Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies

Doctorate in Education

Motherhood and career progression towards secondary school headship in England and Wales: A life history study

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Abstract

Over the past thirty years, growing societal debates about gender, equality and school improvement have generated increasing research interest in the areas of female secondary school leadership, career progression and motherhood; and how these factors relate to teacher recruitment, retention and wellbeing. Although there are some studies in these separate areas, there is limited focus on how these elements combine. This research aims to address this gap by exploring the experiences and perceptions of middle and senior leaders who are aspiring towards secondary school headship and are also mothers of young children.

A life history approach was used to frame the research design. Seven teachers, who are mothers and currently employed in England or Wales, participated in the study. The data were generated through three rounds of semi-structured Skype interviews conducted across the 2018-2019 school year. The interview process was structured and enriched by including the participants’ timelines, photo-journals and significant personal artefacts.

Structuration theory’s duality of structure and the feminist concept of intersectionality were used to build the conceptual framework for this research and underpin a thematic analysis approach. The research findings provide a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the very close interaction between the participants’ personal and professional lives and how they negotiate the challenges experienced from these two dimensions to shape their agency and career decisions. This understanding also includes how the participants perceived a variety of experiences impacting their
career progression, such as discrimination during pregnancy and maternity leave and on job interviews, relational leadership interactions with their line managers and headteachers, and unexpected opportunities for continued professional development and reflection while on maternity leave. The findings also emphasise the important role that the structures and cultures of the British secondary school system play in enabling and constraining the career progression of school leaders who are mothers.

**Key words** – women teachers’ career progression, motherhood, school leadership, intersectionality, duality of structure
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List of Acronyms

AHT – Assistant Headteacher
AST – Advanced Skills Teacher
CBE – Commander of the Order of the British Empire
CPD – Continuous Professional Development
HR – Human Resources
HT – Headteacher
IVF – In Vitro Fertilisation
KIT – Keeping in Touch days
MAT – Multi-Academies Trust
MTPT – Maternity Teachers Paternity Teachers
NPQH – The National Professional Qualification for Headship
NPQML – The National Professional Qualification for Middle Leadership
NPQSL – The National Professional Qualification for Senior Leadership
NQT – Newly Qualified Teacher
PPA Time – Planning, Preparation and Assessment Time
PRU – Pupil Referral Unit
SEN – Special Educational Needs (also SEND – Special Educational Needs and Disability)
SENCo – Special Educational Needs Coordinator
SLT – Senior Leadership Team
TA – Teaching Assistant
TES – Times Educational Supplement
TTA – Teacher Training Agency
WELS – Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies at The Open University
WiP – Work in Progress
Terminology

To ensure commonality of understanding, I provide below definitions of terms that are used throughout this thesis.

**English and Welsh secondary schools** - This term is used in this thesis to mean secondary state maintained educational institutions operating in England and Wales. Secondary state schools provide education for children between the ages of 11-19 and bridge the gap between primary schools and colleges or universities. Secondary schools may either be local authority (LA) maintained schools or academies and free schools which are directly funded by the Government's Department for Education.

**Multi-academy trust (MAT)** - A collection of academies can be grouped together to form a multi-academy trust or a federation. The collection of schools may include primary, secondary, and special education schools. While each school is led by its own headteacher, an executive headteacher or CEO is often appointed to oversee the leadership of the group of schools.

**School leaders** – In this thesis, this term refers to teachers holding positions of responsibility within schools. These positions include middle and senior leadership roles such as heads of departments or faculties, SENCOs, heads of year, assistant headteachers and deputy headteachers. In some academies, these job titles may be different. For example, headteachers may be known as principals, deputy headteachers as deputy principals.

**School headship** - In this thesis, this term refers to the position of headteacher.

**Deputy headteacher/principal and assistant headteacher/principal** - A deputy headteacher and an assistant headteacher do not have the same authority in the
senior leadership hierarchy of a school. The deputy headteacher holds a more strategic role and can make high level decisions and stand-in for the headteacher if they are absent. The assistant headteacher occupies an operational role and is often responsible for the oversight of one or more specific aspects of school structure, such as behaviour management, data, timetable, SEN, teaching and learning, etc. Assistant headteachers are also more likely to be classroom teachers. Therefore, the deputy headteacher is a more senior position.

School-leader mother - This term is a shortened version of the expression 'school leaders who are mothers.' In this thesis, this expression is used in reference to teachers who are middle or senior secondary school leaders and mothers of babies or school aged children.
Chapter 1 Introduction

1.1 Background

The study of gender relations in school leadership and management has generated much interest over the past thirty years and has been the focus of an increasing number of academic studies. This impetus has been driven by a growing concern regarding gender equality, diversity, school effectiveness and school improvement, among other factors. More specifically, there is a growing body of research on women’s experiences in school leadership - for example, Chan, Ngai and Choi (2016), Woodhouse and Pedder (2017) and Fuller (2017). Additionally, other researchers have explored the career aspirations, preparation and development of school leaders (Moorosi, 2010; Bush, 2016; Miller, 2018a). In particular, some have focused on the career development of female teachers (Smith, 2011a; McKillop and Moorosi, 2017).

Although there is research available on educational leaders who are mothers, most studies tend to be centred on the higher and further education sectors, such as Loder (2005), Perrakis and Martinez (2012) and Wolf-Wendel and Ward (2014), and little research has focused on the English and Welsh school context. The research on school leaders who are mothers in England and Wales is limited - for example, Bradbury (2004) and Kell (2016). This points to a gap in the literature. Therefore, my research explores trajectory and aspiration, the journey of career progression to headship and the connections between all three areas mentioned above: women in school leadership, career development and motherhood. This area of overlap is the focus of my research.
A consideration of the experiences of women in school leadership, as they engage with the challenges of career progression and motherhood, contributes to the development of the research problem and helps to establish the academic, professional and personal rationale for this study. At present, we do not know enough about how school leaders who are mothers (school-leader mothers) organise their personal and professional lives to facilitate their responsibilities and career progression. Specifically, we do not clearly understand the steps they take to negotiate the challenges associated with being a mother and a school leader or how their personal decisions and experiences impact their professional lives. Furthermore, we need further insight into how school-leader mothers, as individuals, narrate their personal and professional experiences and interactions, and how these self-perceptions influence their career decisions. Likewise, we also lack in-depth insight into the extent to which school-leader mother in England and Wales are marginalised continually (Fuller, 2017; Moorosi, Fuller, Reilly, 2018) as a result of their embodiment of and interaction with characteristics such as gender, parenthood and access to practical and emotional support. In extension, we know little about how the intersectional impact (Crenshaw, 1991) of these characteristics come to bear on their career progression experiences (Hill Collins, 2015). (A thorough discussion of the application of intersectionality to this study will be presented in Section 3.3.) Therefore, a more in depth understanding of these experiences and processes could inform future interactions between the various stakeholders, shape targeted support and inform relevant career decisions.
1.2 Research rationale and context

This section addresses the academic, professional and personal rationales and the context for this research.

**Academic rationale**

By conducting this research, I hope to contribute to the existing body of knowledge and professional practice by providing a deeper understanding of the career progression journey of school-leader mothers in England and Wales. Three factors that the literature shows to be important underlie the academic rationale of this research. The first relates to a consideration of leadership styles and leadership perspectives, how these might be perceived as gender related and how these are experienced in the day-to-day interactions of school-leader mothers. The second is the role of agency in decision-making processes (Smith, 2011) and how this is likely to be exercised within the context of the school culture and structure. The third is how school-leader mothers perceive and engage with the time at their disposal to further their careers, particularly during the onset of motherhood. This consideration is significant because a lack of time is identified as a major factor impacting teacher wellbeing and mental health (Worth and Brande, 2019).

Therefore, the unique academic contribution that this research provides is a nuanced understanding of the experiences of women who occupy the area where these three factors meet: school leadership, career progression and motherhood. This is important because, as will be demonstrated in Chapters 2 and 3, most of the literature tends to focus on the formal aspects of women's leadership - that is, the rational choices and how these affect their career development - without considering
personal factors. The literature tends to present a description of leadership styles and leadership decision-making processes based on masculine norms and assumptions rooted in patriarchal social structures (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Derks et al., 2016). Strong effective leadership styles are traditionally associated with descriptions, such as strategic, authoritative, challenging, decisive, determined, and so on. In contrast, this study explores the more relational aspects of leadership, which are often associated with female leadership and are described in terms, such as coaching, collaborative, open, supportive, democratic, etc. (Eagly and Karau, 2002; Coleman, 2007), and also critiques the gendered nature of these literatures.

Furthermore, this study explores how school-leader mothers exercise agency and various dimensions of leadership styles in negotiating the complex interactions between their personal and professional lives and how they balance the competing pressures and demands of these two spheres. By carrying out this research, my aim is to add to our current understanding of how school-leader mothers organise their lives to cope with the challenges and utilise the opportunities associated with their career progression and motherhood.

**Professional rationale**

Women form a large part of the teaching workforce (DFE, 2020), and consequently, concerns affecting their practice are likely to impact negatively the education sector. Therefore, as will be further argued in Chapter 2, the professional rationale for this study can be summarised under these three main areas of concern:

i) the underrepresentation of females among secondary school headteachers (Fuller, 2017; DFE, 2020, 2021),
ii) the need to address teacher recruitment and retention issues (Education Support Partnership, 2019, 2020), and


Firstly, exploring the reasons behind the underrepresentation of women in headship posts in secondary schools is relevant as it raises concerns about gender inequality and lack of diversity. By seeking answers to why more women, which naturally includes women who are mothers, are not being appointed to these positions, this research begins to unearth the complex interactions experienced by school-leader mothers.

The second concern relates to the successful recruiting and retaining of experienced female teachers. The number of female teachers leaving the classrooms is growing each year, and a considerable proportion is not returning (Simons et al., 2016). This exodus appears to affect mainly women of childbearing age, as many feel unable to negotiate the barriers associated with motherhood and career progression (TUC, 2016). This study provides new insights into the lives of school-leader mothers who, despite facing many challenges, are mitigating these barriers with varying degrees of success. The research explores their decision-making processes and the support that they received in helping them to meet their goals.

The third professional rationale behind this study is the growing concern around teacher mental health and wellbeing. Teaching is recognised as a stressful profession due to factors such as work intensification, poor working conditions and teachers’ work-life imbalance (Worth and Brande, 2019). A growing number of
teachers, including those at leadership levels, feel unable to discuss their wellbeing concerns with their line managers (Education Support Partnership, 2018, 2019). This study engages with wellbeing and mental health experiences faced by school-leader mothers and through the participants’ perceptions explores how these experiences impact their career progression.

**Personal rationale**

Further to the academic and professional rationale discussed in the previous paragraphs, my decision to research this topic also stems from my personal experience as a secondary school teacher in England. My first-hand experiences, and that of other school-leader mothers, provide a valuable source of data for this research – situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988). Haraway (1988) proposes that knowledge is never objective, that is, it is impossible to see the world from a neutral, external standpoint. I accept that as a source of situated knowledges, the perspectives of school-leader mothers, such as myself, may be considered problematic and open to critical inquiry when compared to other ways of constructing knowledge. However, this subjugated, situated knowledge becomes impactful when different participants relate similar experiences. It is from this place, that recognises the significance of situated knowledges, that I speak to the personal rationale of this study. (Further consideration of how situated knowledges informed the epistemological assumptions of this research will be outlined in Section 4.2).

As a former head of department, my career goal was to progress to a senior leadership position and then to school headship. However, after becoming a mother, I found this goal very challenging to meet. It was near impossible to balance my
responsibilities as a mother and my responsibilities as a middle leader. There were just not enough hours in the day and I was experiencing a ‘time famine’ (Galinsky, Sakai and Wigton, 2011: 141). After careful examination of my work-life interactions, I made the decision to take a career step backwards and return to being a classroom teacher. Contrary to this, I observed that some teachers have maintained middle leadership positions while caring for their young/school aged children. Others have also progressed to senior leadership posts or continued working as senior leaders and have taken on more responsibilities, as they raise their families.

