Recognising and reimagining mature students' unpaid care work as a form of work-based learning

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This research paper explores how unpaid care work is positioned on mature students' undergraduate degrees in English further education (FE) colleges. It offers a new perspective by considering the impact of this form of labour on learning in the home during COVID-19 lockdowns, presenting both narrative data and I-poems created using the Listening Guide. The paper calls for care work to be reimagined as a legitimate type of work-based learning which can make valuable contributions to higher education (HE) degrees. The paper also adds to existing theoretical perspectives on mature students by exploring Gouthro's (2005; 2009) critical feminist theory of the homeplace. Her theory is applied to a mixed group of mature students in a range of family units and evaluated. Findings indicate that home-schooling became another form of care work in students' homes. Care work was gendered and existing scripts about the roles of 'proper mams' reinforced the expectation that women should prioritise their families. This affected the female students' autonomy as learners. The article discusses why institutional recognition of unpaid work is necessary for gender equity and argues for the promotion of critical social literacy about gendered work to counter individualised deficit understandings. As hybrid work and study modes continue, the recommendations have ongoing implications for HE provision.

Keywords: *mature students; HE in FE; the Listening Guide; the homeplace; work-based learning*

Introduction

The decline in mature students' engagement with higher education (HE) is a matter of growing concern in the UK (Butcher 2020; Office for Students 2020). In 2010/11, there were more than 400,000 mature undergraduate entrants but by 2017/18 this had fallen by 40% to fewer than 240,000 (Hubble and Bolton 2021). The steepest declines have been in England and in the numbers of mature students over the age of 30 (Million Plus 2018). English widening participation initiatives and policy highlight the underrepresentation of mature students in HE (Office for Students n.d.), using a definition based on age and level of study (over 21 for an undergraduate student and over 25 for a postgraduate). However, researchers in the field argue the terms 'mature-age student' (Mallman & Lee 2016, p. 685) and 'mature student' (Waller 2006, p. 115) are not nuanced enough to account for the varying backgrounds of this category of under-represented students. This paper presents research which seeks to understand the complex working lives of HE in further education (FE) mature students who are over the age of 25. All too often research stops 'at the door of the HE institution' (Callender 2018, p. 90). This paper considers how mature students' learning interacts with their labour at home and why a reconceptualisation of work-based learning is necessary to recognise their contributions, enhance gender equity, and ultimately increase their participation.

This inquiry explores the question: How does the learning of mature students interact with their care work at home? Narrative data were collected from 15 mature students who were enrolled in undergraduate degrees at three FE colleges in the north of England. This took place in 2021 when England was emerging from a final COVID-19 lockdown. I argue that their experiences can be best understood by employing a critical feminist theory of the homeplace which challenges the dominance of marketplace values in adult education settings. The paper also argues that a feminist approach to data analysis, the Listening Guide, offers different insights to the more typical thematic analysis of mature students' experiences (e.g. Fenge 2011; Robinson 2012; Welsh 2020).

The paper begins with a discussion of employability in the lifelong learning sector and focuses on its instantiation in Foundation degrees which are highly gendered. It then turns to a discussion of Patricia Gouthro's (2005; 2009) theory of the homeplace and argues that this offers a useful framework to analyse the participants' narratives about learning during a lockdown. I then explain my research and data analysis methods. The second part of the paper discusses the findings. I conclude that home-based care work is highly gendered and is positioned as a form of non-work, hence it is overlooked as a valuable source of HE learning. Reimagining work-based learning would lead to enhanced gender equity for many mature students.

Lifelong learning and employability

Although the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) has emphasised a holistic view of lifelong learning for over five decades (Faure et al. 1972; UNESCO 2020), in many international contexts mature students' potential is narrowly construed in terms of their future employment (Blackmore 2006; Merrill et al. 2020; Mojab 2006). UK lifelong learning policy has focused almost exclusively on economic productivity (Coffield 1999; Biesta 2006; Burke & Jackson 2007; Callender & Little 2015). This restricted perception overlooks unpaid care work and disregards the learning mature students gained from it.

The mature students in this research study HE courses at English FE colleges (FECs). These institutions are strongly oriented towards workforce development (Gadsby & Smith 2023; Gleeson et al. 2015). FECs teach a range of levels to students aged 14 and over. They offer HE at degree and sub-degree level.

