because of a personal experience. In 2020, Nicky's eldest child, who was still at school, did not return from her daily exercise and would not respond to her mother's calls. She had gone to her older boyfriend's home. Nicky was in '*meltdown*'. Despite Nicky's pleas and the breach of COVID-19 restrictions, the police force refused to act because her daughter was an adult. Considering safeguarding in an academic setting later exacerbates Nicky's unease about the episode. The interrogation of past experience can be painful for mature students (Edwards, 1997; Lister, 2003).

At the centre of Nicky's experience lies the considerable institutional power of the police and the resources available to a single mother. Questions arise about female power and the extent to which learning about safeguarding can account for a failure to protect a young adult woman who is potentially at risk and breaking the law. Such political questions have the power to destabilise conceptions of state authority as a neutral entity. Adult education can encourage students to perceive the world around them in more

critical ways, making them more attuned to systematic inequality. This type of critical reflection on power relations in *homeplaces* and communities is an important project for adult education, but it can be discomfiting (Gouthro 2019; Grace et al., 2003). However, 'critical social literacy' (Duckworth and Smith, 2021: 35) is important because it develops students' facility to interpret their own position and the wider social relations that shape their lives. In Nicky's case, her analysis of the episode cannot be part of her assessed work; however, her experience and thinking mean she is able to develop a new perspective on how powerful actors can close down the claims of the less powerful. Her life history includes the story of her ex-husband, whose gendered abuse completely removed her self-esteem. He sneered at her ambition to return to education, told her she *'would never do anything'* and made her feel worthless at home. Now, with the support of her HE tutors, Nicky has claimed a different, more powerful position.

6.7 Sharing the mature student experience

The participants respect their tutors' postgraduate studies because of the insights this gives tutors into their own difficulties of combining labour and learning, rather than because of their academic qualifications. Kate, Liz, Luke and Stephen tell me that they wanted to participate in my research because they believe that the impact of mature students' paid work on their capacity to study is overlooked. They want the effect of their labour to be more widely understood, in other words, they want to have a voice. Four other participants asked me direct questions about my teaching experience in schools and in FE. When the interviews ended, I noted: '*Being a teacher seems to give me more authenticity in their eyes than just having a research interest in mature students'* [Research journal]. My vocational history seemed important to many participants, and perhaps gave them confidence that my knowledge of issues that affected them was not purely academic. References to tutors' part-time postgraduate studies are also made in five of the interviews:

During the third lockdown John [lecturer] was asking how I was doing just generally, and he could really sort of empathise where he was in the same position. And I think he's a mature student as well. [Liz transcript]

Sharing the mature student experience is valued:

SALLY: Is there anything else that you think I've missed that you need to tell me, or you think is important?

LIZ: No, I think it's difficult, erm, I think you're doing your PhD and working as well. I think it's hard.

SALLY: I'm not now, no. [Liz transcript]

My transcript annotation notes my embarrassment because Liz is having a far more challenging experience of being a mature student than me. Whilst I and the FEC tutors in question share some labels with the participants e.g. 'mature student', 'employee' 'parent' or 'part of the FEC community', these phrases suggest commonalities of experience which may not actually exist (Letherby, 2003). For example, my children are adults and I retired from paid work in 2020. Liz and I are both part of the 'mature student' and 'student parent' categories and we have occupied a similar physical space (an FEC) but I am differently located in hierarchical power relations (Collins, 2004). Until retiring, I was an HE lecturer rather than student at my FEC. This pathway was not random: social institutions such as family, education and social class paved my way to a first degree as a traditional student at a Russell Group university. I have reaped the financial and social status benefits of being a teacher since the age of 22, with no student loan debt. Liz and I are therefore differently positioned despite apparent commonalities. The participants' identification with lecturers who are also studying and working ignores salient power differentials, yet the notion of a kindred spirit who understands the mature student experience is comforting. Perhaps this is why for some of the participants having a tutor who is also a current student is significant.

156

Groups who are disadvantaged may see that there is strength in collective responses, and the notion of giving voice to these communities is an important insight from feminist standpoint theory (Collins, 2004). There is no evidence from the data that a significant group consciousness of the category 'mature student' exists beyond the label; however, bringing this consciousness into being is an important enterprise for FECs, in my view. For this, I turn to the example of Kim who has developed a standpoint on a different category: student parent.