My experiences have also made me contemplate how the career opportunities and aspirations of individual teachers could be influenced by their personal background. This includes how practical and financial support from their family and close relatives could boost their career journey and how their experiences growing up, both positive and negative, could become a driving force behind them seeking promotion. I observed that these career opportunities and aspirations were fuelled by more subtle factors than social class. These factors appear to extend beyond where one is on the socioeconomic spectrum and what financial resources one possesses. They permeate the wider sphere of life and includes other ‘resources’ such as family set-up, ambitions, intrinsic motivating forces and the ability to use effectively the assets at one’s disposal to achieve one’s goals (Ryan et al, 2008). These resources can be tapped into regardless of one’s social class.

In my case, as a senior teacher, I was financially secure. My husband also had a well-paid job. Therefore, concerns regarding access to financial resources were not the issue. We could afford to pay for childcare. The problem was I needed access to
other resources, emotional and practical resources, that money could not readily
buy. In addition to these personal factors, I also thought about the influence of public
factors such as how secondary schools are organised and operated, in helping to
shape the career progression of teachers who are mothers. For example, the culture
in my school was that mothers were expected to ‘simply get on with it’ and no
designated support was in place for women who were mothers of babies and young
children. Moreover, no structures were in place to support career progression. The
feeling was, ‘If you can’t take the heat, get out of the kitchen.’ In the end, regrettably,
that was what I did.

However, these personal encounters, along with the academic and professional
rationales discussed previously, led me to develop a keen interest in investigating
the lived experiences of secondary school leaders who are mothers. In my quest to
learn more, I began reading widely on the subject matter and engaged in discussions
with my colleagues. I further reached out to other middle and senior school-leader
mothers on social media. In time, the following questions shaped the embryonic
stages of the thinking process of my research journey: How do school leaders, who
are mothers, organise their home and school responsibilities to achieve a suitable
work-life balance? What factors contribute to or hinder their career progression?
I concluded that an exploration of these questions would provide answers for me and
promote discussion of new ways of thinking and operating to support mothers
aspiring towards school headship.

Another aspect of my positionality as a researcher engaging with this topic, is that
being a Black Caribbean, married, heterosexual woman, I am cognisant that I
approach this study with a specific range of experiences and identities. I am also conscious of the multiple identities inhabited by my participants and how these identities could contribute to or hinder their career progression. Research has shown that various factors such as religion, ethnicity, disability, sexuality, geography and so on, are likely to influence career progression (Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). A keen awareness of the impact of these many factors shaped the scope of this research with its focus on parenthood, gender and emotional and practical support.

**Research context**

By concentrating on these factors, the focus of the research was to achieve depth rather than breadth from the data. To accomplish this, I synthesised life-history data from seven women teachers to generate rich and personal insights into their experiences of motherhood and career aspirations, rather than a larger scale study with more people. Furthermore, to address adequately the parameters outlined in this section, the participants were employed in English and Welsh secondary schools. Four participants were employed in state-funded secondary schools and three were employed in secondary academies. However, the context of this research expanded beyond the participants’ school settings. The research context extended into their homes as the research process opened a window to their private lives and explored how the experiences and perceptions of the interactions in this personal sphere merged with and influence what happened at school. Further details of the research design are presented in Sections 4.5 and 4.6.

With this research context, the current study contributes to the debates around the motherhood and career progression experiences of secondary school teachers. This
is achieved by exploring how teachers who are mothers organise their lives, what support structures are available both socially and professionally and how barriers to career progression can be negotiated.

1.3 Research questions

As outlined in Section 1.1, the research problem centres around how school-leader mothers negotiate the challenges and opportunities associated with motherhood and career progression. I explored the participants’ gendered experiences of leadership and how their perceptions compared with evidence in the literature on the role of mothers in the family. To address this problem, I investigated the factors that teachers perceive as career development facilitators or barriers. In addition, I explored the extent to which the challenges arising from parenthood, gender and emotional and practical support are compounded when they intersect with each other.

Therefore, the research problem is articulated through this main research question (MRQ).

**MRQ**

*What are the motherhood and career progression experiences of middle leaders and senior leaders who are aspiring towards headship in secondary schools in England and Wales?*

The MRQ is further broken down into three sub-research questions (SRQ) to address the various aspects of the research problem.
SRQ1

*What is the perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

SRQ2

*To what extent is the career progression of middle and senior school leaders who are mothers perceived to be supported by the culture and the structure of their schools?*

SRQ3

*What is the perceived combined impact of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support on the career progression of secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

### 1.4 Thesis structure

This section summarises the following chapters of the thesis.

**Chapter 2** presents a critical review of the literature on women in educational leadership and management, career progression and motherhood. In this chapter, literature is evaluated on the following topics: leadership perspectives, leadership identity formation and career progression, school culture and structure, work-life balance and wellbeing at individual and organisational levels. This chapter examines the current debates, language and analytic tools that are essential in making sense
of the findings. The story that the literature tells is that while there are ongoing discourses on female school leadership, career progression and parenthood as individual concepts, research that engages with the personal experiences of the combined impact of all three areas is sparse.

Chapter 3 explores the broader societal factors linked to the research topic. This chapter presents the conceptual framework and outlines how it was developed. Aspects of structuration theory and intersectionality are selected and evaluated as the key concepts to frame the research design and analysis of the findings. While elements of structuration theory are used to elucidate the structure-agent relationships experienced, intersectionality’s focus is the compounding of inequalities brought on by the coming together of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support.

Chapter 4 explains the methods and methodological decisions and processes applied to this study. An interpretivist paradigm through a life history narrative approach forms the basis of the research design and data collection processes. Information on the sampling methods, participants and research instruments are also included in this chapter.

Chapter 5 discusses how the different data sets were analysed using thematic analysis in generating the main themes. In addition, this chapter looks at how elements of structuration theory and intersectionality are applied to make sense of the data. The chapter also includes a discussion on the ethics of care and its application throughout the research process.
Chapter 6 presents the findings of the study. Here, the main themes that were identified through thematic analysis, Gendered leadership, Time and career progression, and Wellbeing and mental health issues, are used to structure the chapter. The themes are also amplified through a consideration of demographic data and a vignette of each participant’s story. This format provides a window through which each participant’s lived experiences can be studied, thus ensuring additional insight into their individual perceptions of motherhood and career progression.

Chapter 7 addresses each research question in detail by examining the findings in the light of the literature and conceptual framework. The discussion addresses the research questions under the three main headings: The perceived impact of motherhood on career progression, The role of school culture and school structure in shaping career progression and Intersectionality, motherhood and career progression.

Chapter 8 concludes the thesis with a summary of the main findings of the research. Reflections are also offered on the possibilities for future research, the limitations of this study, and the potential for application of the findings.
Chapter 2 School leadership, career progression and parenthood

2.1 Introduction

The literature review explores the relevant literature on the experiences of female school leaders in England and Wales over the past 30 years. The literature is reviewed across Chapters 2 and 3 of this thesis. Chapter 2 engages with the individual and organisational factors associated with school leadership and parenthood, while Chapter 3 focuses on the concepts that contributed to the formation of the conceptual framework.

This chapter begins with an examination of the literature on women and school leadership, including an overview of some widely used leadership perspectives. This is followed by a discussion on leadership identity formation and the role this process plays in leadership development and career progression in the teaching profession. This chapter concludes with a critical discussion on parenthood, school leadership and the significance of time in school settings. This final section of this chapter also focuses on how teacher wellbeing is impacted by work-life balance and other stress factors encountered at school.

Each section opens with a lead quotation that captures the key insights of the literature discussed in that area. Taken as a whole, the three lead quotations embody the main points across the chapter, which are: the underrepresentation of women in school headship positions, the need for more personalised career-
development support initiatives for women, and the evidence that motherhood still impacts negatively on women’s career progression and personal lives.

For this review, I critically examined literature on diversity (for example Miller, 2016; Joslyn, Miller and Callender, 2018), and general aspects of feminist discourses (for example Grogan, 2000; Moradi and Grzanka, 2017) but decided to exclude these works unless there was a direct connection with the themes of interest outlined in Sections 1.1 and 1.2.

While there is a growing body of literature in these areas (female school leadership, career progression and parenthood), this review points to the absence of work on how individual school-leader mothers of young children negotiate the opportunities and challenges of motherhood and progression to secondary school headship.

2.2 Women and school leadership

At this rate women’s representation in headship will not match their representation in the teaching workforce before 2040.

(Fuller, 2017: 58)

2.2.1 Introduction

This section focuses on the journey of women in educational leadership from the 1990s to the present day. These three decades are shown to be characterised by
change and diversity, with a growing body of national and international research carried out in this area (Blackmore, 2013). For example, there are several large surveys that capture a snapshot of the leadership and management landscape during this period of time (Coleman, 2001; Fuller, 2017). In addition to discussing the quantitative data that emerge from these surveys, this section also presents qualitative data that argues the relevance of engaging with the experiences of female teachers. This is followed by a discussion on the development and implementation of legislation designed to support all women in the workplace, including female school leaders with young children.

The following subsection offers a consideration of leadership perspectives, leadership identity formation and career progression and closes with a discussion on school culture and structure. A commonality among much of the literature is a suggestion that some female leaders struggle to establish their own identities and to prove themselves worthy of engaging at the leadership level in the male-dominated environment of secondary school leadership (Coleman, 2000; 2001). However, taking an alternative approach, other female school leaders have been found to embrace and capitalise on their ‘femininity’ (Fuller, 2014: 322). However, it can be argued that both approaches are problematic and potentially contradicting as they present a limited perspective on the experiences of female school leaders. The literature also suggests that the environment in which female teachers work can have a major influence on their way of work and career prospects (Hallinger and Heck, 2003; Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016).
2.2.2 An overview of women and school leadership

Since the 1990s, there has been a growing global research interest in women and educational leadership. This interest continues to be fuelled by recruitment and retention issues (Bush, 2009), gender discrimination resulting in the underrepresentation of women at the headship level and in school leadership positions (Coleman, 2007, 2012), along with concerns about the wellbeing and general mental health of teachers (Kell, 2016; Adams, 2020).

Statistical analysis of teachers and headteachers in English and Welsh secondary schools provides insights into these areas of interest. Teaching is a female dominated career. Data published by the Department for Education in 2020 revealed that 64% of all secondary school teachers\(^1\) are women but only 39% of secondary headteachers are women (DFE, 2020). There has been only a very marginal increase in the number of female secondary headteachers over the last decade. For example, the figures from 2010/11 show that there were 38% female secondary headteachers, compared to 39% in 2020 (DFE, 2020)\(^2\). The published statistics suggest that the number of female headteachers continues to remain disproportionate to the number of female teachers in English and Welsh secondary schools. While the number of female headteachers is increasing, Fuller (2017) suggests it will be 2040 before there is proportionate representation of women in leadership position, provided the rate of increase remains constant at less than 1% per annum. However, the DFE’s data from 2010 to 2020 show only 1% increase over ten years. Therefore, it might be concluded that the rate of increase is much slower

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\(^1\) In this context, secondary schools are taken to be state funded secondary schools including secondary academies (DFE, 2020).

\(^2\) The 2020 figures published in 2021 are similar (DFE, 2021).
than Fuller (2017) anticipated. These statistics make clear that the underrepresentation of female teachers at the headship level is an area of concern that is likely to become even more acute when applied to teachers who are mothers.

While there is no comparable national level data on school leadership and parenthood, Coleman’s comparison of statistical data from surveys she conducted, across secondary schools, in the 1990s and 2000s provides some insights. She mapped an increase in the proportion of female headteachers with children, from 52% in 1998 up to 63% in 2004, but demonstrated that there is still a significant gap when compared to male headteachers with children, which has been recorded at 94% in 1998 and 90% in 2004 (Coleman, 2007). Though currently limited, the number of studies on headteachers who are mothers is increasing internationally (Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2014; Kell, 2016). However, there is still little qualitative research available on the lived experiences of individual secondary school leaders who are mothers. Little is known about how teachers who are mothers negotiate the opportunities and challenges of educational leadership.

