

Gendered capital: emotional capital and mothers' care work in education

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This paper is concerned with the inequalities experienced by mothers in the performance of educational care work for their children. It is argued that the caring work carried out by mothers at transfer to second-level schooling is shaped by their ability to activate the significant resource of emotional capital; a gendered resource involving emotional skills, knowledge and experiences. Drawing on an in-depth study of mothers' routines of care, it is suggested that the possession of emotional capital subjects mothers to a normative order of care. Moreover, in exploring the idiosyncratic differences between mothers' capacities to activate emotional capital it is argued that the activation of this care resource is facilitated in the context of solidary relationships but also by mothers' access to other capitals. It is concluded that in order to tackle care inequalities those working in education need to recognise the significance of emotional resources, and need to challenge traditional codes of practice and policies around 'parental' involvement.

Keywords: emotional capital; solidary relationships, moral imperative to care

Introduction

Currently, in the West, political and economic climates have required that public policies including educational policy and practice be subject to often unquestioned criteria of rationality, measurability and performativity with little consideration for the affective/emotional context of life (Baker et al. 2004). This paper seeks to explore the relations of production of what has been regarded as the softer, non-productive and 'messier' aspects of social life (Delphy and Leonard 1992; Tavis 1993). It is concerned with the domain of the emotions and the reality of caring relations in the educational field. The paper explores the educational work mothers carry out in caring for their children at the transfer from first-level to second-level education. It concentrates on the emotional work of mothers rather than 'parents' as a considerable body of research has indicated that mothers are primary education workers in ways that men traditionally are not (Bourdieu 1998; Walkerdine and Lucey 1989; David et al. 1993; Polakow 1993; Luttrell 1997; Smith 1996; Reay 1998; O'Brien 2005b; Griffith and Smith 2005).

In Ireland, children may begin primary school the September after their fourth birthday, and having completed eight years at primary level they then make the transfer into the post-primary system. International research suggests that the time of transfer to second-level schooling makes considerable demands on children, families and teachers (O'Brien 2004; Smyth, Mc Coy, and Darmody 2004; Hargreaves, Earl, and Ryan 1996; Reay and Lucey 2000).

In the Irish context, where 'the boom' economy generates ever-increasing demands for more intense involvement and longer hours in paid work, the issue of time and energy for care including schooling support work is problematic. The caring work that mothers have traditionally carried

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out to support schooling, including transfer, is still assumed, although many mothers are engaged in or desire/need to engage in paid work. Moreover, the increasing marketisation of education particularly at second level in Ireland (Lynch and Moran 2006) means that the time of transfer to second-level education requires even greater education support work to select the 'best school'.

From some feminist perspectives, this poses a gender equality problem in that mothers have traditionally done the invisible and unrewarded labour of care, but the literature and the data in this study suggest that women themselves see emotional care work, including schooling work, as significant, valuable and inalienable (Smith and Griffith 1990; David, West, and Ribbens 1994; Reay 1998; O'Brien 2007).

Drawing on qualitative data and the growing interdisciplinary discourse on care, this paper suggests that the reality of performing emotional care in education involves two sets of equality problems: the gender equality problem that is associated with women's traditional performance of care work and its relation to emotional capital; and, secondly, the problem of inequalities and differences between women themselves in accessing the material, social and cultural resources to activate emotional capital for care.

A good deal of research following the work of Bourdieu (1986) has analysed the role of capitals in creating educational advantages. Cultural capital has been seen as the currency par excellence in the educational marketplace. More recently, however, feminist writers have analysed the role of emotional capital in creating possibilities for educational success (Allatt 1993; Reay 1998, 2000). Following this work, it is suggested that emotional capital is a key educational resource in mothers' care. It is understood as a capital comprising of inner emotional energies, emotional skills acquired through practice, and, most importantly, the emotional supports that are available to a mother to enable her to care.

It is argued that describing, thinking about, and theorising emotional capital disrupts the tendency to marginalise issues of care and affective relations in education (Noddings 1992). Moreover, it provides us with a tool for examining not only gender inequalities in the doing of care, but a way of understanding more fully the inequalities between women themselves in performing caring labour. It is suggested that emotional capital is a resource that specifically involves mothers in performing what they identify as the 'moral work' of being a good mother through caring for their children, including educational care (O'Brien 2007).

