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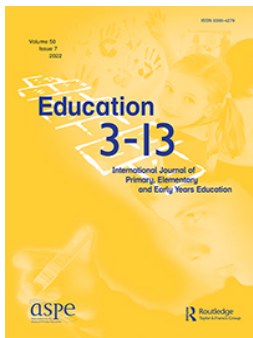
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'Yeah ... but no ... but maybe' – the conflicts and 'lessons' of COVID-19 home-schooling

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ABSTRACT

This paper troubles the narrative around childhood as a 'timeless zone' (James and Prout 2015), which is particularly evident in the performative culture of education. Conversational-style interviews – and in some cases, re-interviews – were conducted with four UK Mums during their time of COVID-19 home-schooling. Subsequent interpretive analysis highlighted a paradoxical problem; in many ways, Mums' new responsibilities to their children's education conflicted with their caring responsibilities. I suggest that this illustrates ways in which Mums have unwittingly learned to prioritise hypothetical futures over subjective experiences. Their stories also demonstrate the importance of embracing human experience in an educational context.

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Introduction

Several years ago, following a period of difficulty in relation to my children's experiences of mainstream schooling, I de-registered my children to begin elective home education. This is where 'parents take direct responsibility for all aspects of their children's education' (Davies 2015, 535). I soon realised that this would not be as simple as delivering a school curriculum and began to recognise the problem that 'the ubiquity of schooling is so pervasive in contemporary society that in many places 'education' has become synonymous with schooling' (Davies 2015, 534). Prior to beginning elective home education, I had not thought deeply about this issue.

The blending of the roles of 'Mum' and 'educator' – which are ordinarily more clearly defined in our culture – led to an array of experiences with my children which, in turn, have led me to 'think differently' about my roles and about education, in an ongoing process. From this, I began to recognise problems with the traditional, 'prescriptive' view of education, and began to question what my children had learned from this approach; As Kelly (2004) discusses, there is a 'hidden curriculum' that students learn:

Because of the way in which the work of the school is planned and organised but which are not themselves overtly included in the planning or even in the consciousness of those responsible for the school arrangements. (5)

I continued learning with and from my children and started to realise that, without direct instruction, they "'pick up" knowledge in ways that are unstructured, ad hoc, apparently haphazard and yet are very efficient' (Thomas and Pattison 2015, 142). This prompted a reflexive reassessment of my past experiences and roles, including my own expectations and, among other things, how I had acted to uphold the values of a goal-orientated paradigm in my family home (Rich 1977). It became apparent that schooling had over-taken my family life in many ways (Gatto 2017).

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Neuman and Guterman (2017) suggest that home education (also known as 'home-schooling') is 'not just about education' and recommend that 'in order to fully understand the spirit of home-schooling, it is necessary to consider not only the pedagogical characteristics but additional aspects' (148) from a 'holistic approach ... [which] examines the lifestyle of those who choose this practice. Literature based on this approach has viewed home-schooling as life changing' (151). This paper draws on interviews that set out to explore these 'additional aspects' of home-schooling under COVID-19 and to consider if it had been 'life changing' and how. This is part of my wider Ph.D. study which focusses on my own learning as a home educator.

Current study

When schools were closed on the 23rd of March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, except to the children of 'essential workers' (National Education Union 2020), I recognised a unique opportunity to speak to other parents about home-schooling, albeit with a different remit than my own. Of course, COVID-19 home-schoolers' circumstances differ to traditional home educators, as their children are still registered in school – thus, they remain subject to schools' requirements.

Initially, I shared a recruitment poster on social media and through a university network. On this, I noted my researcher and home educator roles, along with an interest in parents' experiences of facilitating their children's education during lockdown. Four COVID-19 Home-schoolers responded, two of whom were known to me professionally, two of whom I did not know. Due to lockdown rules, I conducted interviews via video conferencing, although this seemed to have the additional consequence of making the research more accessible to some participants, given their work and caring responsibilities.

The interviews were unstructured and conversational, which was intended to "'empower" respondents to tell their own stories' (Mischler 1986, as cited in Gubrium and Holstein 2012, 35). My approach to the research was also informed by my understanding that 'In social lives, there is only interpretation' (Denzin 2017, 12), and that experience is 'continually constructed and reconstructed. This construction and reconstruction occurs within, and is made visible through, *stories*' (McCormack 2000, 286).

One of the many interesting things about my study is that, in speaking to parents as they were experiencing educational and interrelated dilemmas, I have been able to access the *process* of their meaning-making in new circumstances. As Postman and Weingartner (1968) explain, this is important because:

There is no learning without a learner. And there is no meaning without a meaning maker. In order to survive a world of rapid change there is nothing more worth knowing, for any of us, than the continuing process of how to make viable meanings. (p.81)

Next came the tricky job of figuring out how to analyse the transcripts and learning how to tell a 'meaningful story', as Ellis (1995) calls it; one that could be evaluated on a 'moral criteria [which] ... celebrates resistance, experimentation and empowerment' (Denzin 2017, 9). I was faced with the problematic dilemma that it is not only education, but also educational research that is affected by the 'cultural privileging of positivistic ideologies of science' (Kuntz 2011, 203). This means that 'with the emphasis on the outcomes of research, not the processes involved, the discourse is such that the epistemological, ontological and political nature of research is invisible' (Frankham et al. 2014, 2).