A consideration of the factors hindering female teachers from progressing to headship can help to further contextualise the statistics presented. Research indicates that gender discrimination and work-life balance are the most prevalent inhibitors (Murakami and Törnsen, 2017). The literature offers evidence of these two factors in practices, such as “pervasive discrimination in hiring and promotion, lack of sponsoring and mentoring, and the entrenchment of the “good old boys’ network” (Loder, 2005: 741; Brown, 2010).
Research into gender discrimination and work-life balance more generally provides further insights into the structure and culture of secondary schools in England and Wales. Firstly, a number of studies have suggested that gender discrimination affects women not just in schools but across all strata of society and types of organisation (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005; Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). However, in schools, these examples of gender discrimination were at one time found to be overt and unapologetic (Coleman, 2001). Though still very much present, gender discrimination has become more evident in subtle forms such as unsupportive parents, staff and governors (Coleman, 2007; Shollen 2019). By being advocates for women headteachers, groups such as trade unions, professional associations, charitable trusts and social media networking groups have contributed to raising public awareness and debating issues associated with the challenges faced by women in school leadership (Fuller, 2017).

The second significant barrier to school leadership that female teachers face is achieving a good work-life balance. This merits consideration since ‘concerns about work-family conflicts pose perhaps an even more formidable barrier to women’s access to the principalship than overt gender discrimination’ (Loder, 2005: 769). Evidence in the literature purports that even when operating in these challenging environments, many women skilfully negotiate their multiple and sometimes conflicting roles as school leader, mother and wife by employing a variety of strategies to help them cope (Loder, 2005; Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). The current research also seeks to engage with the participants’ perspectives on work-life balance but specifically as these relate to the added dimensions of school leadership, career progression and motherhood.
Despite the challenges discussed so far, the literature also points to some legislative changes that have contributed to re-shaping the structures and cultures of schools and might be expected to enhance the career prospects of female school leaders in England and Wales. For example, employment legislation has been instrumental in shaping educational institutions’ perceptions of women and school leadership. The United Kingdom Equality Act 2010 is one example. This Equality Act resulted from the amalgamation of five previous legislative documents spanning from the Race Relations Acts (1965, 1976) to the Employment Equalities Regulations (2006). The process of combining the pre-existing legislative documents provided the opportunity to re-examine social inequalities within the then social climate and update the new legislation accordingly. The resulting Equality Act 2010 recognises nine social relationships\(^3\) that need to be protected. These include pregnancy and maternity, which constitute areas of interest for this literature review.

Another legislative initiative that significantly shapes how schools operate is the Equalities and Human Rights Commission (EHRC) (2012). The EHRC monitors and ensures that the requirements of the Public Sector Equality Duty (2012)\(^4\) are in place and being adhered to in all English and Welsh schools. In practice, this means that schools must ensure that female leaders are not victimised, discriminated against or harassed; that good relationships are fostered; and that all teachers, including

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\(^4\) The Public Sector Equality Duty (PSED) was designed to support the Equality Act in ensuring that discrimination is eliminated, equal opportunities are advanced within public bodies and others carrying out public function (ACAS, https://archive.acas.org.uk/index.aspx?articleid=5990 last accessed 9 March 2020)
female headteachers, are given equal opportunities (EHRC, 2012). Schools are therefore required to publish policies outlining objectives on addressing how they intend to remove or minimise factors contributing to discrimination against the nine areas of protected characteristics. This requirement is still pertinent and arguably needs attention because in 2017, research from a leading teachers’ union in the UK reported that 52% of women teachers were unaware if their schools had such policies in place (NASUWT, 2017).

Despite the implementation of legislation to support female teachers with career progression, the literature reviewed in this section suggests that progress regarding female teachers at the headship level continues to be slow. A closer consideration of the leadership perspectives drawn on by female school leaders is presented in the next section to illuminate the statistics and influencing factors and to provide further insights into possibilities for exploring the constraints to school-leader mothers’ agency and career progression.

### 2.2.3 Leadership perspectives

Recent research suggests that educational leadership and management structures continue to be shaped by power relations and a culture that is influenced by patriarchal discourses (Murakami and Törnsen, 2017; Vella, 2020). In support of this argument, Armstrong and Mitchell (2017: 836) suggest that the ‘normative practices of school administration reflect stereotypical identity constructions of white, heterosexual, middle class, Christian, able-bodied males.’ This supports the reports that in some highly male-dominated educational environments positions of authority remain limited for women since those in power continue to recruit like-minded
colleagues who share the characteristics listed above (Bennett, 2001; Inesi and Cable, 2015). Armstrong and Mitchell (2017: 836) further describe this mechanism operating in some schools as:

... containers of control and normalization. These containers ensure that school leaders will “fit in,” despite their different backgrounds, and that practitioners and theorists will replicate and reproduce systemic inequalities despite discourses of diversity and equity.

Against this backdrop, I discuss four common lenses that have been applied to leadership and management and explore how some female school leaders utilise, or otherwise engage with, these ways of leading to pave their own paths in a prevailing male-dominated culture. Although there are other educational leadership and management perspectives that have been used to characterise the female leadership journey, such as transformational leadership (Wilkinson and Blackmore, 2008), ethical leadership (Grogan, 2000) and emotional intelligence leadership (Blackmore, 2013), the scope of this review limits consideration to these ways of understanding women's leadership that are most applicable to the parameters of this research. Therefore, to understand the career progression journey of school-leader mothers, four approaches are considered particularly relevant (Coleman, 2003; Blackmore, 2013): distributed leadership (Harris, 2013), the mothering style of leadership (Lumby and Azaola, 2014), the monoglossia façade style of leadership (Fuller, 2014) and the queen bee phenomenon (Derks et al., 2016)⁵.

⁵Although this study was carried out in business settings by Belle Derks and Naomi Ellemers of Utrecht University in the Netherlands and Colette Van Laar of the University of Leuven in Belgium, its findings are directly relatable to the leadership experiences of female school leaders in England and Wales.
Distributed leadership

Female school leadership styles have been characterised as value driven, collegial, collaborative and people oriented, yet endowed with the ability to demonstrate fluidity as circumstances require (Coleman, 2003, 2012). This aspect of fluidity is considered particularly evident in a distributed perspective of school leadership. Although debates continue within this field around its use as practice versus theory and in establishing a neat and consistent definition (Harris, 2013), distributed leadership is generally perceived as shared, collaborative, team leadership where ‘those best equipped or skilled or positioned to lead do so, in order to fulfil a particular goal or organisational requirement’ (Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016: 144). As schools evolve into ever more complex organisations, the role of leadership has become diverse and multi-faceted. The concept of distributed leadership proposes that school leadership is no longer the preserve of the single, heroic, usually male leader, but is characterised by teams of people working together through ‘collaboration, networking and multi-agency working’ (Harris and Spillane, 2008: 32).

In support of this understanding, a distributive perspective ‘acknowledges that the work of leading and managing schools involves multiple individuals, not just those with formally designated leadership and management positions’ (Spillane et al., 2015: 1070). Consequently, it has been suggested that this way of leading and managing resonates well with many school leaders who do not subscribe to the ‘big man who shouts’ way of leadership (Coleman, 2000). The argument proposed is that although these school leaders are aware that not everyone is a formal leader, by following distributed leadership practices they actively seek out and facilitate the leadership of others (Harris, 2013). The literature on distributed leadership suggests
that these practices can have a profound influence on organisational change, empirical outcomes and pupil progress (Harris and Spillane, 2008).

**The mothering style of leadership**

The findings of other studies suggest that female headteachers tend to be caring, approachable and nurturing to parents, staff and students (Coleman, 2007, 2010; Lumby and Azaola, 2014; Moorosi, 2020). For example, headteachers in Coleman’s study said:

Parents see you as a mother as well as a head, i.e. feel that you understand in difficult times.

(Participant 1 in Coleman, 2007: 395)

Staff are able to talk to me about personal issues. Parents and children too I suppose.

(Participant 2 Coleman, 2007: 395)

This leadership perspective has been designated ‘the mothering style of leadership’ (Lumby and Azaola, 2014: 30). The context of the school and the local community may enhance or hinder the facilitation of this leadership style. For example, in deprived settings, physical and emotional needs may be more evident. Lumby and Azaola (2014) relate narratives of headteachers in South Africa providing care, food, medicine and even lodging for their students. These examples suggest that the notion of a mothering style of leadership is perceived as gendered and linked to women exclusively. Furthermore, they suggest that some female headteachers have worked hard at converting the notion of mothering to social capital. It is proposed that they do this by consciously displaying a mothering style of leadership. By being approachable, protective and nurturing to students, staff and parents, female school
leaders can strengthen, secure or advance their leadership positions (Lumby and Azaola, 2014).

The monoglossia façade style of leadership

Other research suggests that some female headteachers accentuate their femininity by displaying ‘gendered educational leadership in a dramaturgical sense with costume, coiffure and make-up’ (Fuller, 2014: 322). The opinions of the headteachers in Fuller’s study imply that being a woman leader frees them from the stereotypes of male leadership and this is enhanced by choosing to retain a distinctive female identity. They lead as women and use their femininity to their full advantage (Coleman, 2007). Fuller describes this style of leadership as a performance and uses the term ‘monoglossia façade’ (Fuller, 2014: 334) to explain the multidimensional decision-making process, and the intended outcomes, that takes place behind what appears to be a simple interaction or choice.

A monoglossia façade can be exercised through the deliberate selection of fashionable clothing, hairstyle, make-up, nails and jewellery; all carefully chosen to portray a polished and professional, yet feminine appearance. A monoglossia façade may also be evident in interaction with male colleagues, gatekeepers and other stakeholders. Coleman (2007) shares the narratives of female headteachers who consciously use these aspects of their femininity to gain benefits for their schools, such as sponsorships and discounts.

In the original sense, monoglossia is a linguistic term popularised by literary critic and scholar Mikhail Bakhtin and refers to a stable unified language (Francis, 2010;
Francis, 2012). A façade is a veneer or a mask. So, monoglossia façade points to what may, on the surface, appear to be a stable unified language being used to describe a female headteacher’s leadership style. Once the veneer is removed, through the process of empirical research, the perceptions of the participants and the stakeholders are varied (Fuller, 2014).

Other studies recommend a need for caution regarding female leaders portraying an overly feminine style of leadership. For example, Eagly and Karau (2002) propose that if female leaders are to be perceived as successful, they must develop the art of preserving a difficult balance between displaying communal and agentic characteristics. Eagly and Karau (2002) further their claim by suggesting that stereotypical leadership expectations (agentic) and female gender expectations (communal) are not considered compatible in male-dominated organisations. As a result, female leaders who demonstrate male stereotypical leadership expectations are likely to be rated unfavourably by those who adhere to traditional gender roles; since these women may be seen as violating their ‘proper place’ in society. While at the same time, others may also demonstrate a bias towards female leaders, due to their physical attractiveness or feminine clothing, as being too feminine to be effective (Eagly and Karau, 2002). Rudman et al (2012) refer to this lack of fit between feminine stereotypes and leadership qualities as a ‘double bind’ (p. 165). Therefore, this paradoxical complex points to the likelihood of a profound negative impact on the leadership appointment potential of professional women.

The debates around feminine stereotypes and leadership expectations discussed above acknowledge that educational leadership and management is a gendered
construct. Some female school leaders have embraced this idea by being nurturing, protective, approachable and motherly to students, staff and parents. Others have further capitalised on their femininity as displayed in their dress, grooming and interaction with others. As illustrated above, some female school leaders have used both approaches to secure and advance their leadership status. At the same time, female school leaders are encouraged to be ambitious, aggressive, forceful and dominant (Rudman et al, 2012). The challenge remains that of achieving a difficult balance between traditional feminine gender expectations and leadership roles (Coleman, 2001; Eagly and Karau, 2002; Jones, 2016).