Kim is very aware of belonging to a group whose needs are frequently overlooked in HEIs: the student parent (Brooks, 2012; Marandet and Wainwright, 2009; Moreau, 2016; Moreau and Kerner, 2015). In her final year, she receives a £1000 stipend from her FEC to research student parents. Kim has used her student fellowship as a platform to encourage the FEC to address student parent needs. The FEC has implemented two of her recommendations: students' parental status is logged at enrolment, and the criteria for hardship fund eligibility includes them. Kim is proud she has driven this important progress, but she is adamant there is more to be done:

> *My friend, who started the degree at the same time as me, had a 6-month-old baby when she started. As time went on, she was still breastfeeding…we would sit sometimes having dinner in the classroom and she would have to express… She'd be sitting in pain by the end of the day because she needed to express, there was nowhere for her to go at all!* [Kim transcript]

She discusses in detail other issues that affect student parents, which range from the lack of maternity rights for pregnant students to class timings which do not consider clashes with the school day. Our interview moves back and forth from Kim's lived experiences of being a full-time student with children and her advocacy for student parents more generally:

SALLY: Is it fair to say that you think having the fellowship has given you a profile and a voice that doesn't exist for other student parents?

KIM: Yeah, a thousand percent. But because of that I'm using that kind of profile, voice that I've got to then pass that message on to others and hopefully make it better. [Kim transcript]

She does not want to simply voice discontent and increase awareness, she wants meaningful institutional change:

Imagine how many people have tried to get into the education system and they couldn't. They couldn't keep up with it, they couldn't do it. There wasn't a safety net in place to say, 'Have a couple of minutes breather. Have a couple of weeks off. Just try and sort things out and then jump back in.' [Kim transcript]

Her empathy is grounded in both her own individual experiences and in her awareness of injustice, not least the structural poverty which affects this group. Being able to move between an individual and collective standpoint enables Kim to see the social relations which produce oppressive conditions for student parents.

To me the biggest barrier of going to university was the finance. Yeah, I think mainly because we've got the children and we've got a mortgage and we needed to pay all of these things. Getting a student maintenance loan isn't so I can go out on the town and have a great time and buy something. It's making sure that we feed the children. [Kim transcript]

Through a combination of lived experience and educational research, Kim comes to understand the category of the 'student parent' and how social relations affect them. In itself her experience does not lead to a critical consciousness, but through her education, her reflexivity and her struggle to ameliorate the difficulties of student parents at her

FEC, she achieves a standpoint (Harding, 1987; Hughes, 2002). She comes to understand that the experience of student parenthood is institutional rather than simply an individual experience. She no longer feels shame about being a mother in an HEI space. She sees how important it is to acknowledge the self in relation to others as Gouthro (2009) urges adult educators to do. Her critical standpoint is liberatory.

Whilst other mature students may eschew Kim's committed activism, FECs could invest in the development of positive narratives about the mature student experience. Deficit stories which centre on women's guilt in heteronormative families or the spoilt learner identities of those who had difficult school careers are readily available to mature students and FEC staff, but they are unnuanced. Public recognition of the heterogeneous nature of this group is vital if two-dimensional narratives are to be resisted. Honouring the complexity of mature student life histories and emphasising their successes beyond the individualistic and meritocratic narrative framework, which focuses on higher earnings, is also important. Working with mature students to develop a critical perspective on how social relations and systemic barriers play a role in their engagement with education can help them to shed the humiliation some feel for not learning as quickly as younger students or for looking different from them. Questioning the values ascribed to mature students' labour, and acknowledging the importance of care work and its positive contributions to HE learning is urgently necessary. The participants' life histories are instructive narratives which can lead FECs to envision new narratives on the 'mature student.' Celebrating this category, creating the conditions to allow collective homeplaces to flourish and understanding the interdependence of private and public realms would ameliorate some of the difficulties faced by HE in FE mature students.

6.8 Conclusion

Important lessons for FECs emerge from this discussion about the extent they support learning for HE in FE mature students who labour at home. A key difference in the experiences of the part-time mature students is that they feel 'at home' with the other students in their cohorts who are exclusively mature. In contrast, some full-time mature students feel conspicuous and stigmatised by younger students. Some mature students build peer networks, but FECs need to examine whether collective digital or physical *homeplaces* can be facilitated for mature students.

The life histories and situated learning from beyond the workplace that all mature students bring to HE in FE should be formally valued. Valuable FEC support for mature students came from individual staff who had knowledge of the interdependence of their lives with others and their life histories. The COVID-19 lockdowns underlined the need for a new, broader conceptualisation of what is seen as a valid source of valuable WBL. They presented FECs with an opportunity to re-evaluate definitions, so that rather than restricting relational learning and skills which originate in the homeplace to discussions, such forms of care work could be valued in assessments. The gains from HE are not simply to be measured in terms of employability: FECs can and should also develop students' critical thinking about the oppressive social relations which affect them and others. This enables them to move beyond individualised understandings of injustice and shame. It is important to acknowledge that different models of citizenship are available to HE in FE mature students (Gouthro, 2007).