My first consideration was grounded theory (Glaser and Strauss 1967); a popular method among novice qualitative researchers (Frankham et al. 2014). While one must attend to the data in the process of analysis – as per grounded theory – it became apparent that even this had a positivistic 'bent' (Pratt 2012, as cited in Frankham et al. 2014). McCormack (2000) observed that one consequence of this, is that:

The traditional method of coding for themes in transcripts and studying those themes separated people's words from their spoken and heard context. The outcome seemed to be the loss of the individual's experience and the context of that experience. (283)

I was also concerned that there 'is in much scientific and social scientific endeavour the highly problematic assumption that procedural objectivity... will lead us to ontological objectivity' (Thomas and James 2006, 778), while it seems pertinent to acknowledge that 'the researcher is historically and socially situated within the very processes being studied' (Denzin 2017, 12). As Thomas and James (2006) have, I question: 'how is an interpreter, an ethnographer or grounded theorist to emerge with anything which is not merely reportage if that theorist is not using his or her own person to emerge with the 'theory'?' (4).

With this in mind, like Frankham et al. (2014), I:

Want to try to understand (and through that understanding to make tentative moves in explanation, prediction and possible forms of action). In this sense, we wish to theorize as a provocation rather than a resolution to thinking; and in mapping out our thinking about our theorizing, we hope to open up avenues for further debate. This is theory not as an end point, but as a contribution to *conversation*, an educational intervention. (3)

Thus, what is presented is not a 'neutral' view but highlights some of the thinking processes that the Mums I spoke to experienced in navigating the new territory of COVID-19 home-schooling. Ultimately, this is a story about stories, that emerged through my own thinking.

Participants

During the period of lockdown, when life was greatly restricted in many ways, the four participants in this study – all Mums – had their children at home on a full-time basis and were also responsible for their education, with work being sent by schools to support their children's learning. Between them, they cared for eight children, ages four to fourteen years. In some cases, Dads were also involved in their children's home-schooling.

The Mums were all working, or had previously worked, in educational roles, which may have affected their responses to this new responsibility for their children. Three of the Mums continued to carry out paid work during lockdown. Mums' names were replaced with pseudonyms to anonymise them and their families.

Experiences of COVID-19 home-schooling

Initial difficulties

Mums spoke of the time when schools were first closed which, in many ways, was discussed as a time of great disruption and upheaval. Sam, a Mum of four, spoke of how:

The first week of lockdown, my husband wasn't home, so it was just me and the kids, erm, and there was constant meltdowns because of the change. Logging onto the [school] VLE system was just something I thought I can't deal with right now.

Some Mums spoke of their own work and having been particularly busy. Already exhausted from a period of hectic work prior to lockdown, Grace explained:

That first Sunday, erm, when all of the [school] work came through, erm, I think there were about eight emails coming through, with all the different worksheets for the week and I remember thinking "oh my goodness!", like, yeah, having a little cry, thinking "how on earth am I going to do this? There's just no way this is going to physically, possibly, work".

Supporting their children with their schoolwork added another layer of responsibility for Mums as they began to cope with expectations from schools which varied in structure, delivery, and requirements, over time. Some families had as many as four children at home, across educational levels.

Mums described a range of resources being made available to support their children, including, but not limited to, worksheets, books, power point presentations, apps, and virtual learning environments (VLEs). Eve, a Mum of one, described how her daughter had been sent 'a random bunch of handouts', with no expectation that they needed to be returned for marking. At the other extreme was Kate's experience where 'the head teacher says, basically: "So you'll be ready at nine O'clock on Monday morning to receive your lessons and do them"'.

Some families experienced difficulty in even accessing the schoolwork, with device shortages reported by Sam – the Mum of four. Kate, a Mum of two, further discussed a struggle with resources during the first two weeks when her husband was working from home:

We've got, like, two.. three computers, not very good WIFI, we don't have a massive house, so, like, this is our living room and dining room, you know, so, be realistic. If the school are expecting the children to do their work when they're asking us to, then we're all meant to be doing our work at the same time using the same computers or the same WIFI.

The difficulty with not having places and spaces to separate their roles was discussed by some Mums. Eve, a Mum of one, explained that:

I'm a plate-spinner; I've always got lots of things going on - work, research, parenting - but I've got separate places where I compartmentalise that stuff. Combining all of those facets of my life into one physical space, I found really difficult.

In contrast, for Grace, a Mum of a seven-year-old, the blending of space was seen as useful in easing guilt around her work requirements:

I'm always in the room with [my son] ... when I'm in skype meetings he'll just come and wave in the background. It's open plan, so it's all in one space. That makes me feel better, that although I'm on meetings, I can see him the whole time, erm ... I'm with him although I'm not.