The queen bee phenomenon

Further to the three ways of understanding leadership that are discussed above, some female leaders may find themselves operating in a particularly challenging environment characterised by male domination and/or gender discrimination (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). In such an environment, these female leaders may make a strategic decision to conform to an identity that fits the current norm (Smithson and Stokoe, 2005). Some may deliberately adapt masculine characteristics and leadership styles (Murakami and Törnsen, 2017). While others may demonstrate what Derks et al (2016: 457) describe as ‘the queen bee phenomenon’. Queen bees are identified as ‘women who pursue individual success in male-dominated work settings (organizations in which men hold most executive positions) by adjusting to the masculine culture and by distancing themselves from other women’ (Derks et al, 2016: 457). Therefore, it can be argued that this phenomenon is a result of gender discrimination in the workplace and highlights the underrepresentation of women at senior levels. To maintain that role and to fit in,
some women after achieving executive positions, have resorted to displaying the queen bee phenomenon. Queen bees see themselves as more ambitious, committed and masculine than other women who have not achieved this level of success. Therefore, the queen bee phenomenon is perceived as a response to discrimination and identity threat (Derks et al, 2016).

Similarly, Eagly and Karau’s role congruity theory (2002) highlight the impact of unsupportive environments on the perceptions that others may entertain towards successful female leaders. One way in which this is seen is by the ‘epithets often applied to powerful women such as Dragon Lady and Battle-Axe’ (Eagly and Karau, 2002: 575). These nicknames may stem from a mixture of positive and negative reactions. For example, Margaret Thatcher, Britain’s first female prime minister was known as ‘the Iron Lady,’ but she was also called ‘Her Malignancy’ and ‘Attila the Hen’ (Eagly and Karau, 2002: 575). This reinforces the thought that powerful women operating in male-dominated environments are often admired for their hard work, dedication and success but at the same time loathed for being perceived as deviating from feminine role expectations. Rudman et al (2012: 165) describe this as a ‘backlash’. In general, male leaders are not treated this way. Strong female leaders may be considered brazen, while their male counterparts are considered bold; bossy rather than assertive; feisty instead of confident. This suggests that women are not offered the same latitude as men but continue to be censored, sometimes in subtle unconscious ways, by the social mechanisms in place that reinforce male dominance (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013).

Understanding how female teachers lead and manage schools gives insight into the
structures and cultures of English and Welsh schools. As illustrated in this section, female school leaders may choose to adopt a particular way of leading in response to the climate in which they are working. This may span the full length of the spectrum from sharing roles and responsibilities, being nurturing or overtly feminine to being a queen bee. A consideration of leadership perspectives also opens a window of understanding into the perceptions and expectations that key stakeholders have of successful female leaders. The literature suggests that female leaders often face a double bind. They are discriminated against for being too collaborative or they face bias for being too agentic. Some female leaders strive to counter this backlash (Rudman et al, 2012) by forging a delicate balance between traditional gender expectations and leadership behaviours. The literature supports the belief that these perceptions continue to impact on the appointment potential of future female leaders (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

Furthermore, the literature also suggest that gender bias has moved away from overt forms that deliberately exclude women to more subtle forms of discrimination, or second-generation bias. It creates a context, akin to “something in the water” (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013: 64), in which women fail to thrive or reach their full potential. By developing an understanding of the impact of such subtle interactions and influences, female school leaders can take affirmative action to counter their effect. One such way is by identifying and engaging with the relationship between leadership identity, gender and school leadership which is explored in the next section.
2.2.4 Identity, gender and school leadership

This section examines the role of gender in leadership identity formation and how leadership identity, in turn, influences the leadership experiences of female school leaders. The literature proposes that identity is a fundamental social construct that signals membership of certain social groups (Shields, 2008). Identity is key in positioning a person in the world that they inhabit. The process of leadership identity formation involves how leaders see themselves as leaders, how others see them and how they carry out their duties as leaders (Moorosi, 2020). DeRue and Ashford (2010) suggest that the journey to acquiring leadership identity is a ‘claiming-granting process’ (p. 627). Like that of relationship construction, it is made up of three stages: individual internalisation, relational recognition and collective endorsement (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Moorosi, 2014). Firstly, there needs to be self-acceptance that one is a leader or can develop into a leader. Self-belief is a vital component of this first stage. In the second stage, this newly developed self-confidence will promote leadership actions and leadership behaviours that will be recognised by others. Finally, as this spiral grows, in time, such actions and behaviours will be endorsed by others, resulting in the acquisition of one’s leadership identity (DeRue and Ashford, 2010; Moorosi, 2014; Moorosi, 2020).

However, the literature also suggests that leadership identity formation is not a straightforward process for women (Shollen, 2019; Hoyt and Burnette 2019; Moorosi, 2020). Since this journey is perceived as a relational and social process (Shollen, 2019) that is shaped by historical and social contexts and power relationships (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017), it calls into question society’s perception of who really constitutes a leader. Gender is a ‘significant social identity’ and, ‘it is often the
centre of leadership identity construction’ (Moorosi, 2020). Gender is likely to be the first characteristic that is observed at the point of social interaction. Once this aspect of identity is internalised, it then shapes all future interactions. Ibarra, Ely and Kolb (2013) further expand on this understanding by discussing the influence of second-generation bias on the experiences of women leaders. Although it is suggested that gender bias may no longer exist as overt and explicit discrimination in many strata of society, as discussed in Section 2.2.3 gender remains present in subtle but powerful forms such as ‘cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practice and patterns that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage’ (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013: 64).

Likewise, as discussed in Section 2.2.3, Eagly and Karau’s (2002) role congruity theory purports that how elements in the society internalise and act on its perception of the relationship between leadership roles and gender roles continue to shape individuals’ interactions with leaders, to the detriment of women leaders. Therefore, it can be inferred that the general acceptance of patriarchy as the norm for leadership still lingers in the education sector (Armstrong and Mitchell, 2017). The influence of inequalities and power relations on leadership roles remains vibrant at the points of intersection between identity and other social markers such as gender (Corlett and Mavin, 2014; Hoyt and Burnette, 2019). If this remains the case, it can be proposed that leadership identity formation continues to be a challenging experience for women leaders and those seeking leadership positions.

A further aspect of leadership identity and gender is the connection to leadership preparation and leadership development programmes. The literature suggests that
these programmes have the potential to shape and influence leadership identity by providing opportunities to develop and practise the skills required to engage in leadership activities (Moorosi, 2014; McKillop and Moorosi, 2017). These arguments suggest that a well-informed understanding of the leadership identity formation process can contribute to enhancing the design and effectiveness of leadership programmes and by extension the experiences of the participants, particularly women.

In addition to formal leadership development programmes, informal support also plays a role in leadership identity formation. To this end, Shollen (2019) stresses the importance of building a team to support one’s leadership identity journey. Mentors, sponsors, family and friends are proposed as crucial agents for investing in one’s career, giving feedback and providing support. However, scholarly research notes that some women may desist from pursuing networking opportunities as they perceive the process as inauthentic and too instrumental. Men, on the other hand, appear to experience fewer difficulties engaging in the ‘proverbial golf game’ (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013: 66). Nevertheless, the advantages of networking in leadership identity formation are well established (Coleman, 2010; Shollen, 2019). These arguments point to the need for female school leaders, including those aspiring, to be proactive by seeking out opportunities and building relationships.

In conclusion, an examination of the literature in this section raises questions such as: How would this understanding of leadership identity and gender position women leaders who are mothers? Would they be subjected to further disadvantages as a result of the added responsibilities brought on by motherhood? The current research
aims to engage with these questions.

### 2.2.5 School culture and school structure

In this sub-section, I discuss school culture and structure in England and Wales with the aim of understanding the different ways that school culture and school structure have influenced female teachers’ career progression. An examination of policy and practice trends in schools since the 1980s points to the implementation of initiatives that have shaped school leadership and by extension shaped how schools are organised and operated (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). Hallinger and Heck (2003) argue that the 1990s saw a focus on school effectiveness and school improvement. This was followed by a drive to improve pupil learning outcomes in the 2000s. The setting and meeting of targets were introduced, resulting in school leadership becoming more accountable for achieving the desired results in what became an outcome-based education system (Coleman, 2007; Blackmore, 2013; Simons et al., 2016).

Thus, over time a link became established between the quality of school leadership, school effectiveness and improvement and pupil outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). In an effort to meet national standards for student performance, school leadership, in general, came under increased scrutiny (Bush, 2009). School leaders were encouraged to become more visionary, distributed, and transformational (Blackmore, 2013). This climate of change forms the backdrop for the present discussion on how school culture and school structure can enhance or hinder the career progression of school-leader mothers.
Although widely researched, the construct of culture is considered ambiguous and difficult to define as well as challenging to break down into components (Shafer, 2018). Despite this lack of clarity, it is imperative that we engage in dialogue about culture since it is argued to have the potential to exert considerable influence on the way we organise and experience our lives. With this in mind, Miller (2018b) suggests that culture is ‘a shared system of meaning. It dictates what we pay attention to and how we act and what we value’ (p. 76). This involves shared values, principles, styles and behaviours. Though subtle, implicit and informal, culture remains prominent in day-to-day interactions. It is often orchestrated by leadership and arguably can be deliberately shaped to impact on organisational change (Hofstede, 2011).

In addition to being ambiguous and implicit, culture is also believed to be contagious. It is proposed that national culture can influence individual and organisational cultures and by extension, school culture and school leadership. Since its origin in Hofstede’s classic international studies in the 1980’s, much work has been done in categorising national cultures. Initially, Hofstede proposed four dimensions which are presented in dichotomies but believed to be experienced on a spectrum - Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance, Individualism versus Collectivism, Masculinity versus Femininity (Hofstede, 1980). A fifth dimension, Long Term versus Short Term Orientation, was added in the late 1980s by the Canadian psychologist Michael Harris Bond. In the 2000s, further collaboration with Bulgarian scholar Michael Minkov resulted in the inclusion of a sixth dimension - Indulgence versus Restraint.
Hofstede’s work was later adapted and applied to the school setting (Dimmock and Walker, 1999, 2002; Miller, 2018b).

To further this discussion, I draw on the ‘Masculinity versus Femininity’ dimension mentioned above to explore the impact of school culture and establish its relevance to the current study. Miller (2018b) suggests that in male-dominated societies women play a less significant role in decision-making processes. This marginalisation is accepted and considered the norm. This way of operating may then be replicated in schools. In these settings, the senior leadership teams are male dominated. The headteacher and deputy are most likely to be males (as reflected in the statistics in Section 2.2.2). If women are included, they may be offered positions perceived as caregiving such as pastoral or Special Educational Needs (SEN) roles (Coleman, 2000, 2003). Career progression in these settings will likely prove to be challenging for female middle and senior leaders aspiring towards headship. While such stereotyped cultures are less prevalent in UK schools now, the literature discussed in Section 2.2.3 suggest that they still exist, though more muted and less overt than in the past. So, the current research aims to explore to what extent similar cultures are experienced, perceived and challenged by the participants.

Unlike culture, which can be perceived as implicit and informal (Shafer, 2018), structures are understood to be the formal aspects of an organisation that are made visible through its missions, objectives, strategies, plans and hierarchy of responsibility posts. These defining characteristics also hold true for schools. A school’s structures may include its fabric and framework, for example, its buildings, technology, physical resources, financial resources, curricular framework, time
structures, staff, students and decision-making procedures (Dimmock and Walker, 2002). Being the physical and tangible aspects of a school, structures are considered predictable and are often the domain of day-to-day school management, as opposed to leadership. It is argued that the idea of structures could also include how schools are organised to ensure efficiency (Miller, 2018b).

Furthermore, it has been proposed that there is a recursive relationship between school culture and school structure (Carpenter, 2015). This relationship begins with a school vision, often articulated by a mission statement, and summarised in a mantra or tag line, such as Believe, Aspire, Achieve or Ambitions for All. To achieve this vision, a set of values, principles and behaviours are promoted. This is often a subtle and unspoken, yet a very powerful, process and is likely spearheaded by strong, charismatic leadership. It is a battle for hearts and minds (Shafer, 2018). This process shapes the culture of the school. Simultaneously, the structure of the school is being formed. This requires effective management to implement and successfully operate the processes, procedures and interactions involved. At the same time, the school culture and the school structure are brought together to produce the desired results. If this is not achieved, then the point of disconnect is identified and adjusted, and the process restarted. In sum, culture influences the scope and effectiveness of the structure, while the structure facilitates the modes of interactions and creates the conditions in which the culture can operate.