Foundation degrees offer a good insight into how employability underscores HE in FE provision. 63% of Foundation degrees are taught in English FECs (Association of Colleges 2022). These English and Welsh qualifications, which are the equivalent of two thirds of a Bachelor's degree, were launched in 2001. They are discursively placed in 'the demand-led skills agenda of local labour markets' (Burke & Jackson 2007, p. 169) and are created in partnership with employers whose needs are foregrounded in policy documents (Quality Assurance Agency for Higher Education 2020). Employer collaboration is emphasised, and they contain mandatory work-based learning components. As HE in FE is strongly vocational, it tends to follow the gendered order which characterises vocational education and training (Blackmore 2006; Niemeyer & Colley 2015; Skeggs 1997; Welsh 2020). Women's Foundation degree subject choices are therefore consistent with occupations which are coded female: health and social care, childcare, beauty therapy and education courses (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2020). Indeed 66% of Foundation degrees were awarded to women in 2018/19 (ibid). However, the gendered nature of mature students' previous working lives (Burke 2011; Mannay & Morgan 2013; Stevenson & Clegg 2012) is not given ample consideration, so a claim that women on an Early Years Foundation degree 'were no longer constrained by gender in terms of educational choices' (Webber 2015, p. 233) seems naïve. Their pasts have led them to degrees in care-related subjects.

Many mature students bring relevant experience of paid and voluntary work into HE which they believe are valid for discussion in seminar contexts (Edwards 1993; Fenge 2011; Mojab 2006; Smith 2017). Yet, although their private experiences of family care may also be appropriate, many students believe they are not suitable for HE learning (Edwards 1993; Marandet & Wainwright 2010; Moreau 2016). This is an issue which disproportionately affects women as they are the majority of student parents and carers in the UK (Brooks 2012; National Union of Students 2009). This problem requires a critical feminist theoretical approach which asks why lifelong learning policy privileges the economy and downplays unpaid care. I discuss this in the following section.

A critical feminist theory of the homeplace

In England, the home became the site of mature students' formal HE learning and, for many, the site of their paid work and care responsibilities in March 2020. Parents helped children to learn at home as school buildings closed for most pupils. Disabled and elderly relatives were required to shield at home, so they required more support. Worldwide, the impact of these changes fell disproportionately on women, who already shouldered most of the burden for unpaid care (International Labour Organization 2020; United Nations 2020). With this in mind, a distinctive contribution to the field can be made by employing a critical feminist theory which investigates the home as a site for learning and care work. Such a perspective centres the role of labour in analyses and develops a discourse of challenge by asking what really matters in lifelong learning. Gouthro's (2004; 2005; 2009; 2010) theory of the homeplace draws on Habermasian concepts of the system and lifeworld and incorporates Fraser's (2020b) 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. She 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 2020a; Weeks 2011). She locates her critique of the prevalent neoliberal framework in lifelong learning within the critical emancipatory tradition (Gouthro 2019; 2022). Key themes emerge in her work about the need for critical forms of pedagogy and support for mature students, which question dominant values and recentre the homeplace as a significant site for learning.

Gouthro focuses on the experiences of heterosexual women with children, proposing 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. 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. In other words, Gouthro somewhat blurs identity with relationships and her definition of both relationships and unpaid labour reflects the extent to which these are determined by gendered roles.

I chose to focus my analysis on relationships and labour. Different identities were not prominent in my interviews with participants; perhaps the liminality of available identities was blurred when they were not able to leave their homes in lockdown. The differentiation between mature students' different identities has been extensively researched and, in addition, the concept of identity can incur 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 those who are single or childless also made this an unhelpful analytical tool. Whilst Gouthro advocates extending her homeplace theory to other groups, is the lens of identity, which is perhaps inadequately theorised, helpful when participants are not heterosexual mothers?

Methods

Participants
Narrative research often focuses on a very small group of individuals who are interviewed more than once (Riessman 2008) but I decided that this might be unethical given that many people were overwhelmed in lockdowns. I used a snowball sample, a type of purposeful sample (Creswell & Poth 2018). The 15 participants shared four salient characteristics: they were all over 25 years of age; they were studying an undergraduate degree at FECs in northern England; they lived at home; and they all worked in a paid and/or unpaid capacity. The 15 participants began their undergraduate degree programmes before March 2020, with the exception of George who started his degree in September 2020. They were at different stages of their Foundation, full or top-up Honours degrees. The subjects varied but with one exception were care-related: Education; Childcare and Young People; Health and Social Care; Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation. Ten of the group were in full-time paid work. Nine were parents, two of these were single mothers, and one father did not live with his children. One cared for her elderly, disabled mother and was also a grandmother. Nine lived with a spouse or partner, two lived with friends, and four lived alone with or without children. Four of the participants identified as LGBTQI+. Two spoke English as a second language and one student received the Disabled Students' Allowance (DSA). Listing these characteristics demonstrates they are a heterogeneous group. I was anxious to avoid cementing the notion that care work was women's work (Lister 2003); 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. These

proportions reflect national mature student demographics in England (Association of Colleges 2022) and the UK (Higher Education Statistics Agency 2023).