Despite their difficulties, and with the addition of 'educator' to their roles, Mums' initial responses were in favour of keeping to as much normality as possible where school was concerned. However, this 'Yes..' to school was quickly brought into question as they worked with their children and juggled other responsibilities and their changing roles. This resulted in all kinds of ways in which they (metaphorically) found themselves saying: '..but no'.

This questioning happened almost straight away for Grace. After initially feeling overwhelmed during the first weekend of lockdown, she said that 'I think by the Monday afternoon I just thought "I don't care if we don't do all the work we're supposed to do"'. Even this, however, was not straightforward, as she weighed up the ambiguity of the study requirements of her son's [private] school. She was told:

It's optional – they don't have to do it – but then another email comes [from school] and says "oh, we thought it would be really nice for the children to show each other their projects when they get back into school", and it's like, well, how is that optional, then? So, although everything is optional, it's not really.

Sam spoke of some of the initial difficulties she and her husband encountered in working with their children in new ways. They had problems 'doing all this work with ... without much in the way of preparation or awareness of exactly where our children are', and that once they had logged onto the school VLE 'it became a daily battle to try and get our kids to do what they're supposed to be doing'. She spoke of her husband's particular difficulties:

He's been doing quite a lot of the schoolwork with them and the first week or so, he was so frustrated, and he actually stopped sleeping ... because he was finding it so difficult, just the complex nature and switching from one level of something to another.

Dad's involvement in home-schooling ranged from this to Kate's experience of her husband who was 'working.. away from home from eight 'til six every day'. Of course, this was during the time when her children were expected to be doing their schoolwork, so it seemed that the pressure with this all fell

on her shoulders. There was also the case of Eve who spoke of ‘co-educating’ her daughter with her estranged husband.

The complexity of their current roles was further discussed by some Mums. Kate, for example, reasoned that, in school, a teacher ‘would be teaching from their expertise’, and also that: ‘there’s just no point having a battle every lesson if it’s boring, erm, ‘coz it just makes life miserable’. It seemed that a school-based approach to education with their own children was highly problematic, as Eve spoke of how ‘you’d think it would be easy for a teacher to ... it’s completely different with your own kid’. Responding to the *lack* of structure for her daughter, and presumably acting on knowledge she acquired during her fifteen-year teaching career, she recalled:

I set up a classroom. I had my whiteboard and I had desks and I had a bell - I had a school bell! I thought that might be easier for [my daughter] if she’s got similar patterns to they do [at] school. No, she hated it. It was really difficult.

Some Mums spoke of ambiguity in the work that was set. Grace wondered whether she might be ‘over-thinking’ what was required for her son’s work, due to her own educational background. Others spoke of difficulty understanding the work set, despite their educational background. Kate spoke about problems she had encountered in supporting her son’s physics work:

I don’t fully understand it myself, but I can find stuff online and we’ve watched some of the videos, but some of the videos haven’t fully correlated with the questions that he’s got on the worksheets ... So, it’s like, do we just not answer it, guess it, or then go and do more research which takes more time?

It was clear that the Mums (and Dads) perceived high expectations on them to ‘do well’ as home-schoolers, yet that these might not explicitly originate from school or teachers, but partly from their own cultural experiences and understanding.

Responding and adapting

As people began to adjust to the new ‘normal’ of home-schooling, Mums spoke of time and other constraints, and how they had navigated them in supporting their children with a school-based curriculum. Kate, while acknowledging that without schoolwork being set ‘other families ... wouldn’t have a clue where to start’, also spoke of how the schools’ structured approach was not viable in her situation, and how she went:

Back and forth to a couple of teachers saying: “can’t do this! [my son] needs supervision”, so I have to sit with him, erm, and do my own work. One teacher kind of alluded to “oh, we try and find stuff that they can get on with on their own” - [my son] has A.D.D., so ... he’s got this worksheet from a book, you know, and it’s like “does this mean anything to me?”.

Despite these difficulties, though, she spoke of ‘trying to be respectful of what the school are asking us to do’. Similarly conflicted by her own work, her young son’s work, and her son’s welfare – and not wanting to have him ‘sat at a table all day’ – Grace spoke of one of a number of ambivalences – one of a number of ‘maybes’ in her approach:

We’re doing *some* of the work. I don’t know what is best to do – whether to keep to everything that the school are saying to do, or erm, throw it all out, let the kids just have five months off just doing fun things.

Sam spoke of things her family had done together before beginning the schoolwork available on the VLE. For example, they:

Decided to do a coronavirus day very early on because we wanted [the children] to be able to chat and talk about anything to do with it. We did a whole report and posters on what you should be doing, like washing your hands and ... they looked at the virus and looked at the crown shape of it. The two older ones were actually able to use their phones and get really in-depth with what was going on and that was a really helpful thing to do.

Yet, in complying with the school’s [perceived] requests, ‘once we logged onto the VLE system there was no time for that stuff’. It is possible that what she meant here was no time to incorporate the

children's needs and wishes into their learning experiences. This seemed to be an area of frustration for Sam, as she also discussed that 'what [children] learn at home is just as vital as what they learn at school, erm, emotional well-being as well as actual intelligence'. Her narrative on this suggested a great tug-of-war between doing what was right for her children's well-being, and what was 'acceptable' for her children's formal education. In this way, it seemed that the number of 'maybes' grew, over time, for the parents involved.