Growing consciousness of the category 'mature student' in FECs would go some way to redressing the negative connotations some of the students feel are attached to this label. Stories told by and about mature students often coalesce around deficit-based models. Stigmatisation makes it difficult for mature students to draw really positive conclusions about the contributions their life histories make to HE in FE vocational learning, because really positive narrative frameworks on this group are not necessarily culturally available

(Miller, 2017). Giving voice to these students' stories is therefore an important way to engender better FEC support.

Chapter 7: Conclusion

This chapter revisits my research questions and clarifies how they have been answered. I review the contribution to knowledge made by the thesis. Despite the lifting of COVID-19 restrictions, I argue there are continuing implications for mature student HE in FE provision. I discuss the limitations of my study before I make recommendations for further research. I end with a final reflection on undertaking this research.

7.1 Summary of the research findings

This feminist narrative inquiry posed the overall research question: *How did work in the home during lockdowns shape the learning of HE in FE mature students?* I will summarise the findings with reference to each subquestion below.

- *How does their learning at home interact with their care work and paid labour?*

The study time available for participants with care responsibilities for children or elderly relatives was significantly reduced in lockdowns. For the married heterosexual women, traditional gender roles were undisturbed, and this encroached on their learning because some aspects of domestic labour and care work were treated as a naturalised aspects of being a mother/daughter/wife. This led to feelings of burnout and thoughts of withdrawal; these affected all the mothers, whether they were in straight/gay relationships or single parents. Nonetheless, the findings recognise that the affective nature of 'love labour' (Lynch, 2022: 66) meant that *homeplace* care was also rewarding. The participants who lived with others found that the giving and receiving of care supported and sustained them whilst they studied. *Homeplace* learning was different for those with no care responsibilities for other people because lockdowns opened up more time to study; as a result, some students hailed it as very beneficial period for their degree completion. Social differences, such as part-time or full-time student status or

sexuality, lost their salience when the home was the sole learning space. The most relevant determinant of the participants' HE learning experience in lockdown was their care work. This remains stubbornly gendered labour which is generally undertaken by women and written about by women like me who are often directly involved (e.g. Bunting, 2020; Skeggs, 2014).

Participants who did their paid work at home found it colonised *the homeplace* and compressed the space available for learning. The loss of a commute to work was welcomed by the disabled participant, as she was better able to accommodate her paid work and make choices about the timing of her day to fit in with her symptoms. Others found the time gained was taken by more paid work. In response to the intersection of learning, paid work and care work in lockdowns, the students began to resist and reclaim *the homeplace* as a private space. Participants began to instantiate physical boundaries and refuse home schooling, which reaffirmed their homes as spaces of renewal and privacy. As participants began to use their cars again, some women found this was a liminal space in which they were neither wholly in the public realm or the private. Work demands from both domains receded for a while.

Pressures in *the homeplace* almost led some participants to withdraw from their degrees, but they continued. Some of these students linked future graduation to secure accommodation. Their life histories revealed experiences of *homeplace* instability. A degree was a pathway to more satisfying paid work and increased earnings, but this was not interpreted as part of the meritocratic or individualistic discourse promoted by the Department for Education (2021) and FECs themselves (Gadsby and Smith, 2023). Instead, their motivation was related to a need to protect themselves and their families against future precarity. *The homeplace* was a place of safety for these participants.

o *To what extent are FECs providing support for HE mature students who labour at home?*

My work contributes to the literature on the informal peer relationships of mature students (Heagney and Benson, 2017; Mannay and Morgan, 2013; Servant-Miklos et al., 2020; Tones et al., 2009). Their stories emphasised how some initially felt out of place in an FEC, but informal alliances with other students bolstered an 'at home' feeling. These mature students had a strong sense of group belonging which was mutually supportive and included younger students; however, this was not the case for all the participants, some of whom stigmatised non-mature students (Esmond, 2015; Mallman and Lee, 2016). A collective *homeplace* space in which mature students did not feel isolated or conspicuous was important to their wellbeing.

The narratives emphasised the importance of support from individual FEC staff who understood their familial relationships and care responsibilities. Whilst I agree with Mannay and Morgan (2013) that HEI procedures must take women's home-based work into account, I would add that FEC staff must see mature students in the context of their whole lives (Butcher, 2020). Participants who carried deficit learner identities from school found that feelings of inadequacy re-emerged in the lockdowns; FEC support must therefore consider the life histories of those who need additional help.