Theoretical framework

Perspectives on care, care work and emotions

Through history, caring efforts and the reality of care to emotional well-being has been marginalised and rendered invisible. Traditionally, the notion of care as effort did not arise as it was considered women's natural disposition to look after, and out for others emotionally (Tavris 1993; Bubeck 2001). As far back as Beecher and the 'domestic feminists' in the United States (see Polakow 1993, 30), the space of household and family was seen as woman's proper domain, and that her true and moral 'nature' should be demonstrated in her care for family and her rejection of earthly and sexual pleasures (see also Skeggs 1997). Sociological work, particularly functionalist perspectives, has also promoted this view of 'natural carer', as evident in Parson's (1954) classic treatise on kinship practices and the division of labour according to sex roles.

Feminist and egalitarian scholarship, including recent work in sociology of education, have challenged traditional perspectives and suggested that care and emotions are essential aspects of all social life (Goleman 1995; Burkitt 2002). Martha Nussbaum (1995) suggests that our emotional capacities, and particularly the capacity for empathy, are what enable us to care and to act as moral beings. Moreover, caring about and for others is far from effortless and natural, and

requires significant work on the part of those who care, generally women (Lynch and McLoughlin 1995; Ungerson 1990; Delphy and Leonard 1992; Polakow 1993).

Although the need for emotional care is universally experienced, how care is produced and understood is socially and culturally constructed. The culturally dominant concept of maternal care is exemplified in what Hays (1996) terms the ideology of intensive mothering. This view requires that mothers maintain an open-ended emotional availability to children, be on-call permanently, and, moreover, do this in spite of or regardless of the specificity of the contexts in which they are caring.

This model of care has traditionally applied to mothers but not to men as fathers. This is not to suggest that men do not care but rather to argue that they are subject to a different set of cultural and moral rules in relation to care. Research suggests that women *feel* they must do this work under a moral imperative that ties them to caring (O'Brien 2007; Bubeck 2001).

Care, emotions and capitals in the educational field

In the past decade or so, a significant body of research and scholarship in feminist sociology of education has addressed the issue of mothers' care work in the educational field. Before this, the discourse centred on discussions of 'parental involvement' and most specifically on class differences in parental support. In Britain and North America, the work of Lareau (1989), Walkerdine and Lucey (1989), Allatt (1993), David et al. (1993), Reay (1998, 2000, 2002), Polakow (1993), Luttrell (1997) and Griffith and Smith (2005) has challenged the gender-neutral assumptions around parental care and described the intense efforts of mothers to support their children's education.

Bourdieu's theorisation of economic, cultural and social resources as capitals suggests that mothers' capacities to support children's schooling are shaped by access to these resources. Allatt (1993) and Reay (1998) draw in a new metaphor. They suggest that our emotions and emotional connection are a form of capital in the educational field. Allatt sees emotional capital as a resource that facilitates mothers in the *transmission* of social and cultural capital to their children, one that includes skills, love, affection and a willingness to spend time and energy on their education.

Allatt's definition of emotional capital is close to what sociologists and psychologists have described in care literature as the gendered and socialised disposition to care, and to perform the work that care implies (Gilligan 1995; Chodorow 1978; Lynch and Lyons 2008; Delphy and Leonard 1992). Emotional capital as a care resource clearly involves sensitivity to a repertoire of emotions in oneself and others. It can be seen as a form of gendered knowledge built through practices of care, the positive emotional relations one has experienced over time, and the personal and emotional support one has available in the present.¹

In the field of education, Reay (2000, 2002) has examined the complexities of emotional capital and suggests that it is a gendered capital whose possession and accumulation is not tied to social class in the same way as other capitals. Moreover, Reay's (1998, 2000) research demonstrates that intense investment of emotional resources in education by working-class mothers depletes their own emotional well-being (see also Polakow 1993; Luttrell 1997).