Some Mums spoke of 'boring' schoolwork, and how they could – 'maybe' – allow for some flexibility in their approach to it. Kate had encouraged her daughter, who was in year seven, to read a 'boring' schoolbook, but a way of being flexible about this was that 'if [we're] having a conversation of something she would have written down, then in my mind she's done it'. Grace similarly spoke of her son's comment about a schoolbook that 'this story is really boring', and the possibility of him reading different books:

Maybe at home we don't have to read the schoolbooks. He likes 'Claud the dog', and it's like, "well, why can't you just read that?" When he's at home we could, sort of, do that, couldn't we? I don't know.

It seems that Mums were faced with the problem that standardised education cannot account for their children's individuality – and that 'maybe', as parents, *they* could. However, they were also trying to make sense of this in relation to their existing knowledge of education, which in some ways seemed to be at odds with their more recent experiences.

Responding to her daughter's initial distress at her attempts at setting up a formal classroom, and realising that she had 'snapped automatically' into a teacher role, Eve described how:

I had to abandon that formal format. Now we do it completely informal, it is very Montessori, I am led by her – what she shows an interest in, I then pick that up and we roll with it, and she loves it now.

However, this was not without huge continuing concerns about her daughter's social 'isolation', as an only child: 'socially, I couldn't give her what she needs. I do feel like she's missing out and it is important to her – she is a social kid'. Eve was faced with further dilemmas when she received an email from school about her daughter's potential return, to which she responded (to me, in interview): 'yeah.. but no.. but maybe'. This seemed to be a 'coming together' of a number of ongoing dilemmas and ambivalences about the situation. In a subsequent interview, however, Eve discussed her daughter inventing an 'imaginary friend' and her conclusion was that '[my daughter] *needs* school'. This allowed Eve to put some of her ambivalence to one side and to say 'yes' to her daughter going to mainstream school again.

At the same time, the absence of school and its related pressures was seen as actively beneficial to some children. For example, Sam described how her daughter had experienced bullying and peer pressure, and how: 'I think that if she was given the choice, she would continue with the home-schooling because she's just thriving ... we're starting to see her personality again'. Kate, speaking of her son with A.D.D., said that 'lessons don't suit people like him', and that he 'requires a different approach'. She continued to try to provide such an approach while also feeling guilty about what she was doing:

I'm not doing enough, or I'm not disciplined, and I'm not ... there's people sat there with their kids every morning, and erm, at the same time, balancing it with - well, that's not how they learn.

Although Kate was saying 'yes' to trying something different with her son it did not come without its own ambivalences and dilemmas.

The wider emotional and social aspects of lockdown were discussed by Mums, with Grace noting that her son: 'is missing his friends. I think the hardest thing is not ... seeing grandparents and aunts and uncles'. Mums discussed a range of ways they had helped their children to keep connections to those outside of the family home. Some spoke of socially distanced meets – for example, Kate spoke of going 'out to the park [for a] socially distanced play-date', and Grace spoke of a friend calling and 'bouncing around on the pavement waving to [my son]'.

Some Mums also spoke of their children using technology to communicate with their peers, via online games, and through phone and video calls. Kate's son had 'been on the Xbox and been chatting to his friends – so he is engaging with his friends and ... he's been keeping connected'. For Sam, her daughters' peer communication via Roblox was seen as being 'a little bit freeing for them', compared to the 'monitored' conversations they could have via the schools' VLE. Although, this was sometimes seen as a substitute for their typical interactions, and 'not the same' – in quality?

It was also true, though, that technology usage presented another area of ambiguity for Sam with regard to her daughters, who 'have been using this [VLE] system and they've been on their phones a lot more. We've had to install no-tech days.. because I need them to be away from their phones at some point'. There were also new tensions around parents' use of technology. Eve described how her daughter did not understand that when *she* was working and 'walking around the house [using] my phone', that her phone use was 'legitimate'. She reasoned that 'I need to sit at a desk with a computer so [my daughter] can physically see that's work time, because when I'm doing that, she gives me the space'.

Clearly, these Mums did not simply have their children's intellectual needs to cater to but continued to try to care for them in holistic ways.

Thinking about teachers, school, and education

The ambivalence with teachers and school – terms which seemed to be used interchangeably at times – was further highlighted when Mums spoke of individual teachers' efforts with their children. For example, Grace spoke of being 'grateful for the sweet things [teachers] do', such as 'on a Wednesday, the teacher who does the lunchtime break.. does a story about her dog', but also that 'I think they're doing their best, but I think they've sent too much work for me to do with [my son]. I think they're just trying to do school and transferring it over'.