It has been observed that some schools can develop into domains of less supportive cultures with poorly managed structures (Coleman, 2001; Loder, 2005). If a school’s cultural identity becomes saturated with features, such as being male influenced,
self-orientated, fatalistic, and aggressiveness (Dimmock and Walker, 2002), this could create an environment that does not facilitate the career progression of female teachers who identify with, and embody, the leadership styles traditionally ascribed to women. This is in line with the discussion in Section 2.2.3 which argued that female leadership styles are often characterised by qualities such as ‘awareness of individual differences, caring, intuitive, tolerant and creative’ (Coleman, 2000: 16). Likewise, if a school’s structure is rigid and unable to facilitate flexible working arrangements and other family-friendly initiatives (Brown, 2010) this may not be a supportive environment for a mother with young children who is aspiring towards school headship. In these ways, school culture and school structure can have a direct bearing on the career progression of school-leader mothers.

2.2.6 Summary

The underrepresentation of female teachers at the headship level remains a concern in the field (Fuller, 2017). Although the English and Welsh context has experienced slight improvements in recent years (DFE, 2020, 2021), the number of female secondary headteachers remains disproportionate to their male counterpart. In this section of the chapter a review was presented of some ways in which female school leaders may choose to lead and manage, the significance of leadership identity formation, as well as of how the existing culture and structure of schools give perspective on the environment in which female teachers operate and how they function in these settings. The current research aims to explore the impact of school culture and school structure on the career progression experiences of the participants.
2.3 Career progression

Women can, and do, make decisions for themselves and take steps to shape their own lives and careers.

(Smith, 2011b: 8)

2.3.1 Introduction

With a proposed link between the quality of school leadership and school improvement and effectiveness, formal preparation for school headship is now the norm in many countries (Bush, 2009). However, as highlighted in the previous section, female teachers continue to be underrepresented at the headship level in England and Wales (Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi, 2018). This questions the effectiveness of the current career preparation and development programmes and policies in achieving this goal. To address these concerns, this section explores the literature on the career progression of female teachers.

2.3.2 Leadership preparation and development

Over the last two decades, leadership preparation has come to be recognised as an essential step in the succession planning process in schools (Ritchie, 2020). Some countries such as Japan, Singapore, Hong Kong and Finland have ‘well-established systems to identify leadership potential and then support intensive training of school leaders’ (Fusarelli, et al, 2018: 287). Although school leadership succession planning is not yet formalised to this extent in England and Wales, there continues to be an
awareness of the importance of effective school leadership preparation. As previously discussed, there is a suggested link between the quality of leadership and student outcomes (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). Bush (2009) also supports this understanding by purporting that the ‘quality of leadership makes a significant difference to school and student outcomes’ (p. 375). Likewise, Fusarelli et al (2018) agree that ‘quality leadership matters and is second only to teaching among the school-related factors impacting students’ (p. 287). As a result, it can be suggested that formal leadership preparation is vital since it has the potential to play a significant role in the quality of school leadership and by extension school and student outcomes.

The emphasis on formalised school leadership preparation in England and Wales can be traced back to the 1988 Education Reform Act and subsequent legislation (The Education Reform Act, 1988). The resulting School Management Task Force (SMTF) Report in 1990 highlighted inconsistency in the quality of school leadership and management and set out recommendations that would shape developments in this area (The Elton Report, 1989; Bush, 2017). Such major developments included mentoring schemes for new headteachers and the launch of the Teacher Training Agency (TTA) and later the National College for School Leadership (NCSL). The TTA was responsible for pre-service teacher training and leadership training. In time, the TTA and NCSL were succeeded by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL) (NCSL, 2012). The drive for leadership preparation training was in support of the discourse that although headteachers may be qualified teachers, ‘leading is not teaching’ (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019: 74). Planning and training are required to hone the skills and competencies necessary to lead and manage
schools. To ensure a successful educational system, ‘leadership must grow by design not by default’ (NCSL, 2007: 17). The end result is that ‘governments are investing substantial sums in leadership development because they believe that it will produce better leaders and more effective school systems’ (Bush, 2009: 382).

At the time of writing, the main accredited headship qualification in England and Wales is the National Professional Qualification for Headship (NPQH). This qualification was instituted in 1997 by the Teacher Training Agency (TTA). The NPQH provides professional development for aspiring and serving headteachers including training in strategic leadership, management techniques, and achieving school standards. Successfully completing this qualification was made mandatory for headship appointment in 2004. Later, this requirement was discontinued in 2012 (Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi, 2018). However, recognising the significance of this qualification, most aspiring headteachers still aim to achieve the NPQH before appointment. The changes in the educational climate over the last decade have affected how the NPQH is offered (Bush, 2016). The programme is no longer monopolised by the National College for Teaching and Leadership (NCTL). There are currently more than 28 licensees offering the NPQH across England and Wales. These providers include Ofsted rated outstanding schools and academies trusts, universities, local authorities and private companies (Bush, 2009). For example, the Ambition Institute offers a range of leadership preparation qualifications including NPQML, NPQSL and NPQEL, for middle, senior and executive leaders, respectively. Women only NPQH cohorts are also available (Ambition Institute, 2021).
In addition to leadership preparation, in-service leadership development is also considered high on the agenda for school leaders. Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi (2018) propose a clear distinction between leadership preparation and leadership development. They conceptualise these as ‘pre-service for preparation and in-service for development’ (p. 85). Elsewhere, Moorosi (2010) categorises the headteacher career route in three phases: the anticipation, the acquisition and the performance. In later work, McKillop and Moorosi (2017) revised the three phases to: formations (making a headteacher), accession (becoming a headteacher) and incumbency (being a headteacher) (McKillop and Moorosi, 2017: 340). Through this framework, Moorosi (2010) emphasises that continued development is ‘an essential component of women’s participation in management in all three phases’ (Moorosi, 2010: 552). Therefore, headteachers are expected to continue learning on the job. Along with formal training such as the NPQ qualifications, further development is achieved through mentoring, coaching and networking. Irvine and Brundrett (2019: 86) propose five sources through which headteachers’ continued learning can be accessed. These are: within the same school, from other schools, outside the school context, by talking to peers and by learning on the job. Bush (2016) describes this same process of leadership development activities as ‘personalised learning … a range of action modes and support mechanisms, often customized to the specific needs of leaders’ (p. 9).

If it is accepted that there is a connection between the quality of school leadership and the quality of pupil outcomes (Bush, 2009), then the significance of leadership preparation and development cannot be overlooked. Formal training and qualifications, though not mandatory, are still considered important in equipping
headteachers with the skills and competencies required. Furthermore, coaching, mentoring and networking are vital in maintaining CPD for school leaders. In the next section, I examine the literature on tailored career preparation and development policies for female teachers as they progress towards headship.

**2.3.3 Female teachers’ career progression**

Studies have found that female teachers perceive and experience school leadership and career aspiration differently from men (Brimrose et al, 2014). In a three-year longitudinal study investigating early career teachers’ experiences and perceptions of school leadership, Woodhouse and Peddler (2017) found that even as early as during teacher training, significantly more male than female teachers entertain aspirations of career progression. In an earlier study, Woodhouse’s [then Smith (2015)] findings also support the understanding that men are more likely than women to aspire to leadership. In addition, statistics\(^6\) reviewed by the think tank Policy Exchange show that 27% of those leaving the teaching profession each year are women between the ages 30-39, of which half will not return to teaching (Simons et al, 2016; Andrade, Hillary and Worth, 2018). These statistics support the academic and professional rationale of this study and reinforce the need for further exploration into the perceptions and experiences of female teachers to gain a better understanding of their career choices.

An important consideration in this discussion is the suggestion that women’s career development is distinct from that of men. Some researchers advocate a gendered

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career theory by outlining how gender differences can impact on the various stages of career progression (Brimrose et al., 2014; McKillop and Moorosi, 2017). While, in general, a male teacher’s career progression could be described as linear, a female teacher’s journey may be characterised by inactive time periods. It has been suggested that these experiences are particularly evident when female teachers become mothers (TUC, 2016). An understanding of the impact of the difference in the career progression of the two genders might help to promote the development of specially tailored provisions to support female teachers in counteracting the effect of these inactive time periods. One way in which this has been acknowledged is by the introduction of women-only cohorts of NPQH programmes. One provider comments that their aim is to ‘take positive action to address the underrepresentation of women in headship positions in schools… by offering new and inspirational facilitators who will address issues often specific to women’ (Women Leading in Education Network, 2018).

In addition, some small-scale initiatives are being implemented across England and Wales to facilitate the career development of female teachers. These are evident in the policies and practices of individual schools and academy trusts and by the direct action of grassroots networks such as the Women Ed organisation and the Maternity Teachers Paternity Teachers (MTPT) project. However, it can be argued that there needs to be a more concerted effort focusing on these concerns at the local authority and government levels (Bush, 2016). If this is not addressed urgently, then as previously highlighted, it is likely that women’s representation in headship will not match their representation in the teaching workforce for many years to come (Fuller, 2017).
Furthermore, it can be proposed that although interventions by policymakers, local and governmental authorities are crucial in achieving these goals, these stakeholders are slow to recognise and act on the distinctiveness of female teachers’ career progression. Although national and regional initiatives for supporting the career progression of female teachers may be lacking, individuals and groups have been taking positive steps to improve their career progression journey. Likewise, Smith (2011b) emphasises the role of agency in the career decisions of female teachers. She stresses that ‘women can, and do, make decisions for themselves and take steps to shape their own lives and careers’ (Smith, 2011b: 8).

Smith (2011a) also developed a typology of female teachers’ perceptions of career progression, identifying two different types of narratives. The first narrative is of teachers who feel that their careers are being driven by their own agency, meaning they are ‘constructing their career history as self-defined’ (Smith, 2011b: 10). These teachers are further categorised into three subgroups: planners, pupil-centred and politicised teachers. They display characteristics such as being self-motivated and self-driven, having a strong sense of values and high aspirations and engaging in strong positive relationships with their pupils and colleagues. Teachers who perceive themselves as the authors of their own careers, not only see their careers as a crucial part of their lives but, have a clear strategic plan for their career progression (Smith, 2011a; Smith, 2011b).

The second group believe that their careers are being controlled by external structures. They are the protegees, pragmatists and protesters. They may
undervalue their own abilities and lack confidence, fit their career around other priorities or responsibilities and are often critical of their own career prospects. These teachers may therefore be less ambitious than they were earlier in their careers. Some develop a sense of self-determination as they become more conscious of the external factors that are blocking their career progression (Smith, 2011a). A consideration of Smith’s typology facilitates an engagement with the motivations behind the career decisions of female teachers and highlights that there are multiple factors that shape these decisions.

Guihen (2018) furthers this argument by focusing on a specific phase of female teachers’ career progression, the deputy headteacher phase. She found that women deputy headteachers’ experiences often determine whether they progress to headship and thus contribute to female teachers’ underrepresentation at the secondary school headship level. Guihen’s participants comment that the ‘greediness of the deputy head role has the power to constrain, to destroy, to break relationships’ (Guihen, 2018: 546). This is putting off many deputy headteachers from aspiring to headship:

I am 35 and I am burning out… The work is constant, 12 to 15 hours a day.

(Participant 1 in Guihen, 2018: 546)

I might be a deputy head teacher but I’m a wife and a mother and a sister and a daughter and everything else that goes with life… I know so many female teachers that are in failed relationships, broken marriages and I don’t want that for myself.

(Participant 2 in Guihen, 2018: 546)
It is also worth highlighting the role of job satisfaction as a vital determining factor in the career decisions of female teachers. Kwan (2011) proposes that job satisfaction is the crucial link between job responsibilities and career progression and that ‘job satisfaction..(is) a mediator variable… controlling the effect of personal and school variables’ (Kwan, 2011: 358; word in brackets added). If the responsibilities undertaken by female deputy headteachers result in job satisfaction, then this in turn may contribute positively towards their decision to progress to the headship level. However, as shown in the comments above, if deputy headteachers are finding the responsibilities overwhelming, then conversely, this may result in a decision not to aspire to headship.