The findings from this research prompt questions about what counts as work and what skills are valued by HE in FE providers. Learning from family experiences has traditionally been marginalised in HEIs (e.g. Edwards, 1993), and the vocational degree specialisation of FECs compounds this tendency. Lockdowns rendered the WBL components of Foundation degrees impossible. Whilst most of the participants viewed their situated learning from home as irreconcilable with notions of WBL, their stories of

home-schooling and caring for disabled family members demonstrated how care-related degrees could formally value their skills.

The findings also point to the positive support of 'critical social literacy' (Duckworth and Smith, 2021: 25) facilitated by individual lecturers. The dominant employability and skills discourse of HE in FE supplants respect for theoretical learning for a number of the participants. Yet abstract thinking informed by critical theory is important in lifelong learning contexts (Gouthro, 2019). The expansion of students' capacity to critique workplace inequality enabled them to move away from individualised understandings of gender-based and/or sexual orientation discrimination, which create shame and debilitation. Building on work by Askham (2008), Callender and Little (2015), Esmond (2015) and McManus (2011), my findings show that dialogue in HE in FE classrooms about workplace relations and wider social problems can lead to new ways of seeing the world and conceptualisations of citizenship. As Lister (2003) also concludes, albeit in a university context, tutors' treatment of mature students' past experience as valued knowledge plays a crucial role in the development of their engagement with critical theory.

The findings of this research emphasise the importance of a shared, collective mature student experience because some participants felt they occupied a marginalised space in FECs. One participant (Kim) developed a standpoint on student parents which came about through her experience and theoretical research. This led to pride and activism on behalf of other student parents with whom she shared this category and points to the role positive narratives can play in supporting HE in FE mature students.

7.2 Contribution to knowledge

This thesis makes a threefold contribution to knowledge. Firstly, the application of Gouthro's theory in an HE in FE context brings a new perspective to existing literature

which decries the narrow definition of skills imposed by neoliberal interests in FEC contexts (Avis and Orr, 2016; Duckworth and Smith, 2021). My work claims that a reimagination of what constitutes WBL is urgently needed; it should encompass forms of unpaid care and theoretically informed critiques of workplace relations. My thesis advances our understanding of how labour in *the homeplace* and relational learning could be afforded value in VET settings. Additionally, the prevailing conceptualisation of WBL in HE in FE as employability obscures structural barriers and injustices; Gouthro's emphasis on the need for mature students to engage with critical theory has revealed how mature students' lived experiences of workplace relations can be developed so that they resist objectification and understand the systemic nature of social inequality.

Secondly, the thesis also makes its own theoretical contributions to *homeplace* theory. The unique circumstances of the COVID-19 lockdowns revealed the extent to which mature students' identities are defined by their labour and their family units. When all work takes place in *the homeplace*, the relevance of identity becomes less salient than the labour itself and relationships to other people. Characteristics such as sexuality or part-time/full-time student status had less relevance to learning in *the homeplace* when all social interaction was online. The thesis therefore argues that relationships and labour are the key lenses through which to understand mature students' *homeplace* experiences and how they relate to learning. Unlike existing literature on student parents in the pandemic (Nikiforidou and Holmes, 2022; Savage, 2023), this research concerns a more diverse group of mature students and emphasises the heterogeneity of their lives, relationships and frequently overlooked *homeplace* labours. This perspective deliberately challenges the deficit model which is frequently implied in the treatment of mature students' families. A new contribution to Gouthro's theory provided by this thesis is that of the importance of achieving *homeplace* security through mature students' learning. Finally, a new extension to her theory is the concept of the need for marginalised students to have access to informal collective *homeplaces*. Hitherto, this

has been confined to educational studies of young non-White girls in the US (Garcia, 2017; Kelly, 2020), so my thesis demonstrates that digital and physical educational spaces where non-majority students feel 'at home' are crucial for some mature students.

Thirdly, this thesis adds a new contribution to the existing small body of research on mature students which uses The Listening Guide (Lyndon and Edwards, 2022; McCusker, 2020) by applying the method specifically to HE in FE mature student experiences. The use of this data analysis method represents a departure from thematic analysis which is typically applied to them (e.g. Cree et al., 2009; Fenge, 2011; Robinson, 2012; Welsh, 2020). As a form of narrative analysis, the LG interpretation preserves the life history of participants and recasts how they are understood (Frank, 2015). The focus on language and metaphor reveals different insights into complex life histories. The creative poetic texts produced in the analysis engage the reader in a different relationship to the data (Carter et al., 2018; Edwards and Weller, 2012; Inckle, 2020).