The present paper draws on this work to investigate differences between mothers in the activation of emotional capital. It continues the debate about the nature of emotional resources and how they are capitalised and depleted in the educational field. The paper takes the position that emotional capital is above all a solitary resource and thus cannot be activated effectively without emotional supports to the mother. The discussion also includes a brief analysis of the inter-relationship between emotional resources/capitals and other capitals available to mothers in doing education work.

Researching care in education and exploring emotional capital

This paper is drawn from a larger study undertaken for Doctoral research in the interdisciplinary field of Equality Studies (O'Brien 2005a). The research was conducted within the emancipatory/feminist research traditions to gain insights into daily caring and educational care from the perspectives of mothers (Oliver 1992; Lynch 1999). A qualitative study was carried out with 25 mothers who were sampled theoretically in order to represent diversity and the significance of mothers' social positionings to caring (hooks 2000; Harding and Norberg 2005). The categories according to which mothers were sampled are presented in Table 1.

Mothers were contacted through schools and social networks. The sample did not include mothers with disabilities although clearly mothers with a disability would experience greater demands on their resources at school transfer (Redmond 1996). Interviews were carried out between summer 2002 and summer 2003.

Considerations of power and reflexivity were crucial to carrying out these interviews, particularly with mothers who had experienced marginalisation within society more generally, and in relation to the school system (see Fawcett and Hearn 2004; Holloway and Jefferson 2001). The common identity I shared with participants as a mother of teenage children and the experience I had working with mothers in the educational field helped to reduce power differentials and to facilitate the exploration of caring (see also Hartstock 1998 on pluralities of standpoint).

The interviews were semi-structured and focused on mothers' daily routines of care, the specific care work that supported school transfer, and, most importantly, they allowed mothers the space to discuss the meanings that caring held for them (Smith 1987). Data were also gathered with respect to mothers', and where relevant, fathers' paid work. Informed by the feminist and interdisciplinary literature on care and educational support work, the data were analysed relative to categories and emergent themes in the mothers' stories of caring (Cotterill and Letherby 1993; Harding 1991).

Analysing capitals

In this paper, the analysis focuses on mothers' emotional work relative to the volume and type of resources they could access and activate, and on the relation between material, cultural and emotional resources. Bourdieu's (1986) metaphors of economic, social and cultural capital point to resource differences between groups and individuals in the social field, but they are not generally measured with any precision. This research drew upon Bourdieu's thesis of capitals, as conceptual tools to capture mothers' idiosyncratic access to and use of resources in the field of educational care work (see Reay 2004). The research tried to represent this idiosyncrasy by mapping mothers along individual continua of capitals; economic, social, cultural and emotional capital.²

Table 1. Mothers by social group, marital status, work status and particular educational needs.

Group/class identity	Relationship status (married, separated, co-habiting, always single	In paid work	Full-time, part- time, community employment	Child's learning disability
Middle class (<i>n</i> = 14)	9, 2, 2, 1	10	8, 2,-	4
Working class (<i>n</i> = 7)	3, 2, 1, 1,	6	-, 3, 3	1
Traveller (<i>n</i> = 2)	1, 1, -, -	1	-, -, 1	1
Immigrant (<i>n</i> = 2)	2, -, -, -	0	-, -, -	-
Total (<i>n</i> = 25)	<i>n</i> = 15+ 5+ 3+ 2 = 25	<i>n</i> = 17	<i>n</i> = 17	<i>n</i> = 6

Economic capital was categorised using the Irish average industrial wage ($I \text{ €} = 29,000$; see Layte et al. 2001) as a baseline of *very low*, those above this were categorised as *low* ($I + 25\%$), the category *adequate* covered the next band ($I \times 2$) and *high capital* were categorised at the upper end ($>I \times 2$). Cultural capital was measured using educational credentials to locate mothers along the very low to high continuum from no educational qualifications to higher degrees (see Reay 1998). While Bourdieu does not limit his metaphor of cultural capital to credentialised cultural capital, this is what is used here to describe mothers' levels of familiarity and 'success' within the school system. Social capital was a more difficult concept to capture but the continuum approach was used to position mothers relative to their access to social networks of support, networks that gave mothers credit and information to do caring in the educational field (OECD 2001).