2.3.4 Summary

This section on career progression shows the importance of succession planning in educational leadership and management by facilitating the career progression of female teachers in our schools. While accredited leadership qualifications play a significant role in the acquisition of the skills and competencies required for headship; mentoring, coaching and networking are also seen as key to leadership preparation and development (Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). Furthermore, it is suggested that acknowledging the role of agency in the career decisions of female teachers by exploring their experiences and self-perceptions (Smith, 2011b) may help to fuel the creation and implementation of specialised policies and programmes of support. Although some progress has been achieved in this area, the literature signals the need for more dedicated organisations, programmes and policies that provide a safe space for interaction with role models and for honing skills in furthering their career progression. The arguments presented in this section suggest
that despite some improvements, there is much more work that needs to be done in facilitating the effective career progression of school-leader mothers.

2.4 Parenthood and school leadership

*Motherhood still limits women’s career progression.*

*(McIntosh et al, 2012: 346)*

2.4.1 Introduction

A key area of interest for this research is the overlap between parenthood and gender: motherhood. Many working mothers, and by extension school leaders who are mothers, still find themselves in what Hochschild (1997: xxii) described more than two decades ago as a ‘time bind.’ Working mothers struggle to reconcile work time and family time. This section examines the impact of parenthood on the career progression of school leaders. It begins by exploring the idea of the motherhood penalty versus the fatherhood bonus phenomenon and then considers the relationship between the notion of time and work-life balance. The section concludes by exploring teacher wellbeing and how this can be shaped by stress brought on by interactions encountered in the workplace.

2.4.2 The motherhood penalty versus the fatherhood bonus

As discussed earlier in this chapter, in recent years, there has been a gradual increase in the number of female school leaders. Yet, female teachers are still
underrepresented at the headship level (Fuller, 2017). The literature indicates that their career progression is being hampered by policymakers’ failure to recognise that the career development of women may be distinct from that of men (Smith, 2011a; McKillop and Moorosi, 2017). In this section, I discuss further ways in which female teachers are likely to be penalised as they aspire towards headship.

In the journey towards headship, female teachers might feel that they are sacrificing senior leadership positions for motherhood (Chhatwal, 2015). These experiences are often fuelled by popular societal discourses on the role of mothers and fathers in the family. In 1999, Grogan wrote of the influence of ‘traditional fathering discourses (that) located fathers in the workplace, giving them permission to spend not only less time with the family than do mothers but also relieving them of many responsibilities for childcare’ (p. 526). Although these popular discourses may have shifted to become more liberal with the passing of time, their underlying belief systems appear still to exert a powerful influence on how working mothers and fathers experience work life (Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). In 2015, Chhatwal’s Leadership and Parenthood Survey analysed data from 114 men and 171 women respondents. The findings show that becoming a mother impacts negatively on the pay and careers of female school leaders, while male counterparts tend to benefit from becoming fathers: the motherhood penalty versus the fatherhood bonus phenomenon. ‘It is a well-established fact that women with dependent children earn less than other women’ (McIntosh et al, 2012: 349). Chhatwal (2015) found that after becoming mothers, over half of school leaders felt their pay was negatively affected, 60% felt they missed out on training opportunities and three-quarters revealed that they missed out on promotions and additional responsibilities.
To address this problem, Chhatwal (2015) recommends a shift in the culture of schools away from a situation where becoming a parent only benefits your career if you are a male teacher, to one that is synchronised with family life. However, organisational culture is slow to change and reflects deep societal norms (Doherty, 2004). The conclusion reached is that a lack of adequate support structures has resulted in missing female headteachers from English and Welsh schools (Chhatwal, 2015). A similar picture appears to be present in other countries and across other industries. For example, Ma et al’s (2022) study on the tourism and hospitality industry in the US found that while 50% of workers in this industry are women, less than 15% are in top leadership positions. Niemisto et al’s (2021) study concluded that ‘mother-professionals’ in Finland find it difficult to achieve the ‘Finnish Dream’ (pp. 696, 700), that is, achieving the perfect balance between professional and personal life. To many employers, the notion still persists that fatherhood signals greater work commitment, stability and deservingness while motherhood is characterised by a shift in priorities away from paid work outside the home to that of caring for children, family and domestic responsibilities (TUC, 2016).

It can be concluded that the challenges experienced as a result of the motherhood penalty could be a contributing factor to why some teachers who are mothers are giving up on their career aspirations or leaving the teaching profession altogether. As discussed earlier, of those leaving the classroom each year, 27% are women of childbearing age, of which half will not return (TUC, 2016; Simons et al., 2016; Andrade, Hillary and Worth, 2018). A further barrier to career progression that may
arise because of motherhood is attaining and maintaining a good work-life balance. This is the focus of the next section.

### 2.4.3 School time and work-life balance

The concept of time is a theme that permeates the discourses of women and school leadership (Education Support Partnership, 2019). In general, time is often equated to money and efficiency and is perceived in numbers. In schools, the dedication of teachers, especially those with additional responsibilities, is often judged by what time they arrive and leave school. Furthermore, this apparent dedication gets rewarded in terms of promotions to positions of responsibility (Brown, 2010).

However, it can be argued that the number of hours spent at work does not always equate to efficiency. A visible headteacher is not always an effective headteacher (Wood, 2019). Nonetheless, the idea of time spent in the workplace continues to take prominence and although many aspects of school leadership do not require face time, popular leadership discourses continue to encourage the visibility of headteachers (Coleman, 2007; Fuller, 2017).

Although some school-leader mothers have become experts at managing their time, referred to as ‘time-architects’ (Loder, 2005: 750), adhering fully to this expectation can be overwhelming. However, Wood (2019) offers a different perspective on how school time could be conceptualised to facilitate a more effective work-life balance.

The key is the realisation of how time is felt. ‘We do not experience time through numbers. However, we do experience time through rhythms’ (Wood, 2019: 88).

Being familiar with the time rhythm or cycle of a typical school day (or school week/term/year) can be a useful planning device. For example, any time cycle will
have peaks and troughs. Times of high work intensification, with inflexible deadlines, can be identified beforehand and be adequately prepared for. Likewise, less intense periods can be capitalised on as time for reflection, development and respite. Giving teachers and school leaders the autonomy to develop and implement appropriate models of how they can best use their time within these cycles would contribute positively to sustaining a more effective work-life balance (Wood, 2019).

In addition to managing school time, the literature indicates that the reconciliation of public and private time remains a challenge for female school leaders. This is described as ‘the dilemma of the double day’ (Loder, 2005: 750). Brown (2010) posits that ‘married women who work outside the home experience far greater conflicts between work and family roles than their male counterparts’ (p. 472). According to Brown (2010), a survey of 3000 working-age women found that almost 70% said family responsibilities are their major barrier to career progression. This partly explains why, at that time, less than 15% of top corporate executives worldwide were women (Brown, 2010). While there have been some improvements over time, it is still clear that many women continue to shoulder the majority of what Hochschild (1997) calls ‘the second shift’ and ‘working the extra month a year’ (p. 258). Likewise, Loder (2005) argues that ‘overall, women have not been successful in offsetting their increasing responsibilities in the work-place with decreased obligations on the home front’ (p. 743).

Considering the enormity of the issues presented above, how can a school leader who is aspiring to headship negotiate the challenges of motherhood and career progression? The literature offers four main suggestions. Firstly, some teachers may
organise their lives so that they have children before they become headteachers. Loder (2005) describes this as ‘buying family time as an assistant principal’ (p. 761). These teachers may decide to start a family as they progress to headship by moving into senior leadership positions. In this way, mothers can gradually take on the responsibilities associated with headship as they simultaneously acclimatise themselves to the duties of motherhood. It is suggested that in time when these mothers accept a headship appointment they would have by then, through practice, achieved an acceptable work-life balance.

Secondly, practical support structures can also be instrumental in advancing the career progression of mothers. Support is often available in two main forms: unpaid help from spouses and relatives and paid help from nannies, cleaners, childminders and nurseries (Brown, 2010). It can be argued that family structures in England and Wales are becoming more liberal. There is a recognised shift with more husbands (and other male partners) shouldering an increased proportion of childcare and household responsibilities. In addition, with global changes in how people work, more fathers are working from home or opting to be househusbands. It is no longer unfamiliar to see fathers doing the school drop off and pick-up. Furthermore, in some families, grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins or other relatives may also help with childcare and household chores, whilst other families rely on paid childcare and household help. Overall, the changes in family structures and the availability of reliable support structures have given some mothers the headspace, a conducive frame of mind, to focus on their careers, resulting in the progression to senior leadership and headship posts.
Thirdly, women-only networks have been instrumental in offering a balance of emotional and practical support for their members (Coleman, 2010). A member, quantifying their importance, explains,

We could meet and let our hair down, say “how do we cope with this?” We could not do that in a mixed group. Men would appear to have the answers even though they did not

(Participant 1, Coleman, 2010: 775).

Another adds:

It was like going into a warm bath when I joined it

(Participant 2, Coleman, 2010: 775).

Similar to face-to-face networks, there is a growing number of internet-based groups. Two of these are the Maternity Teachers Paternity Teachers (MTPT) CPD project and the WomenEd movement. Like the formal face-to-face women only groups, internet-based groups provide a safe place for female teachers to find friendship and support. The MTPT CPD project has members across the UK. In addition to communicating online by offering support to teachers on maternity/paternity leave, members also arrange face-to-face gatherings such as coffee mornings, picnics, walks and meet-and-greet sessions (The Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher Project, 2020). At the point of writing in 2022, the WomenEd group had 44000 followers on Twitter and use the tag line: ‘Connecting aspiring/existing women leaders in global education’ (WomenEd, 2020). WomenEd also hosts regional and national unconferecnes and local lead-meet sessions and webinars through which they provide CPD and networking opportunities. Being internet-based offers ease and convenience of communication and quick response times.
Finally, flexible working arrangements offered by schools can provide additional support. School-leader mothers can face the enormous challenge of balancing a larger share of responsibility, compared to fathers, caring for their children. While some aspects of their lives may allow flexibility and tasks can be rearranged to better complement established patterns, other responsibilities may be fixed and must take priority. Some headteachers are becoming sympathetic to the need of supporting teachers with families and may offer flexible working opportunities. Recent studies show that 27% of female teachers work part-time (TUC, 2016; Simons et al., 2016; Andrade, Hillary and Worth, 2018). However, lack of support persists in many schools and has resulted in a significant proportion of mothers leaving the teaching profession (see sections 2.3.3 and 2.4.2 above). It is therefore proposed by some studies that if the cultures and structures of schools are adjusted to support better mothers, they will also be able to support other teachers (such as carers, those with health problems, those pursuing further studies, etc.) who may require part-time or flexible work (Brown, 2010; Simons et al., 2016). Smithson and Stokoe (2005:149) argue that supporting mothers is ‘also about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, can find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations.’

2.4.4 Teacher wellbeing

Across the globe there is a recorded increase in the number of children and adults suffering from mental health conditions (Adams, 2020). This has resulted in governments implementing preventative measures and interventions to minimise this growing concern. One of the main strategies employed in the UK is the mobilising of
schools and other educational institutions to the forefront of this battle (Department of Health and Department of Education, 2017). It is estimated that one in every six children and young people in England have a mental health condition. This can equate to about five children in each classroom (NHS Digital, 2020).

It has been suggested that schools should adopt a ‘mentally healthy’ (Adams, 2020: 28) school culture supported by a whole school approach to minimising mental health concerns. The success of this approach depends not only on formal support structures being established for the children and young people to access, but also on the modelling of effective management of their own mental health by the teachers, especially senior leaders. However, reaching this goal is problematic since teaching is considered one of the most stressful occupations (Worth and Van den Brande, 2019). Worth and Van den Brande (2019) in identifying the working conditions that impact the mental health and wellbeing of teachers suggest that job-related stress, part-time and flexible working teachers’ working hours and teachers’ work-life balance are the most prolific contributors.