7.3 Implications

The research has significant implications for HE in FE practice, despite English COVID-19 lockdowns ending in 2021. Recent data reveal 38% of UK employees have been engaged in hybrid working (ONS, 2022), and a survey claims that a third of HE courses are still being taught in a hybrid format (Clarence-Smith, 2023). It seems likely that some paid working and learning at home will continue into the future. For this reason, FECs must carefully consider the provision of support which takes into account learning, paid work and unpaid work in *the homeplace.* To halt the very worrying 'retreat of adults from HE' (Butcher, 2020: 7) mature students' particular needs must be considered (Mallman and Lee, 2016).

The participants relied upon individual HE in FE tutors, support staff and their access to peer networks. Yet whilst the personalised care they received from these people was considerable, it was contingent. Similarly, whilst individual lecturers created environments which foster dialogue about workplace relations, a broader and more critical conceptualisation of WBL is required institutionally. This should question the notion of employability as it is applied to mature students and consider structural factors that affect them (Leathwood, 2006; Merrill et al., 2020). Embedding respect for the learning from *the homeplace* and into HE curricula is an ambitious goal; nonetheless, I stand with others (Burke and Jackson, 2007; Callender, 2018; Gouthro, 2009) to argue it is necessary. Lastly, FECs must actively consider creating collective *homeplaces* for mature students. This means considering the physical and digital college spaces in which mature students operate, in order to ensure they have opportunities to build peer relationships with people like them (Butcher, 2020) and feel FECs are 'somewhere [they] can be' [Kim]. It also means mitigating the stigma they may feel about their age or their previous educational experiences by building positive institutional narratives with them about their rich and complex lives.

Finally, the findings from this study suggest more nuanced HE in FE metrics are needed to account for mature students' caring responsibilities, both at institutional and national levels (HESA, 2020). This information can be used to inform and improve FEC Access and Participation Plans (OfS, 2023) to plan interventions on behalf of mature students.

7.4 Limitations of this study and future research directions

Although narrative researchers are often advised to conduct more than one interview with participants (Creswell and Poth, 2018; Riessman, 2008), ethical concerns about excessive demands being made on participants' time prevented this. Had I followed up with a second interview, there would have been further opportunities to deepen the

research data, as I might have become more skilled at eliciting further stories (Letherby, 2003).

The research might also have benefited if the sample had been more diverse in terms of its gender split and the students' FECs. The existing HE in FE gender imbalance (AoC, 2022) may have been a factor in the smaller number of men recruited. Furthermore, despite attempts to involve participants from colleges in other regions, the participants came from three FECs in northeast England. To what extent regional attitudes to work and gender affected my data is unknowable. Whilst I do not claim generalisability for my findings as a narrative researcher, I aimed for depth (Creswell and Poth, 2018) and different facets of experience might have been revealed with other participants.

Finally, triangulation of the narrative data to increase validity was desirable but was not achieved. A combination of ethics and lockdowns impeded my initial plan to ask participants to share visual artefacts with me in the interviews (King, Horrocks and Brooks, 2019). The photo elicitation method I envisaged could have been construed as an invasion of *homeplace* privacy or led to consent issues if they shared pictures of the people they lived with. It would also have increased the participants' workload.

Future research in this field could take a number of useful directions to build on the knowledge and insights gained in this thesis. Research with FECs and other HE in FE stakeholders on the possibility of expanding definitions of WBL to support those students working in *the homeplace* would complement the perspectives provided in the current study. Inspired by Kim's standpoint, participatory action research to build new 'canonical narratives' (Pegg and di Paolo, 2013: 212) on mature HE in FE students would be worthwhile and have liberatory potential. Future research could also be conducted to investigate the relevance of *the homeplace* theory with other cohorts of FEC students. The concepts of a collective *homeplace* and securing a *homeplace* through learning

seem especially pertinent for research with ESOL learners or students who have experienced homelessness.

7.5 Personal reflection

Throughout this research, particularly in the interviews, I have oscillated on the insider/outsider Education doctoral research continuum, but in truth this is an artificial binary division (Czerniawski, 2023) because I occupy an in-between space. I was positioned as a teacher, a mature student, a researcher and a mother by participants (Thapar-Björkert and Henry, 2004), but the significance of these seemingly distinct identities dissolved somewhat as everything took place in my *homeplace* in lockdown. My assigned identities were determined by the participants' perceptions of my work and my relationships, the key lenses through which I have sought to understand their narratives of learning and *the homeplace.* Just like them, paid work and study in my *homeplace* during lockdowns were sometimes interrupted by family responsibilities.