With respect to emotional capital, egalitarian work on solidarity and emotional interdependency suggest that the emotional supports that one can draw upon at a particular point in time are significant to the capacity to activate emotional and nurturing capital (Lynch and Lyons 2008). For analytic purposes it seemed reasonable here to confine the mapping of mothers' emotional capital to the level of personal emotional support she could access in her present carescape (McKie, Gregory, and Bowlby, 2002). The mapping is therefore limited to more tangible conscious and solidary aspects of emotional capital.

Table 2 demonstrates mothers' differential positionings with respect to these capitals along the four continua. Significantly, it would appear that those mothers with very low levels of emotional capital are also low in other resources, particularly the economic. The following section discusses how differently positioned mothers activate emotional and other capitals to perform the work of care.

Emotional capital and caring at school transfer

The data from this study indicate that all mothers, regardless of social positioning, cared deeply about how children's transition from primary to second-level education was negotiated. They believed that education was a key to the success and happiness of their children in the present as well as in the future. Although understandings of 'happiness' were culturally and socially relative, all mothers performed education care work towards that end, because of their 'love' for their children and the sense of obligation that was deeply embedded in that 'mothers' love'.

As schooling work was understood as significant to care by all mothers, they carried out extensive 'legwork' and 'donkeywork' (see David, West, and Ribbens 1994) in visiting and contacting schools, attending meetings, organising children for the school-day, organising and providing transport, supporting children through their assessment tests, helping with homework, listening to children talking, listening out when children did not talk, finding opportunities for communication, and in general making sure that children were well cared for physically so they could cope with the new school and its regimes. This care work that mothers described was love labour (Lynch and Lyons 2008), work focused on the relationship between mother and child. What was highly problematic for some mothers was that they did this care work although the material and social realities of their lives created significant differences in the emotional energies available to perform care.

In examining the emotional supports that fostered mothers' access and activation of emotional capital, mothers were categorised relative to the sets of intimate relations in which they were involved; as partnered in either heterosexual or lesbian partnerships, and as mothers who were currently single and parenting alone. The following discussion uses this framework to illustrate the dynamics of activating emotional capital in doing care in education. The second part of the analysis then focuses on the relations between emotional capital and other forms of capital.

Table 2. Mothers' access to economic, cultural, social and emotional capitals.

Name	Economic capital	Cultural capital	Social capital	Emotional capital
Masha	1	3	1	1
Ellie	1	3	1	1
Brigid	1	1	1	2
Maisie	1	1	1	2
Kay	2	1	2	3
Nuala	2	2	2	2
Doreen	1	2	2	2
Linda	3	4	3	2
Kate	3	4	2	2
Ruth	3	4	3	3
Sarah	4	3	3	2
Janet	3	4	2	3
Anna	3	4	4	4
Rita	2	4	3	3
Pauline	1	1	1	1
Val	1	1	1	2
Trudi	3	4	3	3
Rose	2	2	2	2
Laura	2	1	2	2
Donna	3	3	3	3
Marie	4	4	4	3
Maura	4	3	3	3
Connie	3	3	3	2
Noreen	4	4	4	3
Nell	3	3	3	3

Note: Codes for continua of capitals: Economic capital, 1 = less than average industrial wage ($I = \text{€}29,000$), 2 = I and up to 25% above, 3 = $I + 25\%$ and up to $I \times 2 = \text{€}58,000$, and 4 = $>I \times 2$; cultural capital (credentialised), 1 = primary education, 2 = intermediate certificate, 3 = leaving certificate and professional qualifications and 4 = college degree; social capital, 1–4 = a cumulative continuum including nuclear family, extended family, social networks of friends, professional and business colleagues and friends; and emotional capital, 1–4 = a continuum of support from one's own personal emotional resources to the support of partners/family/friends and colleagues.