Data collection
Each participant agreed to an online life history interview. I elicited stories about school days, previous jobs, and talk about their families. The interviews took place between April and June 2021 during a phased exit from the third national lockdown in England, so COVID-19 restrictions dictated the decision to interview participants remotely. The interviews were conducted on Microsoft Teams and recorded.

Data analysis: The Listening Guide
My method of data analysis was the Listening Guide (LG). As a form of narrative analysis, the LG interpretation preserves the life history of participants and recasts how they are understood (Frank 2015). Firstly, I transcribed the video recordings in full. I preserved my questions and reactions in the transcripts, as I played a role in the construction of the participants' narrated self (Doucet & Mauthner 2008; Riessman 2008). After transcription, my analysis proceeded in four stages.

Reading 1: restorying, recurring language and reflexivity
Following the sociological LG 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 which allowed me to identify their influential experiences and turning points (Golding & Hargreaves 2018; Riessman 2008). This 'restorying' (Creswell & Poth 2018, p. 72) immediately raised questions about my own personal background and political commitments, and I recognise that the emphases in my retelling inevitably reflect these. Simultaneously, as I worked through each interview transcript, I explored my reactions. I annotated my utterances as well as the participants'. My reactions were then explored as prompts for my thinking and analysis (Woodcock 2016).

Reading 2: Creating I-poems
The second reading of the LG focuses on the way in which respondents speak about themselves, their feelings and experiences (Doucet & 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 underlined, and important associated verbs or phrases are retained (Edwards & Weller 2012; Golding & 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. The creative poetic texts produced in the analysis engage the reader in a different relationship to the data (Carter, Sanders & Bray 2018; Edwards & Weller 2012; Inckle 2020) and allow readers to discern different voices which they may not be aware of in verbatim transcripts.

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 & Mauthner 2008; Mauthner & Doucet 2011). I used highlighting to show participants' key relationships with others.

Reading 4: Enabling and disadvantaging structures
In the final reading, participants are placed within broader cultural and social contexts (Golding & Hargreaves 2018; Mauthner & Doucet 2011). I made notes on the ways in which structural factors, such as social class, gender, age, and sexuality, were seen by the participants as either enabling or disadvantaging structures. I was also interested in whether they were recognised as such or seen as private issues.

Ethical considerations
I adhered to the British Educational Research Association (2018) ethical code and was granted ethical clearance by Lancaster University. Volunteers emailed me signed consent forms before interviews and were offered transcripts for reading and comment. All individuals, FECs, and places were assigned pseudonyms as I transcribed the data.

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. As the social arrangements which brought the mature students into HE in FE can be traced in the narratives, I include transcript extracts. I-poems are also presented so readers can 'see representations of the different voices on a page and can interrogate them, questioning (perhaps) the meaning…or decisions made' (Riessman 2008, p. 137).

Findings and discussion

'Proper mams': The gendering of care work
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 had dependants, and they did most of their care work.

Male references to caring for others were limited. Richard, a part-time student, with no dependants, shopped for his grandmother in lockdowns. George, a full-time student, shared the care of his two children 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'. 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 workload also increased, leaving gender role attitudes undisturbed for the most part. My findings bear out a widely-noted trend in the UK lockdowns: many heterosexual couples moved to a 'back to the 1950s' (Chung et al. 2021, p. 219) division of labour. This phenomenon was not confined to the UK but also reported in countries which rate amongst the highest in the world for gender equality: Iceland (Hjálmsdóttir & Bjarnadóttir 2021), Germany (Yucel & Chung 2021), and Canada (Qian & Fuller 2020).

Liz worked full-time as a legal assistant, studied full-time, and had three school-aged children. She described 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 falls on me. [Liz's 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 work 'morphs into a gendered definition of work' (Weeks 2011, p. 63). Sue regarded caring for her elderly, disabled mother as daughter's work, and she also had wife's work. She worked as a full-time manager, and studied 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's 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 labour in homeplaces and beyond. These 'taken-for-granted discourses' (Riessman 2008, p. 3) determine how it seems both natural and even correct to divide work into female and male categories: '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].