The Teacher Wellbeing Indices provide annual data that also point to working conditions as benchmark indicators of the state of teaching professionals’ mental health. This publication analyses trends over time and includes responses from educators working in different roles across the profession. The 2019 instalment of this publication reports that about 8 in 10 educators have ‘experienced behavioural, psychological or physical symptoms due to their work’ (Education Support Partnership, 2019: 7); of these educators more than a half have been formally diagnosed by their general practitioner with anxiety or depression. These statistics
are higher than the national average for similar professions (Education Support Partnership, 2019: 7). The 2018 instalment of the same publication builds a picture of what it means to work in the education sector by reporting that about 30% of teachers work more than 51 hours per week on average, and three quarters of teachers find it difficult to switch off. Further highlighting the impact of mental health on the education sector, the Teacher Wellbeing Index 2018 reported that 65% of educators do not feel confident enough to discuss their mental health problems with their employers, and 56% of senior leaders believe that their personal relationships at home have suffered due to their mental health issues at work (Education Support Partnership, 2018). In 2021, the same journal reported that 89% of senior leaders described themselves as stressed. This was up from 77% in 2020\(^7\) (Education Support Partnership, 2020, 2021).

Despite the increased awareness of the deterioration of teacher mental health and wellbeing, Sinéad McBrearty, CEO at Education Support Partnership suggests that, ‘teachers tend toward the stoic, and usually wait until a crisis point before accessing support’ (Education Support Partnership, 2019: 4). Similarly, Adams (2020) describes this behaviour as ‘presenteeism where teachers continue to work despite their abilities being impaired’ (p. 29). This begs the question: How can teachers care for the mental health of their students while struggling to manage their own mental health? This situation is further compounded when the key arguments presented earlier in this section are also included in this debate. Many teachers who are

\(^7\) In addition to citing factors considered in previous instalments such as excessive workload, work/life balance, pupils’ behaviour, unreasonable demands from managers, lack of trust from managers, low income and inspections, the 2020 and 2021 instalments of the Teacher Wellbeing Index also included the impact of covid-19 on the stress levels of senior leaders. This could partially account for the increased percentages reported during this time (Education Support Partnership, 2020, 2021).
parents find it challenging to achieve a suitable work-life balance (Brown, 2010). Although the option of flexible or part-time work is available to some teachers, many, especially senior leaders, find it challenging to acquire such a position (TUC, 2016; Simons et al., 2016; Andrade, Hillary and Worth, 2018). Therefore, consideration of the accumulation of factors that contribute to the reduced mental health and wellbeing of teachers who are mothers is an essential part of exploring their career progression journey.

2.4.5 Summary

The literature reviewed in this section on parenthood and educational leadership suggests that how families distribute responsibilities within the home is changing. For some time now, family structures have been becoming more egalitarian (Loder, 2005). However, at the same time, mothers still shoulder most of the childcare and household responsibilities and this continue to impact negatively on their career progression. In general, studies have shown that motherhood signals negative connotations for employers. Employers perceive the onset of motherhood as marking a change in priorities and often ascribe a penalty. Conversely, fatherhood is seen as positive since it signifies commitment resulting in fathers being rewarded in the workplace. The situation is further compounded for mothers when managing time and work-life balance are added to the equation. Mental health and wellbeing issues can also impact negatively on career progression. However, the literature points to some ways in which mothers negotiate these challenges such as relying on supportive networks and availing themselves of the opportunities associated with flexible working arrangements.
2.5 Linking school leadership, career progression and parenthood

Having presented a review of the literature on women and educational leadership, career progression and parenthood, this section shows the positioning of the gap in the literature and by so doing highlights the academic relevance of the current study. As shown in the previous sections of this chapter, research on women in school leadership has a well-established history (Fuller, 2017). Likewise, literature is available on career progression in the teaching profession (Bush, 2009). There are increasing numbers of studies available on women in leadership and career progression (Guihen, 2018). This is an emerging area of interest as most of these studies seek to address the underrepresentation of women in headship positions. However, literature on parenthood in general, and particularly motherhood and career progression, and motherhood and school leadership are sparse. Where present it is dated (Loder, 2005), exists as unpublished work (Bradbury, 2004; Kell 2016), or as newspaper articles and blogs. This is despite this being an area of growing concern as it relates directly to the current debates on teachers’ wellbeing and mental health. Gaps in the literature are obvious across the area of motherhood but are most prominent at the intersection of the three above mentioned constructs: women and school leadership, career progression and parenthood.

Figure 1 offers a diagrammatic representation of a sample of the literature that is currently available on the three main constructs under consideration and the areas of
overlap between the main constructs. For example, Loder (2005) studies motherhood and career progression and Guihen (2018) investigates women in leadership and career progression. The figure shows that there is very little, if any, literature available where all three constructs overlap. More specifically, the lived experiences of individual secondary school teachers within these three constructs are visibly absent.

Figure 1: Situating the current research in the existing body of literature
Therefore, the current research seeks to address this identified gap in the literature through the consideration of the following research questions:

**Main Research Question (MRQ)**

*What are the motherhood and career progression experiences of middle leaders and senior leaders who are aspiring towards headship in secondary schools in England and Wales?*

**Sub-research Questions (SRQs)**

1. *What is the perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

2. *To what extent is the career progression of middle and senior school leaders who are mothers perceived to be supported by the culture and the structure of their schools?*

3. *What is the perceived combined impact of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support on the career progression of secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

**2.6 Chapter conclusion**

The review of literature in this chapter emphasises three crucial points. Firstly, the underrepresentation of women teachers at the headship level in schools remains a
concern, not only in English and Welsh secondary schools but internationally (Fuller, 2017; Elonga Mboyo, 2019). Despite the existence of diversity and equality legislation, most schools remain slow to implement diversity initiatives. Furthermore, the literature indicates that societal patriarchal discourses continue to influence educational leadership perspectives and practices (Murakami and Törnsen, 2017). However, understanding the leadership and management perspectives that female headteachers prefer to employ can give insight into the existing structures and cultures of our secondary schools and how far they enable or constrain women leaders career development.

Secondly, the literature points to the need for the design and implementation of specialised programmes to support the career development of female teachers (Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi, 2018). There have been some improvements in this area with the establishment of women-only NPQH cohorts and the growth of women-only networks such as the MTPT project and the WomenEd movement. However, for the most part, these developments have been fuelled by the actions of individual or collective agencies working together to change the established structures (Coleman, 2010). This suggests that there is much more work that needs to be done in facilitating the effective career progression of school-leader mothers. Such exploration should include the role of agency in the career decisions of female teachers by engaging with their experiences and self-perceptions (Smith, 2011a).

Finally, motherhood continues to impact negatively on the career progression of female teachers (McIntosh et al, 2012). Although family structures are becoming more egalitarian and husbands (and other male partners) are assuming more
childcare and domestic responsibilities, by and large, mothers are still doing the ‘second shift’ (Hochschild, 1995: 258). The literature further suggests that mothers are discriminated against in the workplace and are often penalised (Simons et al., 2016). This can impact on their pay and career progression. Teacher wellbeing is also considered in terms of stress factors such as workload, and by extension work-life balance and impact mental health. Despite these challenges, some mothers still manage to achieve and sustain headship positions (Fuller, 2017). Some ascribe their success to the support of family, friends, and childcare professionals. Others have availed themselves of the opportunities associated with flexible working arrangements (including part-time) offered in their schools. Reliable childcare arrangements and the option to work flexibly have assisted many school-leader mothers in finding an acceptable balance between family life and school life.

When taken as a whole, these three arguments point to a gap in the literature. While some studies have been published in the areas of women and educational leadership and career progression, there is little literature available on motherhood. Furthermore, literature exploring the interaction between all three constructs appear to be limited. The literature is also sparse on how individual school leaders negotiate the challenges and opportunities of motherhood and career progression to secondary headship. Therefore, this specific area of interest is the focus of the current research.
Chapter 3 Structuration theory and intersectionality

3.1 Introduction

This chapter presents a review of the literature of the conceptual tools that were applied in this study to advance the conversation on motherhood and career progression beyond where previous researchers have taken it (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017). Like Su, Nixon and Adamson (2010) I support the argument that concepts are significant because they provide us with ‘the means to find our voice in the field, to locate the place from which we speak, and from which our work, our unique contribution to the field, can be evaluated for rigour’ (p. 160, italics mine).

This research aims to explore the experiences of secondary school leaders, who are mothers of young children, as they progress towards headship and engage with the challenges and opportunities they encounter while striving towards this goal. To ensure that this was achieved, the research findings should be able to contribute to the existing body of knowledge in this field. The conceptual framework provided the rigour and reason required to connect the literature, theories, research methods, methodology and findings in a cohesive manner (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017). Therefore, applying an effective conceptual framework to structure the current research facilitated an analysis of the interactions between the participants and their school culture and structure.

To achieve this aim, this chapter builds on and extends the literature reviewed in Chapter 2. It engages with the structural considerations impacting motherhood and school leadership and shows how the conceptual framework was developed. An
examination of literature relating to the research questions resulted in the identification and combination of elements from two theories to form this conceptual framework. These are structuration theory (Giddens, 1984, 1991) and the feminist theory of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991). The combination of structuration theory and intersectionality produces a framework that informed the research design and supported the analysis of the findings.

3.2 Structuration theory

3.2.1 Introduction

Here, I outline the origin and development of structuration theory along with a consideration of its main ideologies and commonly used terminologies. I discuss the contribution of Anthony Giddens, the major theorist in its development and application, followed by the contributions of other theorists, such as Rob Stones, who through critique sought to improve structuration theory’s application to empirical analysis (Stones, 2005).

Below, I discuss the relevance of structuration theory to the current research on motherhood and career progression by explaining the aspects that are applicable to my research design and data analysis. I also consider the limitations in the application of structuration theory to empirical research. By exploring the strengths and limitations, I justify the selection of structuration theory.
3.2.2 Origin and definitions

Structuration theory was developed out of the need to address what Giddens perceived as an over-dependency on the traditional dualism themes in social theory (Turner, 1986). Dualism is characterised by dichotomies, such as voluntaryism or free will versus determinism, individualism and collectivism versus structuralism, micro versus macro systems, and so on, which fail to address discourses that span the full length of the spectrum (Elbasha and Wright, 2017). Furthermore, it is proposed that a dualist discourse often constructs humans as relatively powerless to alter their circumstances. That is, 'the structures that humans find themselves in are determined for them' (Lamsal, 2012: 111). Giddens seeks to disrupt this artificial dichotomy by considering the possibilities for spaces and interactions between two extremes. The concept of structuration is considered the bridge that closes the gap between contrasting ideas of structure and agency (Whittington, 2015) and emphasises the active, reflexive character of human conduct (Giddens, 1984).

Giddens' work on structuration theory further draws on elements of the diverse schools of thought in the classical works of Karl Marx, Emile Durkheim and Max Weber (Turner, 1986). Giddens (1984) cites Marx, Durkheim and Weber repeatedly in his book The Constitution of Society - Outline of the Theory of Structuration. For example, Giddens applies the Durkheimian sense of theorising structure and agency as external and internal entities.\(^8\)

Based on the Durkheimian approach, Giddens defines structures as established ways of interacting within the society, 'rules and resources, or sets of transformation

\(^8\) Durkheim argued that structures are external to individuals yet drive their behaviour and the behaviour of institutions, creating interdependency. These views shaped Giddens development of structuration theory (Giddens, 1984).
relations, organized as properties of social systems’ (Giddens, 1984: 61). From this definition, it can be suggested that Giddens’ use of the term structures holds a more inclusive meaning than the traditional use of the term (see Section 2.2.5). For example, in educational leadership and management literature, structures are usually understood to be the patterns through which the school is organised, such as the teaching timetable, the leadership hierarchy, the school’s strategic plan, and so on. This is understandable since engagement with structures is often complemented with an examination of culture. However, as discussed in Section 2.2.5, Dimmock and Walker (1999, 2002), Miller (2018b), (Shafer, 2018), and others, present structure and culture, though interconnected, as separate concepts. It can be argued that although Giddens does not speak directly about culture, by considering the internal and external aspects of structures, he offers a broader understanding of structures to include that which is seen as culture by these other writers.