Caring and emotional capital within lesbian relationships

The two mothers in the sample who were in lesbian relationships were conscious of being involved in egalitarian emotional relationships. They felt that their partners were emotionally supportive around the 'hands on' educational work they performed. Rita, who had one child from a previous heterosexual relationship, described the experience of sharing the care with her partner as 'finding the crock of gold'. She appreciated how her partner sometimes got up first in the morning, and drove her daughter to school so she could have 'a lie on', a reality sharply in contrast with most heterosexual partnerships in this research. Rita described the building of her emotional capital through emotional support:

I was no less of a parent [before], but now I'm getting that nurturing myself, and in a way it comes in at all levels. Emotionally there's more of me to go round with her, whereas before I was spreading myself a bit thin all the time, a lot of the time really. (Rita)

Anna, another lesbian mother is not a biological mother but is a 'social' mother. Anna and Jean jointly decided to home educate their daughter Niamh during her primary school years. This

involved negotiation in relation to the sharing of time and tasks. Both mothers cut their hours in paid work in order to be at home to teach and care for Niamh. Thus, Anna was not emotionally stressed about the new 'caring for' arrangements that schooling at second level would involve. In contrast to the norm in most heterosexual partnerships in this study, both partners felt supported as they had negotiated and adjusted their hours spent in paid work.

Well, I have to be in for work at half eight and Jean is in the same place as me, but I'm tied for time as I have to be at a session and she has more flexibility. But I'll be waiting outside the gates ready to grab her and we'll have a bit of company and my day [in paid work] will be finished then ... (Anna)

Heterosexual relations and emotional capital

Mothers in heterosexual partnerships, whether co-habiting or married, experienced varying but fairly low levels of emotional support in relation to the organisation of daily school support work. Even mothers who were involved in paid work, and who experienced the dual demands of also getting themselves organised for work, did not always get emotional support for 'hands on' caring for children. In line with traditional gender ideology, middle-class mothers, in particular, explained that this kind of support was not possible anyhow because of their husbands' commitments to long hours in paid work (see Hays 1996).

Notwithstanding mothers' responsibilities for primary care work, in middle-class families where the father and mother were living together ($n = 10$), however, fathers were more involved in the *school choice process* at an emotional level, even if they were unavailable for the donkey-work (David, West, and Ribbens 1994). Mothers did the legwork and the background research but support was forthcoming from fathers particularly for meetings with school principals and in making the final decisions about which school children should attend.

Some mothers differentiated between *practical and strategic* support fathers offered about decisions, in contrast to emotional and consuming deliberations that mothers experienced. Noreen, a middle-class mother, expressed this difference through understandings shaped by traditional gender ideology.

Let me put it this way, men are more pragmatic. He'll just come in and look at a situation and say right ... For a woman the old heart strings enter in, possibly heart rules head. (Nora)

Mothers were not as resentful of the absence of hands-on emotional support as might be expected. Traditional ideologies of gender and family enabled mothers to negotiate their primary care role (Hochschild 1989). They perceived that there was emotional support *in the background*, or potential support, even if it was not available in a 'hands-on' manner. Trudi exemplified this:

It's important to know there's another parent there whose primary aim is probably the same as mine, to know that if I fall down or if I'm away he's there to take my place, and that he'll do it. He's very good and supportive, there's a family structure there. (Trudi)

Nonetheless, Nell felt men did not understand the intensity of emotional work or recognise the need for investment of emotional capital in order to care properly.

Men don't see it, though I know some men are different ... They want the child to progress, to be happy and not to get into trouble, but I think they expect that to happen without having to put in too much input. I think they lead by example and expect their children to follow them, to take their example and not necessarily discuss it with them, but just to follow their fathers (Nell).

In one case, Ruth, a middle-class mother, indicated that her husband was more involved in giving emotional and practical support to the school selection process than to daily caring. Ruth described benefits of sharing this task as significant for their relationship and her emotional energy.

Well, he was involved from the start. He took a day off yesterday. We kind of mingled it [the work]. He approached the school as well, from our point of view [the relationship], it was very good, it was shared. (Ruth)

For mothers of children with specific learning needs who were living with partners or husbands, the need for practical care support was fundamental to functioning. These mothers stated that they needed and did get practical support from partners for the children who needed most help in the family. *Practical support* when provided was interpreted by mothers as *emotional support*, as it freed them to do other work, or to be less frustrated and torn in their attempts to care for children. Practical support in caring for children rebuilt mothers' emotional energies.