> 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's 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). 'One [sister] used to be a teacher, but she doesn't do anything now. She's a mam' [Luke].

The impact of home-schooling
Existing gender-normative assumptions laid the ground for another form of care work to be added to some mature female students' workloads: home-schooling. 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 & 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's 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. This is consistent with research findings from Austria, Hungary, Spain and the Netherlands (Derndorfer et al. 2021). As home-schooling was largely a gendered form of labour, the capacity for HE learning of many women students with school-aged 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, p. 107). Home-schooling was only discussed in detail by five women who told me their own learning was at times pushed aside by home-schooling their children. All described how they had considered withdrawing from their degree programmes as they simultaneously tried to study, work, and home-school. In order to accommodate this form of unpaid labour, their own study time sometimes began 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. Nicky was a full-time student and single parent with two children:

> 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's 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 called 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, a full-time student with a partner and two children, 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's transcript]

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 in lockdowns.

Kim explained how becoming a student in 2019 made her feel complete - 'My brain was turning on. I wasn't just a mam, I was Kim.' - but the lockdown forced a pivot:

> 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's I-poem]

Gouthro's (2004) theoretical argument is that for many caregiving 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. Prior to lockdowns, Kim accommodated being a student and a mam, but when the labour of home-schooling was added to her existing care work, she struggled to sustain her degree.

Institutional recognition of care work as a legitimate contributor to HE learning
The 'Great Interruption' (Rikowski 2021, p. 33) of norms caused by the pandemic is an opportunity to rethink aspects of HE provision. Evidential requirements for mitigation were softened and reductions in the hours required for some work-based learning modules were agreed. Yet rigidity around the classification of what counts as work stubbornly persisted. Nonetheless, 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, Education, and Sports Therapy and Rehabilitation.

The lack of opportunity to undertake any work-based learning in lockdowns frustrated several participants. 'You can't get the placement hours that you need due to COVID' [Luke]. Luke was a full-time Sport Therapy and Rehabilitation student with two children who did not live with him. However, five participants were in fact undertaking a brand-new form of unpaid work within the homeplace:

> 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 work-based learning modules on their Children and Young People Foundation degree. They 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 2002, p. 11). Edwards (1993) also finds whilst mature women at university feel their experiences in the public world of work are useful for understanding social science issues, their family experiences are not formally valued. This disjuncture is amplified in the lifelong learning sector because of its emphasis on employability. Although relevant life experiences may be discussed in class, they do not count (Allatt & Tett 2021). Kim believed her social reproductive work could certainly be reimagined as a form of work-based learning:

> 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 emphasised how important their maturity and life experiences were in guiding their degree study, but with the exception of Kim, they all rejected 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 & Holst 2010, p. 18), most participants thought there could be no relationship at all between their situated homeplace knowledge and their degree study. Conceptually, the term 'skills' in the FEC landscape is attached to the notion of work-readiness and industry (Duckworth & Smith 2018; Smith & O'Leary 2013) so homeplace skills were 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).

Some participants had adverse adolescent experiences and they shaped their life histories to make direct links between these and their entry into the field of paid care-related work which eventually led to their degrees. For example, Kim was brought up by her grandparent because she was estranged from her mother who had drug and alcohol addictions. They were very poor: 'My life was extremely chaotic by the time 15, 16 came'. However, after she had children, she worked for a breastfeeding 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 was victimised because he was gay: '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 top-up Honours degree was Education, as was Sue's, who believed 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 reflected on her teenage years:

> I've got seven siblings below me
>
> I'm from a large family
>
> I've got a sister who had speech and language issues
>
> I went through so much
>
> I've got so much personal experience

> Being in the home
>
> Seeing sort of the effects of what divorce does
>
> As a child
>
> Experiencing it
>
> Seeing it again
>
> As a 16, 17-year-old
>
> Supporting my mum and my siblings
>
> I came across so many different things
>
> I have another sister who has mental health issues
>
> I've had a lot of experience. [Jess' I-poem]

Jess' learning was valuable for her Supporting Teaching and Learning Foundation degree. Like Kim, Stephen, and Sue, she acquired relational skills as a result of her family and teenage experiences. These are necessary in educational settings when dealing with children or young people who are also experiencing difficulties or trauma.