Over time, I have retreated from my workplace teacher status and inhabited my *homeplace* mature student status more fully, which leads me to confront the issue that I am no longer a researcher-practitioner as I was when I started my PhD. Although I am committed to social change as a critical feminist researcher, I must question how far my work can have an influence on institutions' policy or FEC colleagues' practice. However, I do retain links to the field which enable me to disseminate my findings to HE in FE audiences. I have already sought out opportunities to tell in accessible language the powerfully affecting stories my participants shared with me (Burke and Jackson, 2007; Burke and Lumb, 2018; Lillis, 2001), for example as a guest in a podcast on FE research and in a UCU online seminar. The importance of hearing and sharing the participants' voices informed my decision to use the LG as a data analysis tool, and the I-poems

express their experiences in an arresting way; I hope therefore to be able to exhibit these texts, for example in a conference setting.

By focusing attention on mature students' own voices which mostly go unheard in the sector, I hope to influence thinking on their *homeplaces* and care practices. The tide is beginning to turn on the salience of unpaid care, as evidenced by the establishment of a new interdisciplinary journal, *The International Journal of Care and Caring* in 2017, the first UN International Day of Care and Support in October 2023 and the publication of counter-narratives which challenge neoliberal modes of thinking (Bunting, 2020; Lynch, 2022; The Care Collective, 2020). I believe this shift prepares the ground for a more positive reception within HE in FE for feminist narrative research such as mine.

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Appendix 1: A timeline of COVID-19 restrictions in England

Key moments of the English lockdown timeline in a brief summary table, adapted from Brown and Kirk-Wade (2021); however, the circumstances, the legislation and UK government guidance were complex and changed frequently so this is not a comprehensive guide.

'Lockdown laws'	Time frame	Restrictions summary
First national lockdown	March to June 2020	People ordered to stay at home and leave only for essential purposes. Workers required to work from home if possible. Non-essential high street businesses closed. FEC and school premises closed to all but the most vulnerable students and the children of key workers.
Local restrictions: northeast England placed in a tiered lockdown	September to October 2020	Restrictions on businesses and gatherings reapplied.
Second national lockdown	November 2020	People allowed to leave home to meet one other person outside. Non-essential high street businesses closed. FEC and school premises closed.

Reintroduction of local tiers: northeast England in lockdown	December 2020	Restrictions on gatherings and some businesses reapplied.
Third national lockdown	January to March 2021	As in the first national lockdown.
Leaving lockdown	March to July 2021	A four-step plan to leave lockdown was implemented. The period was extended as people began receiving their first doses of COVID-19 vaccines.

Appendix 2: Interview schedule

Welcome and thank. Tell them about me and my research aims in brief. Check understanding of consent form. OK for me to record meeting in Teams?

1. <u>Brief background</u>: age? Degree? PT/FT? Job(s)? Do you live with anybody?

2. <u>Previous education and family</u>

- How was secondary school? What do you remember?

- What were you expected to do when you left school? Age?

- Were you encouraged to…? Did your gender play a part in what you did?

- Who, what influenced you to do what you did?

- Memories of family life: parents' jobs, who did the work in the home, pocket money, Saturday jobs? Your family's view of their social class? Has your perception of this changed for you now?

3. <u>Working life now</u>

- What is your job? What led up to you doing this work? Part-time/ full-time? Why? Does your gender play any part in you doing this job? Effects of pandemic on your working life?

- Does your job link to your degree? How? Does your work, or the amount of it, impact on your studies? How?

- What do people at work think of your study? Are you supported by colleagues/ managers/ employers? How (e.g. time, paying your fees, encouragement, mentoring)? Any barriers?

4. <u>HE education at FE college as a mature student</u>

- Why did you decide to return to formal education after a gap? Any triggers/ a turning point?

- Why choose a degree in an FE college (e.g. location, ease, feeling 'at home' with other students, the FE ethos, the course, lower fees)?

- How is your course as a mature student? Do you have things in common with other students (e.g. age, gender, a family, working background)?

- How have previous experiences (life/ work) helped you/ not helped you? Examples?

- Does the college value you/ understand your needs as a mature student? Have you used RPL?

- Valued forms of support? Difficulties? Mitigation? Withdrawal? Tell me more.

- How do you manage to fund your course? Tell me about the process you went through for this.

- How/ what has changed in you/ for you as a result of doing the degree? Does your studying impact on your paid work?