It came across in some cases that teachers had gone out of their way to maintain some sense of normalcy for the children, yet how Mums and Dads were coping with implementing the work had not necessarily been considered. Sam and her husband had considered contacting the school to talk about their difficulties but had concluded that 'the kids will feel like.. we're telling them off'. She described what she saw as a struggle for the teachers who would also be encountering dilemmas:

We get the impression that the teachers are a bit afraid, if we don't set a deadline for things then people just won't do it, but for the people that are doing it, I wonder if ... they're ever thinking "ooh, I wonder if that family's ok?", because we're getting stuff in, but it's not always that easy to do.

It seemed that teachers, too, were struggling with trying to get things 'right'.

It was also true that some Mums spoke of better understanding the pressure teachers – or even schools in general – are under. Kate discussed being contacted by a teacher about her daughter missing 'a block of work'. She explained to the teacher that '[my daughter] was helping me with my work, erm, so she's trying to catch up', and the teacher had replied: "that was exactly the response I needed". Kate elaborated that:

I feel for the teachers, 'coz I think they know that it's, you know, almost impossible to keep on top of it. I think them getting the responses like I gave, it gives them ... they can pass it on and say: "there you go, there's a reason".

It seems like here Kate appreciates that teachers are caught in the middle of a demanding system. In a subsequent interview, Sam noted a problem with the expectations placed on teachers and the current education model more widely:

I don't know how teachers do it, to be honest, managing twenty to thirty children in a class that are all supposed to be individuals, yet you're supposed to get them to the same point- how does that work? You know, it doesn't work.

Having spent time with her four children and noticing their differences, she noted that:

If [school] were to teach my children all together, they would see that each one of them has a different learning style and each one of them grasps and uses the information that they're given in a different way.

Other concerns for the way schools operate included their inability to 'care' for children's understanding, as Kate observed that 'In school they're having to work through [the] curriculum whether or not the kids are keeping up with it. That's what schools have on them, I guess'. Eve felt that 'one-size-fits-all just isn't appropriate ... there are too many exceptions to the rule for that to be the rule anymore, and I think this situation is highlighting that more than ever'. She elaborated that:

I'm not a fan of SATS or ... formal assessments. I don't think they help. I think all they do is provide a statistic that you can create a competitive environment that doesn't need to be there. All I see from it, I suppose, is more harm to emotional resilience than good.

The amount of comparison and self-judgement evident in these interviews, though, suggests that Mums were also greatly affected by the competitive nature of school education.

This time with their children seemed to have sparked thinking – or re-thinking – not just about what school does, but *how* it does what it does. Grace reported one of her son's comments that, at home 'we don't do any lining up', and her subsequent thinking about the school day:

I think at school they do a lot of "we line up for this" and then they might do a little activity and then they line up for something else, and I think a lot of their day actually isn't doing work, it's a lot of preparing to move to the dining room where they're going to have lunch, or lining up to go outside to play ... I think there is quite a lot of faff at school, isn't there?

Speaking about the time when she was contemplating elective home education and her similar thinking about the school day, Kate surmised that 'the learning time – if you put that into time at home – it's, like, half-an-hour/twenty minutes in a lesson'. She went on to discuss of their period of home educating prior to lockdown, that:

What we found at home is we can go with the child - I mean, we choose subjects the child enjoys and we don't necessarily go through as many subjects as you would do in school in a set time, but the child's more likely to understand that topic more fully and, 'coz they're enjoying it, they're taking it in better.

However, the stakes had been very high when it came to home education, as Kate had wondered 'whether we were going to ruin our child's life'. The children had both returned to mainstream school rather than continuing to be educated at home.

With similar concerns to Kate about her child's understanding and enjoyment in their learning, Eve discussed what she now felt was a more appropriate way to approach her daughter's education, stating that:

What I want is a well-rounded human. I feel like, Montessori, what you're not doing, you're not behaviourally conditioning, you know, you're letting them figure out rules around.. not just around education but around social interaction and, erm, around their thinking processes. Kids will do the things that they enjoy, and they tend to enjoy the things that they're good at.

Even this was not without ambiguity, however, as she also discussed being 'in two minds' about the necessity of teaching quadratic equations, and how:

I don't know if I've been conditioned to think this way because of what I do for a living ... it's the process your brain goes through to work it out - that's the foundation for [life skills]. It's about problem solving.

The dire pressure and grave concern for not following the accepted model, although sometimes seen as better for their children's well-being, seemed to be a continuing concern for the interviewees.

Unanticipated consequences of home-schooling

It seemed clear that lockdown with their children had yielded some unexpected insights for Mums. Some Mums spoke of poor communication between school and home. Sam discussed how this had affected what she spoke to her children about – specifically, in respect to school closures:

At the end of the first week [my daughter] said to me: “I didn’t understand what was going on, the teachers just came into the class, said a load of mumbo jumbo, and then we went home”, so she didn’t understand what was going on, and sometimes we as parents, step on the schools’ toes. It’s kind of difficult because you’re not a hundred percent sure what they get taught.

Others spoke of this more widely. Eve, for example, explained how she felt that:

It’s always been like “well, as teachers we have all this and you [parents] can’t have it - it’s for me to know because I’m the professional”, and they’ve never really shared it with parents, now it’s like “have all the stuff, see you next year”.