Why is workplace experience deemed to be objective and legitimate for assessment on Education, Childcare, Sports Therapy, and Health and Social Care degrees, whereas unpaid care is illegitimate because it is subjective? The inconsistency stems from the positioning of paid work as superior to unpaid care. Given that FE has long been characterised as UK industry's servant (Duckworth & 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 of HE is part of the adoption of 'marketplace values' (Gouthro 2002, p. 2). Care work in the home is not costless, nor is its contribution to the economy negligible (Fraser 2017). The denigration of this labour, which is mostly undertaken by women, as non-work is deliberate and enables it to go unpaid. Bringing forms of critical social literacy into mature student education can raise awareness of structural injustice, which I turn to next.

Critical social literacy
In her degree, Nicky learned to bring her homeplace relational learning and skills 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's I-poem]

Here Nicky's reflection on her experience (being a mum) took place in class (we). She was then able to analyse her own experiences in discussion with others. However, she found an assignment on child safeguarding difficult because of a personal experience. Safeguarding underpins practice in Education, Health and Social Care, and Children and Young People's

settings, so is a fundamental part of these vocational degree subjects. Safeguarding ensures action is taken to protect children from risk or harm, and to promote their health and well-being. 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 exacerbated Nicky's unease about the episode. The interrogation of this past experience in an academic setting proved to be painful for Nicky (Edwards 1993; 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, Gouthro & Mojab 2003). However, 'critical social literacy' (Duckworth & Smith 2021, p. 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 could not be part of her assessed work; however, her experience and thinking meant she was able to develop a new perspective on how powerful actors can close down the claims of the less powerful. Her life history included 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. Later, with the support of her HE tutors, Nicky claimed a different, more powerful position.

Kim also moved on from initial feelings of shame about her maturity and motherhood when she first started her degree: 'I was thinking people are gonna think I'm a lecturer. People are gonna think, "What are *you* doing here?"'. Through a combination of her lived experience and educational research, Kim came to understand she was not alone, but was part of a wider group, the 'student parent' whose needs are frequently overlooked (Brooks 2012; Marandet & Wainwright 2009; Moreau 2016; Moreau & Kerner 2015). She discussed in detail issues that affect student parents, which ranged from the lack of maternity rights for pregnant students to inadequate breastfeeding facilities at her college: 'my friend…she'd be sitting in pain by the end of the day because she needed to express [breastmilk], there was nowhere for her to go at all!' Thus she understood the experience of student parenthood is institutional rather than simply individual.

> They've got children. They want to better themselves. They'll start to go and do this FE course; will not get much support and they'll drop out. And on an emotional level as a parent, imagine thinking that you want to do something so much better for your child and you try, you make an effort, you make that big step, but then there's a big wall there. There's something that doesn't work, finance or childcare or something. Imagine that feeling of stepping back and thinking: 'I really tried, but I couldn't. I tried to be the best mam I could, but I couldn't do it.' [Kim's transcript]

Kim's empathy was grounded in both her own experience and her awareness of injustice, not least the structural poverty which affects this group. Being able to move between these standpoints enabled her to see the social relations which produce oppressive conditions for student parents. Working with mature students to develop critical perspectives on how 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, acknowledging the importance of care work and relational skills, and their positive contributions to HE learning is therefore urgently necessary.

Conclusion

This article calls for a reimagination of work-based learning in England to encompass forms of unpaid care. It advances our understanding of how labour in the homeplace and relational learning could be afforded value. Experiential knowledge associated with marginalised groups such as working-class women is frequently misrecognised (Duckworth & Smith 2021; Skeggs 1997). I stand with others (Burke & Jackson 2007; Callender 2018; Gouthro 2009) to argue that whilst embedding respect for learning from the homeplace and into HE curricula is an ambitious goal, it is necessary. The prevailing conceptualisation of work-based learning in HE in FE as employability obscures structural barriers and injustices; Gouthro's emphasis on the need to develop mature students' critical literacy has revealed how mature students' lived experiences can be developed so that they resist objectification and understand the systemic nature of social inequality.

The research has significant implications for HE practice, despite English COVID-19 lockdowns ending in 2021. Recent data reveal 38% of UK employees have been engaged in hybrid working (Office for National Statistics 2022), and a survey claims that a third of HE courses are still being taught in a hybrid format (Standley 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 and work in the homeplace. To halt the very worrying 'retreat of adults from HE' (Butcher 2020, p. 7), mature students' needs must be considered (Mallman & Lee 2016).

Finally, the tide is beginning to turn on the salience of unpaid care, as evidenced by the establishment of 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). By focusing attention on mature students' own voices, which mostly go unheard in the sector, I hope to influence thinking on the importance of their homeplaces and care work for learning.

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