5. Life at home

- Current family situation: partner/children? How do they see you & your studies? Examples of support/ encouragement/ barriers/ discouragement?

- How are household jobs shared out? Particular roles? Are they gendered? Do you care for other people/ animals?

- How has the pandemic affected your studying? Tell me more.

- How do you manage to fit in study at home? Special room/ place/ time of day? Boundaries?

- Free time? Hobbies? When do you do them? Why do you value them?

6. The future

- How would you like your life to be in a year? Your family? In 5 years? Job/ more HE study?   What do you feel about the debt you'll have in the future? Does this affect your future?

7. <u>Is there anything else you'd like to tell me about your life as a working mature student?</u>

Thank for taking part and giving up time to help me. The Teams video will be deleted after transcription. Data will be anonymised, stored securely. Would they like to choose a pseudonym? Would they like me to email the transcript so they can check it? Remind them about the right to withdraw as detailed in the consent form. I'll email an Amazon e-voucher as token of my appreciation. Other recruits who may be willing to help?

Appendix 3: Participant information sheet

Lancaster University

Participant information sheet

Title: Exploring the role of different forms of work in mature students' experiences of higher education in further education colleges

For further information about how Lancaster University processes personal data for research purposes and your data rights please visit our webpage:
www.lancaster.ac.uk/research/data-protection

I am Sally Welsh, a PhD student at Lancaster University, and I would like to invite you to take part in a research study about the role of different forms of work in the lives of mature HE students at FE colleges. Please take time to read the following information carefully before you decide whether you wish to take part.

What is the study about? This study aims to understand how paid work and work in the home, such as caring for relatives, affects mature HE students. The study also aims to learn how colleges can best support these students.

Why have I been invited? I have approached you because your experiences of education and different kinds of work will help me understand what influences the types of work you do now and how these affect your degree. I would be very grateful if you would agree to take part in this study.

What will I be asked to do if I take part? If you decided to take part, this would involve the following: an email to give your written consent and an interview on Microsoft Teams of approximately 60 minutes.

What are the possible benefits from taking part? If you take part in this study, your insights will contribute to our understanding of supporting mature students engaged in college-based HE. This has the potential to inform future college policy and provision for future mature students. I will give you a £10 Amazon voucher to thank you for giving me your time.

Do I have to take part? No. It's completely up to you to decide whether you take part. Your participation is voluntary. If you decide not to take part in this study, this will not affect your programme of study or relationships with college staff.

What if I change my mind? If you change your mind, you are free to withdraw at any time during your participation in this study. If you want to withdraw, please let me know, and I will extract any ideas or information you contributed to the study and destroy them. However, it is difficult and often impossible to take out data from one specific participant when this has already been anonymised or pooled together with other people's data. Therefore, you can only withdraw up to 2 weeks after taking part in the study**.**

What are the possible disadvantages and risks of taking part? It is unlikely that there will be any disadvantages to taking part; however, the interview is likely to take up to an hour of your time.

Will my data be identifiable? After the interview only I and my supervisor will have access to the ideas you share with me. I will keep your personal information (e.g. your name and other information about you that can identify you) confidential, that is I will not share it with others. I will remove any personal information from the written record of your contribution. All reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity by assigning you a pseudonym.

How will I use the information you have shared with me and what will happen to the results of the research study? I will use the information you have shared with me only in the following ways. I will use it for research purposes. This will include my PhD thesis and other publications, for example journal articles. I may also present the results of my study at academic conferences. The findings may also be shared with FE colleges in order to learn lessons for the future about supporting other mature students. When writing up the findings from this study, I would like to reproduce some of the views and ideas you shared with me. I will only use anonymised quotations from my interview with you so that although I will use your exact words, **all reasonable steps will be taken to protect your anonymity in** my publications.

How my data will be stored? Your data will be stored in encrypted files (that is no-one other than me, the researcher, will be able to access them) on password-protected devices. I will store hard copies of any data securely in locked cabinets in my office. I will keep data that can identify you separately from non-personal information (e.g. your views on a specific topic). In accordance with university guidelines, I will keep the data securely for a minimum of ten years.

Sources of support

If you have concerns about your wellbeing, please contact the xxx College Student Support Team. They can offer counselling and advice on a range of different forms of support which are available. Tel: xxx. Email: xxx

What if I have a question or concern?

If you have any queries or if you are unhappy with anything that happens concerning your participation in the study, please email me at s.welsh1@lancaster.ac.uk or my supervisor, Dr Melis Cin at m.cin@lancaster.ac.uk. Tel: +44 (0)1524 592884.