Donna, a mother of eight who had a son with Down's syndrome, stated that she had to ask her husband for support with care. This was wearing down her emotional energy:

Yea, I've been doing everything and sometimes that gets really exhausting, and I said to my husband 'Will you do this run [to school]?' and it's that he wouldn't even think ... He would do anything for you, but he doesn't think of doing it. (Donna)

There are clearly emotional and practical demands on mothers of children who have specific health and educational needs. Caring for these children and trying to look after the rest of the family is demanding work and raises the question of support systems for the carers, particularly if they are the sole adult within the family.

Lone parents and emotional capital at transfer

Six of the seven lone parents in this study were living away from their parental home. They were in a different situation from couples with respect to getting children organised for the school day. They did not have another adult living in the home who shared their concern for the children or who could potentially take over if required.

Linda, a middle-class separated mother, had a demanding routine of rising at six and getting to bed by ten at night to cope with the demands of caring work and paid work. In the absence of a supportive partner, she described how she consciously drew upon her own internal resources, her emotional capital. Linda drew a distinction between the emotional support that one could derive from a sibling, a colleague, a boyfriend and what one might expect from a permanent and supportive partner.

I suppose my sister Sheila she's a role model. She's a really good mother and she's there for me to talk a bit, but not like a partner on a daily basis. I don't discuss this with my partner [long-term boyfriend but not co habiting], that's a different relationship and I can't rely on it. I suppose in my work too, my principal, she's also alone and has difficulty with her son, so maybe I'm there more for her.

Connie and Janet were both lone mothers and stated that they relied on both the emotional and practical support of their own parents to enable them to continue to work full-time and to care for their children. Connie and Janet acknowledged that they would have grave difficulties in managing their children and paid work without this support.

Emotional capital and its relation to other capitals

Marginalised and poor mothers

Relying too heavily on one's internal emotional resources can lead to emotional isolation and exhaustion. Pauline, a working-class separated mother of five, tried to care for her children in economic poverty, and in a state of emotional trauma after the death of one of her children. Pauline's frankness in the interview provides a picture of the very real tensions experienced by mothers without capitals and in a situation of depleting emotional resources.

If I've problems at home, there's no point in hittin' them 'cos they only laugh at you. Mikie is getting' a bit of an attitude but I've discovered they do when they make their confirmation,³ and I get angry and say 'I'm going up to bed for bit of a lie down' and like the other day I said to them I'm sick of yez.

This image of a mother caring without capital highlights the fragility of a mother's energy to care, but also the willingness of mothers to dig deep into their own emotional resources. Pauline was asked by service providers if she would take a short break, but she could not. She described her 'love' for her children, as all she had, so she invested this emotional energy although she was putting herself at risk of collapse.

It has been considered a truism that money cannot buy love, but in the daily routines of care that mothers performed to support their children's schooling, economic, social and cultural capital in the right currency enabled them to care. Moreover, these resources enabled mothers to restore their emotional energies for both care and their own well-being. Yet, these capitals could not replace the significance of emotional support as we have seen above; being cared for oneself builds one's emotional capital.

The problem of activating emotional capital without access to other capitals was obvious in the case of the most marginalised mothers, the Traveller and immigrant women ($n = 2$ and $n = 2$, respectively). While three of these mothers had ongoing emotional support from intimate relationships, their poverty and lack of knowledge of the schooling system meant they had to make far greater efforts to achieve a level of care in education that middle-class mothers routinely achieved. Furthermore, struggles to survive do not leave sufficient space for fostering one's own emotional well-being, which is key to doing care.

Socially privileged mothers and anxiety

The anxiety and erosion of emotional capital involved in doing educational care work was not just confined to the impoverished and socially marginalised. Even those mothers with reasonable to high levels of economic, cultural and social capital worried and cared intensely about how their children were coping with the new school system. Indeed, the data show, as Reay (2000) has previously argued, that middle-class mothers with access to the traditional capitals sometimes worried too intensely about their children's schooling. In this sample, none of the mothers displayed the movement from care to control, but nonetheless the level of emotional energy that was expended on managing schooling showed that there is a normative requirement for mothers to do intensive caring.