It seemed like Mums had more difficulty in supporting schools’ agenda now that they could ‘see’ previously ‘hidden’ aspects of their children’s school education. However, it also seemed that this was key to their questioning and growing insight – for example, Sam discussed her relief at being better able to understand her daughter’s reading struggles, and how ‘it’s been good to have her home, in a way, because we weren’t really getting much contact from the school to actually say where she was or how to help her’. This was related to the lack of communication, as she perceived it, from school that is referred to, above. She added that:

I’ve actually gone from being so worried about her, to being ... not worried at all now, because I have the evidence that I needed that actually she can do it, there’s nothing wrong in that area, it’s just that she finds it easier to do it in some ways than others.

Her new understanding seemed to have the effect of de-pathologising her daughter, who was no longer the ‘one with the problem’ but a person who could be helped with the right approach. This also seemed to be the case for what Eve felt was her improved understanding of her daughter’s learning preferences:

Now I’m teaching her, and I can see that actually, in an educational situation she’s drawn to, kind of, maths and science. I understand her in a completely different way before I had to home-school her, which is lovely, and it’s been scary and sometimes upsetting, but I understand *her*.

As described above, this time together held many ambivalences and uncertainties, although there also seemed to be some unforeseen benefits to Mother–child relationships. Supporting their children’s work, and responding to the dilemmas it raised, seemed to remind them of the pleasure and value of their emotional bonds with each other, as Grace spoke of enjoying ‘more relaxed time together’ with her son. Despite her difficulties, Eve said that her daughter seeing her in different roles was ‘quite beautiful and important. I feel like I will, you know, involve her more in that stuff and hide it away from her less’. She added: ‘so I think she’s ... seeing a different side to me, the same way that I’m seeing a different side to her’. Additionally, and having spoken of her ‘surprise’ at ‘how quickly [the children] were understanding what was going on’, Sam commented that:

I think that’s one of the biggest benefits that it’s given us – home-schooling – is that now when we talk to our kids, they listen with more of a level of “ooh, she’s going to tell us something interesting”.

It seemed the new ‘territory’ of home-schooling had allowed new connections and understandings to build. This had an additional consequence for Sam, who, in a subsequent interview, explained her critical thinking about her children’s [previously more rigid] bedtimes, and her new approach to this. She said that:

I have been sending my kids to bed at a certain time, even though it’s the summer holidays. I sat down a couple of nights ago and I was like “why am I doing this?”, and I realised I was doing it because I needed that wind-down

time at the end of the day. I had a flashback of me sitting up in my room, going “why would [my parents] send me to bed?”, and I just realised that: one - I’m doing the same thing as my parents have done, but two - I think there’s a good reason for it and I felt so guilty for all those years that I felt angry at my parents for sending us to bed. I’ve now decided that my kids don’t have to go to bed, but they *do* have to go and do something quietly upstairs and have calm-down time. So, I’m not making them sleep straight away, but I am making them give me some boundaries.

This seemed to be something she had not considered previously, and appears to be a questioning of authoritarian-based relations to children, much like Eve’s observation of variation in her daughter’s day-to-day capabilities and needs:

If [my daughter’s] really not in the mood and she’s in a bad head space ... as adults we get the option to go “do you know what, I’m not going to do that thing”, or “I’m not going to write that paper because my head’s not there today”. I should afford her that head space, too ... maybe ... I don’t know.

For these Mums, it appeared that their new experiences had led to a questioning some of their *own* expectations of their children. Some Mums also spoke of recognising the undue pressure they had put *themselves* under. For example, Grace discussed how:

I’ve quite enjoyed – described it as like a pause. I think sometimes when you’re in that motion of moving all the time and we’ve got to do this and that, you kind of ignore the fact that you’re exhausted and relying on caffeine. I think sometimes we put expectations on ourselves, or people put expectations on us, and we think “oh yeah, we’ll do that and do that and do that” and it’s like: “actually, no. I don’t want to do that, and I won’t”.

In a subsequent interview, Eve spoke about her ‘rushed’ approach to mornings prior to lockdown, which she described as ‘chaos, getting up, getting her ready, getting me ready, rushing around trying to get an espresso or five in me’, and of her observation that:

Now, when I’m going to work, I’m getting up at the same time and I’m not rushing - I’m enjoying my coffee in the garden, then I’m like “ooh I’ll have a little shower now”, and “oh yeah, I’ll put some makeup on” ... I’m arriving at work at the same time. I don’t know where that rushing was coming from - what purpose did that serve?

This seems to suggest that Mums developed a different way of relating to their children’s and their own experiences in the ‘here and now’.

Discussion

COVID-19 home-schooling presented many challenges for these Mums, which were not only related to resources or physical constraints, but also to their children’s overarching education. I started by thinking that Mums’ ambiguity said some fascinating things about the ‘hidden curriculum of compulsory schooling’ (Gatto 2017). However, it occurred to me that this was about more than school; I found it intriguing how Mums spoke of being ‘shut out’ of their children’s education. This initially seemed to be in relation to their children’s schoolwork but is also evident in their subsequent questioning of what school does, how it does it, and if that is ‘right’. It was as if they had been ‘shut out’ of the very nature of school education. How was this possible, given their educational backgrounds?