If you have any concerns or complaints that you wish to discuss with a person who is not directly involved in the research, you can also contact the PhD Programme Director, Professor Jo Warin at j.warin@lancaster.ac.uk. Tel: +44 (0)1524 594266.

The postal address for Dr Cin and Professor Warin is:

Educational Research Department

County South

Lancaster University

Lancaster

United Kingdom

LA1 4YD

This study has been reviewed and approved by the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Lancaster Management School's Research Ethics Committee.

Thank you for considering your participation in this project. *Sally Welsh*

Appendix 4: Consent form

Lancaster University

Project Title: Exploring the role of different forms of work in the lives of mature students engaged in higher education in further education colleges.

Name of Researcher: Sally Welsh

Email: s.welsh1@lancaster.ac.uk

Please tick each box

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the information sheet for the above study. I have had the opportunity to consider the information, ask questions and have had these answered satisfactorily.	☐
2. I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time during my participation in this study and within 2 weeks after I took part in the study, without giving any reason. If I withdraw within 2 weeks of taking part in the study, my data will be removed.	☐
3. I understand that any information given by me may be used in future reports, academic articles, publications or presentations by the researcher, but my personal information will not be included,	☐

and all reasonable steps will be taken to protect the anonymity of the participants involved in this project.	
4. I understand that my name and my organisation's name will not appear in any reports, articles or presentation without my consent.	☐
5. I understand my interview will take place via Microsoft Teams. This will be audio-recorded and transcribed. The data will be protected in encrypted files and kept secure. I will have the right to check transcriptions of audio material generated as part of this project.	☐
6. I understand that data will be kept according to university guidelines for a minimum of 10 years after the end of the study.	☐
7. I agree to take part in the above study.	☐

_____   _____   _____

Name of Participant   Date (Day/month/year)   Signature

I confirm that the participant was given an opportunity to ask questions about the study, and all the questions asked by the participant have been answered correctly and to the best of my ability. I confirm that the individual has not been coerced into giving consent, and the consent has been given freely and voluntarily.

Signature of researcher/person taking the consent

_____

Date _____   Day/month/year

Appendix 5: An example participant story (LG reading 1)

Emma is 25 and completing a FT top-up BA Health and Social Care at an FE college. She works 25-30 hours per week in a restaurant. She lives with her female partner and her young child. Her partner also works.

Emma is from a working-class family. Her mother was a single parent who worked as a teaching assistant (TA). Emma has brothers and sisters. She describes her mother as 'fighting our corner'. Her twin is autistic, and Emma was diagnosed with dyslexia at primary school. As a child, she liked 'girly' play with dolls, but she also describes herself as 'a tomboy' who played sports.

After GCSEs, she went to an FEC to do a childcare qualification but did not complete it. Although Emma wanted to work with children, she thinks TAs are disrespected. She started an Access to HE course but withdrew because she had an accident. However, she later started afresh and completed it. She applied to northeast universities to do a social work degree but was not offered a place. Her mother inspired this course choice because Emma wanted to be able to support children who didn't have parent to advocate for them like she had had. She achieved a Foundation degree Health and Social Care at an FEC and then progressed onto the level 6 top-up degree.

Emma has faced a number of setbacks in her post-16 education. Her accident interrupted her Access course. Her mother died unexpectedly during her Foundation degree. Her tutor helped her think about her options at the time and after a gap, with mitigation in place, she resumed her studies. The FEC support worker who helped Emma with her written work and organisation skills left and was not replaced. Emma did not want to pursue this as she is not 'pushy', so she continued without any support.

Her FEC provides a discrete building for its HE students and she likes the separation from FE students; she sees this as a space for the mature students. There are only women on her degree and most of them are parents. Emma feels lockdowns may have destroyed any potential connections between them; she does not share typically 'girly' interests with them e.g. 'talking about makeup'. Emma was not aware of her financial entitlements as the non-biological parent of her child e.g. the childcare grant. Her stepmother helped her to apply for this and her SfE loan.

Emma is very close to her twin and to an older sibling who encourages her when she feels demotivated. Her partner also motivates her and takes their child out of the house, so Emma has time and space to study. Emma really struggles to keep going at times and has often felt like withdrawing from her degree. In lockdowns, she has looked after and shared the home-schooling of her child, who is 5 years old and has developmental delays. She has used HE mitigation to help her through this. At the start of the first lockdown, Emma's family of three shared a laptop until her child's school supplied a laptop. She has no discrete study space at home. If her child wants to play, she readily gives up studying to join in. In her free time, she loves playing with her child, baking and watching TV boxsets. She can no longer play sport due to an injury.