Conclusions: emotional resources and the moral imperative to care

One of the questions that have not been addressed explicitly so far is why mothers continue to do educational care work on unequal terms with men, and in spite of the great differences that exist between them in terms of resources. Mothers' own narratives of care provide that explanation. The stories of all mothers in this research were infused with a language of love and compulsion to care. Mothers had deeply internalised traditional gender ideologies of care and of intensive mothering; a gendered knowledge that they must care, as proper mothers.

Even mothers in the sample who understood the nature of gender ideology and had broken away from traditional understandings of femininity felt they must continue the intensive care of their child because there would be no one else to care in the way they did. The structuring of society under a patriarchal gender order defines the meaning of care for mothers in particular self-sacrificial terms, requiring mothers to engage in care work in accordance with dominant norms and codes of conduct.

This is somewhat problematic, as it raises the question of mothers' own agency in relation to how they live their lives and replenish their emotional resources. Although mothers are at one level compelled to care, the data indicate that mothers are agentic in how they care. Their stories of care are filled with nuance and idiosyncrasy. They deal with the school system relative to their positionings and their values of care. As Reay (2002) also found, mothers will sometimes go against the grain in how they choose to care in the educational field, placing what they consider as the child's happiness as a priority over schooling demands.

Reay (2002) cites Ilouz (1997), who suggests that those with emotional distance are often in a better position to manage the emotional needs of others. Certainly, for mothers in the most marginalised circumstances, in poverty, who were lacking in basic educational skills themselves, and experiencing affective challenges, found it difficult to manage emotions in doing educational care work (see Burkitt 2002). These mothers could be seen to have low levels of emotional capital and of agency in relation to how they cared.

Clearly, what remains problematic for mothers is not just the gendering of care under a moral imperative, but the compounding of these affective gender-based inequalities through inequalities experienced in relation to the economic, social and cultural fields. Where there is little access to economic, social and cultural capitals, which are necessary to participation in education, emotional resources become highly significant for economically excluded and marginalised mothers (Skeggs 1997).

It is concluded that the ongoing caring work mothers do in supporting children's education acts as a constant drain on their emotional energies and resources. Moreover, the experience of doing caring day to day, and of the schooling work that is necessary to the provision of good care, forms a gendered knowledge that ties one to caring and to emotional investment.

One way of tackling the inequality associated with the gendered acquisition and investment of emotional capital by mothers is to highlight and explore what emerged in the data as ambivalence with respect to daily care and education work. All of the mothers in this study expressed some sense of being torn between care and a desire for 'a life of one's own'. Most mothers had knowledge that they had needs beyond caring, needs that were often impossible to realise under the current gender order and women's association with emotional capital.

In the educational field, schools and policy-makers need to recognise the significance of care, and to understand how emotional capitals, usually activated by mothers, support children's schooling. Indeed, the majority of those who work 'on the ground' in schools are women, and often are themselves struggling with some of the same issues. Allowing teaching and other personnel to engage reflectively and politically with their own struggles around care would help to develop a sense of empathy with the parents with whom they are dealing.

Within the educational field, our understandings of the nature of emotional resources should be informed by ongoing research that links the development of emotional resources to education of the emotions (Noddings 1992; Goleman 1995; Gardner 1987). The development of these emotional resources should not be tied to the reproduction of dominant masculinities and femininities (McClave 2005), but that requires people be given the critical and creative tools to imagine an alternative.

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Notes

1. Lynch and Lyons (2008) make a distinction between emotional capital and nurturing capital – the latter enables love labour, a specific form of caring.
2. A colour schematic of the continua is available online (http://www.spd.dcu.ie/main/academic/education/staff_details/o_brien_m.shtml).
3. The majority of Catholic children in the Irish school system make their Confirmation in their final year at primary school. Confirmation is seen as a rite of passage (O'Brien 2004).

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