Given Mums’ educational roles, it was perhaps unsurprising that, despite their difficulties, their initial approaches to education were concerned with ‘trying to be respectful of schools’ wishes’ – to quote Kate – or creating their own ‘formal classroom’, like Eve. However, previous research has found that Mums initially approach [traditional] home-schooling from their existing knowledge of education as ‘schooling’ (Lois 2006). As home-schoolers (‘home educators’) do not have school to ‘answer to’, and are not necessarily education specialists themselves, it seems that Mums’ educational backgrounds do not solely account for this phenomenon.

Lois (2006) suggested that Mums new to home-schooling approach education this way ‘in an effort to manage fears about short-changing their children’ (523). Indeed, Mums’ many initial and continuing concerns about not following the accepted model, and even if they were ‘going to ruin [their] kids’ lives’ – to quote Kate – by making different choices, suggests that fears were prevalent and problematic for these Mums, too. However, in attempting to follow a school-like,

‘acceptable’ approach to education, Mums were almost immediately faced with the problem that the ‘traditional idea of “teacher” ... in many ways requires affective neutrality that conflicts with the idea of “mother”’ (Lois 2006, 518). I believe this is what Eve was referring to when she said that ‘it’s completely different with your own kid’.

In working with their children Mums seemed to become aware that – perhaps inevitably – schools are not able to adapt to the individual needs of their children. By extension, teachers could not adapt to children’s, or their parents’, needs in respect of home schooling. This is perhaps not so much a failing of individual teachers, however, as a statement about how schools’ function. As Kate said: ‘In school they’re having to work through [the] curriculum whether or not the kids are keeping up with it’. In many ways, it seemed that the overall ‘school’ approach to education was at odds with Mums’ holistic responsibilities to their children, which Sam seems to be saying when she notes the importance of ‘emotional well-being as well as actual intelligence’.

This was also evident a number of other ways, as Mums discussed their own and their children’s many difficulties with schoolwork. These difficulties and conflicts appear to highlight an underlying belief that education is separate from life and is achieved through being ‘taught’ at school. Indeed, this is what James and Prout (2015) discuss as the construction of childhood as a ‘timeless zone’ (2015) – a time to study life, away from life, in preparation for life. However, this is deeply problematic, and, as the narrative of the Mums in this study seems to suggest, it is ‘vital to focus on children not only as protoadults, future-beings, but also on children as beings-in-the-present’ (James and Prout 2015, 215).

‘School is best’ seems to be an automatic assumption in our society, as Davies (2015) has said, so that ‘school’ is often thought of as ‘education’. However, attending school was not always a ‘fact of life’; Neuman and Guterman (2017) stated that ‘education took place at home and was one of the aspects of daily life (education is life) throughout most of human history’ (162). Some researchers (e.g. Davies 2015; Rich 1977; Neuman and Guterman 2017) argue that even now, education begins at home, as it is where children first learn about the world, values, norms, cultural attitudes (and learn to eat, walk, etc). Yet, when children reach compulsory education age, Mums are, very often, not seen as educators and children are sent to school to be trained by ‘experts’.

According to Adrienne Rich (1977), the reliance on expert knowledge is one of the ways that mothers are denied their subjectivity and made to feel powerless – especially given that the majority of this ‘expert knowledge’ is created by men. Holmes (2006) further troubles this discourse, by adding that ‘patriarchal ideologies have constructed the work associated with mothering as something that naturally flows from women and as such, no inordinate effort, skill or thought is employed’ (20). However – and this is the crux – Motherhood (or is it parenthood?) is not only societally devalued, *but* it also requires responsibility for children’s education – which, as I have already discussed, is largely thought of as ‘school’. Thus, what Mums (or parents?) might contribute educationally is often downplayed or ignored.

So, Mums began home-schooling with the assumption that ‘school is best’ – it is, after all, what everybody ‘does’. However, their new experiences with their children seemed to have them metaphorically scratching their heads, as they witnessed their children’s difficulties and comments about ‘boring’ schoolbooks – and could actually see for themselves that, yes, this *is* boring and, in the grand scheme of life, sometimes also meaningless to their child at that moment. They seemed to question: it is well to do as school ask and to think about my child’s future prospects, but what about my child’s *experience* of this, and what about mine? What about what this means *right now*? Perhaps even more crucially – what is my child really learning from this?

In such ways, Mums began to ‘resist’ what they already ‘knew’; it was as though they were noticing things they had not noticed before – where their children’s (and their own) experiences and input had been obscured in the name of education, or were deemed ‘unnecessary’, or even ‘unacceptable’. As Biesta (2015) discussed:

Even if we are 'just' trying to give our students some knowledge, we are also impacting on them as persons.. we are also representing particular traditions, for example by communicating that this particular knowledge is more useful or valuable or truer than other knowledge. (78)

Mums' narratives seemed to be conveying the important message that schoolwork was far from the only thing to consider regarding 'what's best' for their children. Actually, this is a far more complex problem that concerns 'the current emphasis on achievement.. beginning to have a negative impact on subjectification' (Biesta 2015, 78), where 'subjectification' is 'the freedom to act in and with the world in a "grown-up" way' (Biesta 2020, 89). It seems that this, specifically, and in a 'real world' sense is related to children's ability to be present in their own lives, and not simply exist as 'future-beings' (James & Prout, IBID).

Mums' previous understanding of, and approach to, 'what's best' for their children appeared to have the unwitting effect of privileging a hypothetical 'future moment' over the 'here and now', so that 'the present [was] loaded with meanings via its connections to their own and their children's past and future' (Frankham 2006, 248). Indeed, Frankham (2006) noted that:

It is part of the morality of parenthood that parents have both the freedom and responsibility to 'do the best for' their children. Of course, this is one of the ways the state governs 'through the family'. (250)

There were also occasions where this 'privileging of the future' seemed to be part of a subconscious 'knowing'; a 'habit' – when something was considered to be a 'natural' part of parenting. This was evident in Sam's previous approach to bedtime and in Mums' realisations of the unique nature of their children's (and their own) needs, and how they vary. This seems to imply that they had previously accepted discrete and unquestionable 'facts' – or 'satellites of information' (Frankham 2006, 241) – about childhood, education and even their roles as mothers. 'Facts' which Mums had presumably been instrumental in unwittingly passing onto their children. Mums were now conflicted as they were faced with new evidence that suggests alternative ways they might relate, not just to their children, but to life.

It was particularly interesting how some Mums spoke of their prior 'rushed' approach to life. For example, Eve's discussion of her previously rushed mornings, and how, now: 'I'm getting up at the same time and I'm not rushing – I'm enjoying my coffee in the garden'. It seemed that in some cases, Mums had come to a new understanding that 'life' is something that is also happening now, not just as a future goal to 'rush' towards, nor in the past. In this way, it seems that the goal-orientated nature of education, and even how they had come to understand life in general until this point, had influenced how they had behaved and their relationship to the world around them – including their children.

Effectively, I am suggesting here that Mums had been 'shut out' of the philosophical assumptions underlying some of their 'existing' knowledge – specifically, ways they had learned to prioritise future hypothetical moments over what was occurring in the present moment. Indeed, Kizel (2020) suggested that the absence of philosophy in schools mean that 'critical, care and creative' (41) components are what is missing from education today – all highly subjective and necessary components of living a human life. I suggest that this story demonstrates how *Mums* have been influenced by the school 'expert' and future-based way of thinking and have unwittingly perpetuated the construction of childhood as a time of separation from life and of preparation for the future.

Mums' narratives seemed to suggest that the dominant approach to 'education' in some ways conflicts with living a human life. Specifically, one of the problems encountered in relating to their children in 'preparation for the future' is that life and indeed the future, is uncertain, which brings the ideology of a positivistic/goal-orientated approach into question. I wonder if this is what Eve meant by her comment that 'one-size-fits-all just isn't appropriate ... there are too many exceptions to the rule for that to be the rule anymore, and I think this situation is highlighting that more than ever'; that in the face of this unpredictable situation – a global pandemic – her existing knowledge alone was of little help, where being able to make new meanings *was*. If so, then this brings a whole new meaning – and urgency – to Postman and Weingartner's (1968) assertion that:

There is no learning without a learner. And there is no meaning without a meaning maker. In order to survive a world of rapid change there is nothing more worth knowing, for any of us, than the continuing process of how to make viable meanings. (p.81)

In a sense then, this is about Mums being able to ‘make their own minds up’; to be able to evaluate ‘what’s best’ for their children and themselves in a way that considers subjective experiences – or, what is ‘in front’ of them. Of course, this story is based on Mums’ perceptions, so it would be very interesting to find out how the children and their dads perceived these events. However, it seems that children stand to benefit from their mother’s increased confidence to make new meanings, especially if we are to take seriously O’Reilly’s (2004) notion of ‘empowered mothering’, that ‘both mothers and children benefit when the mother lives her life and practices mothering from a position of agency, authority, authenticity, and autonomy’ (12). In facing their children’s objections to their schoolwork, along with their own difficulties and observations, I suggest that Mums noticed conflicts in their *own* knowledge and understanding of their children from their two key – and previously distinct – roles as ‘mother’ and ‘educator’.

So, this is a story about learning, but not in the traditional, school-based way – this is ‘thinking differently’. It is about accepting ambivalence and uncertainty as a part of the human experience and that, in embracing this, subjectivity can be used to develop new understandings, make new meanings, and can lead to different choices. It is about understanding education to be much more than schoolwork, understanding that the work of parenthood has great educational value, and, vitally, putting ‘children’ back into ‘childhood’. In short, this is a story about the importance of subjectification and socialisation (Biesta 2015) in education. As such, I suggest that this is, indeed, a story that – to re-quote Denzin (2017) – ‘celebrates resistance, experimentation and empowerment’ (9).

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