Structuration theory was developed during the 1970s and 1980s while Giddens was a professor of sociology at the University of Cambridge (Whittington, 2015). Giddens (1984) proposes that structuration theory reconceptualises the dualism that exists between structure and agency as a duality9, referred to as ‘the duality of structure’ (p. 17). The duality of structure is the most central concept in structuration theory. It promotes equal attention and mutual dependency between structure and agency (Elbasha and Wright, 2017). Structure and agency produce, reproduce and amend the expectations and values of the society at various points of interaction (Whittington, 2015). Structures are comprised of rules and resources. Agents

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9 While there are similarities between the terms dualism and duality and in some instances both words can be used interchangeably, in this sense, dualism points to the contrasting features between agency and structure while duality emphasises the similarities and the symbiotic relationship between both concepts.
exercise social understanding as they negotiate the constraining factors (rules) and use the enabling factors (resources) to their advantage (Lamsal, 2012). Skilful interaction with the rules and resources can change structures. Therefore, it is inferred that agents can act as individuals or collectively to change structures (Elbasha and Wright, 2017). This process embodies the duality of structure.

**3.2.3 Application of structuration theory**

In the previous section, I discussed the relevance of Giddens’ contribution to the study of social science through the development of structuration theory with its core concept, the duality of structure, that forms a bridge between dualisms and stresses the importance of equal attention and interdependence between structure and agency. In this section, I present the relevance to my study of the philosophical foundations of structuration theory.

Structuration theory, as developed by Giddens (1984), accounts for both ontological and epistemological considerations. However, critics suggest that this early form of structuration theory is ontology-heavy by focusing on proving the existence of the concepts it proposes, for example, the duality of structure, rather than explaining what causes or reinforces these concepts (Lamsal, 2012). The emphasis seems to be focused on the abstract, high-level social phenomenon, what Elbasha and Wright (2017) describe as ‘tall ontology’ (p. 110). Stones (2014) also questions Giddens’ (1984) philosophical leanings by proposing a balance between the ontological and epistemological issues. He suggests switching from an ‘all and everything’ approach (ontology-in-general) to ‘who did what, where, when, how and why?’ (ontology-in-situ) (Stones, 2014:114). It is implied that by asking these questions, ontology-in-situ
facilitates the link between agency and structure by enabling more in-depth research into the phenomenon under consideration.

Thus, Stones (2005, 2014) proposes a three-level ontological framework to highlight its importance in structuration theory: the abstract level, the meso level and the ontic level. The abstract level is akin to Giddens' (1984) version of the role of ontology in structuration theory. While this level has resonance, it can be argued that it requires more connectivity if it is to inform empirical application and analysis. On the other hand, the meso and ontic levels create the opportunity for practical application. The ontic level represents that which is physical and real. Analysis at this level addresses questions, such as ‘Which structures? What agencies? In what sort of sequence?’ (Stones, 2005: 76), which enables concrete application in empirical research. The meso level bridges the gap between the abstract and the concrete, emphasising connections between both levels and facilitating a more practical analysis.

Although ontological issues are key in establishing and grounding an emerging theory, I agree with Stones (2005, 2014) in endorsing the need for equal consideration of ontological and epistemological factors. This is particularly important if the theory is to be applied to research. For example, the current research seeks to explore the professional and personal lived experiences of mothers progressing to headship in secondary schools. An ontology that recognises and accounts for what is present, real and factual has greater purchase in its application to this setting than one that is abstract. Given this, while appreciating Giddens’ contribution to the ontological foundations of structuration theory, I favour the relevance of Stones’
ontological improvements and consider this version as more applicable to empirical research.

Even with these improvements, structuration theory is still considered difficult to apply empirically (den Fond et al., 2012). This is brought out in the reviews of structuration theory studies carried out by various researchers, such as den Fond et al. (2012), Whittington (2015) and Elbasha and Wright (2017). Pozzebon and Pinsonneault (2005) cite two reasons for its difficulty in empirical application. First, structuration theory is complex, its concepts are highly abstract. Second, structuration theory does not fit well with some philosophical perspectives and methodological approaches.

This suggests that its ontological framework points to aspects of incompatibility if applied in full to the current research. All aspects of structuration theory could not be applied, and careful consideration was needed to ensure ontological compatibility with the aspect that was applied. To illustrate, when applied to empirical studies, structuration theory is often used to study organisational phenomena such as organisational change as evidenced through the structuration cycle (Pozzebon and Pinsonneault, 2005). The structuration cycle takes place over an extended period and often includes the consideration of strategic change within large organisations through the study of multiple sources (Stones, 2005). These aspects of structuration theory do not synchronise with the aims and research design of this study. The current study did not set out to investigate organisational change through the structuration cycle, nor did it engage with large organisations or multiple data
sources within an organisation. Therefore, aspects of structuration theory that relates to these processes did not fit well with the current study and were not applied.

In addition, structuration theory has broad concepts that are rarely all applied to the same empirical study. Duality of structure, time and space relations and the knowledgeability of agents are considered the main structuration theory concepts for informing empirical studies (den Fond et al, 2012). However, few studies have applied all three concepts. Of the 253 studies that were analysed by den Fond et al (2012), 188 made reference to Giddens but did not apply structuration theory. These were labelled as ‘Giddens in passing.’ Fifty used one or two of the concepts mentioned above and were categorised as ‘Giddens a la carte’. Only 15 applied all three concepts and were labelled ‘Giddens full monty’ (den Fond et al, 2012: 247, 248).

Furthermore, the complementation and substantiation of structuration theory through the application of other theories is an established pattern in research. Elbasha and Wright (2017) present a list of 10 studies that use structuration theory ‘in passing, a la carte or full monty’ (den Fond et al, 2012: 247) all infused by additional ‘theoretical backbone’ (Elbasha and Wright, 2017: 112). This list was initially compiled by Whittington (2015) to acknowledge the limitations of structuration theory’s application to empirical research and to demonstrate how these limitations have been addressed in previous studies. Some of the additional theories used to complement structuration theory include ‘sense making and sense giving, communication theory, strategy process, dynamic capabilities and institutional theory’ (Whittington, 2015:157).
Therefore, like other studies, I applied only one main structuration theory concept to this research, duality of structure, thus taking a Giddens light-touch approach, Giddens ‘a la carte’ (den Fond et al, 2012: 247) to the use of structuration theory.

Despite the challenges outlined in the previous paragraphs, the application of duality of structure to this research was crucial in capturing and conceptualising the interactions between agency and structure. A duality of structure analysis supports the notion that seemingly opposing, unrelated experiences may foster subtle, yet significant, connections that can point to new ways of understanding the career progression journeys of school-leader mothers. This approach was particularly useful when engaging with wider societal factors, such as gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support. Through a duality of structure lens, data relating to aspects of each factor were examined and the connections analysed. However, to further enhance the analysis, the interconnections between these factors were further evaluated using intersectionality. Section 3.3 of this thesis details how intersectionality was applied as a complement to structuration theory for the conceptual framework of this research.

**3.2.4 Summary**

This section began by outlining the origin, philosophical assumptions and application of structuration theory to the current research. This included a critique for redressing the balance between the ontological and epistemological considerations of structuration theory and for moving away from an abstract ontology to a more ontic ontology (Stones, 2005, 2014), which has relevance to the current research. The
duality of structure, which is a fundamental aspect of structuration theory, is presented as a powerful tool that was used to help investigate the motherhood and career progression experiences of the participants. Its application focused on the significance of the wider societal factors that impact on the lives of school-leader mothers. The section concluded with an explanation of why the application of structuration theory to this research took a light-touch approach, Giddens ‘a la carte’, as opposed to Giddens ‘full monty’ (Elbasha and Wright, 2017: 112).

The remaining sections of this chapter will discuss intersectionality, which complements structuration theory in forming the conceptual framework of this research.

3.3 Intersectionality

3.3.1 Introduction

A consideration of the literature on secondary school leadership in England and Wales seems to position female teachers, particularly those with children, as marginalised (Coleman, 2007; Fuller, 2017; Moorosi, Fuller and Reilly, 2018). This marginalisation is mainly evident through three characteristics that are understood to be a factor in inequality: gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support (Equality Act, 2010). As a part of the conceptual framework of this study, intersectionality is applied to inform the research design and to analyse and conceptualise the findings. In addition, intersectionality furthers the conversation by
emphasising the different aspects of inequality, highlighting the points where these characteristics overlap and theorising the impact of the compounding of inequalities at these points (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

This section explores the origin and development of intersectionality along with examples of its theoretical and practical application. The discussion then turns to the three intersectional areas of consideration for this research, gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support, critically reviewing the literature on mothers in school leadership at these points of intersection.

### 3.3.2 Origin and definitions

Although intersectionality is best known for its application to work on race and gender, from its roots in Black activism in the USA, it has developed into a conceptual and methodological approach that has been applied in both theory and practice across numerous fields including social science, law, education, healthcare and psychology (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

The term intersectionality was coined by Kimberlé Williams Crenshaw in the late 1980s and its parameters first set out in her article ‘Mapping the Margins: Intersectionality, Identity Politics and Violence Against Women of Color,’ (Crenshaw, 1991). This concept emerged from the growing recognition that Black women in the USA were unable to fully access the support required to combat social issues, such as domestic violence and rape because the structures in place took a one-dimensional view in designing social services provisions. There were initiatives in
place to support Black men and to support women as a group, but no policies were
directly tailored for Black women (Crenshaw, 1991).

To further illustrate this concept, Romero (2018) uses the Rubik’s cube metaphor to
emphasise the importance of a multi-dimensional approach in addressing
subordination and privilege. As the six sides of the cube, each with its own colour
mix to create new sides of multiple colours, so do social inequalities, such as race,
class, gender, sexuality, ability, citizenship status, and so on, mix to create multiple
identities and intersections.

Early work framed by an intersectional approach focused on race, class and gender,
which came to be known as ‘the holy trinity’ of social inequalities (Romero, 2018: 9).
However, as the list in the previous paragraph shows, intersectional work has grown
to encompass a wide range of social markers of injustice and is used in a variety of
different ways (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013). Hill Collins and Bilge (2016)
describe intersectionality as ‘a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in
the world, in people and in human experiences’ (p. 15). I use this argument to
support my choice of the three social inequalities that are used as intersectionality
markers in this research. It could be argued that besides gender, the other two
markers chosen, parenthood and emotional and practical support, are not wide
enough to be classified as general social categorisations, or as ‘static and rigid
systems of domination’ (Prins, 2006: 281). However, Romero (2018) proposes that
sociologists should accept that intersectionality ‘is key to understanding how
inequality, privilege and oppression work… it has the power to connect private
troubles with public issues’ (p. 11). As such, the scope of intersectionality has grown
to facilitate a much wider range of social markers (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013).

Furthering the argument on intersectionality’s versatility, legal scholar, Mari Matsuda, developed a method of applying intersectionality by asking the *other* question:

When I see something that looks racist, I ask, “Where is the patriarchy in this?” ... When I see something that looks homophobic, I ask, “Where is the class interest in this?”

(Matsuda, 1991, p. 1189)

While a working definition is helpful in understanding intersectionality, as illustrated in the previous paragraphs, ‘what intersectionality does, rather than what intersectionality is’ (Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013: 795) better captures the essence of this concept. Therefore, the emphasis is on intersectionality as a *verb*, not as a *noun* (Romero, 2018: 11). In this study, the inequalities linked to the characteristics of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support are used to guide and organise the literature review on intersectionality in this chapter.

**3.3.3 Intersectionality: theory or praxis**

The fluidity of definition, with its focus on application, has contributed to intersectionality being described as ‘a shifting and travelling theory’ (Chadwick, 2017: 6). While its fluidity contributes to its versatility, this has also resulted in debates concerning what intersectionality really is and how it should be applied. The two main groups in this debate, broadly speaking, are the European and the North American feminist groups. Each group promotes a different version of intersectionality shaped by their distinctive political and historical environments
There are epistemological differences between the two applications of intersectionality. The Europeans have developed a form of intersectionality that focuses on identity and constructivism, while the North Americans continue to use a form of intersectionality that is rooted in inequalities and post-structuralism. Bilge (2013) argues that European feminists are trying to take over intersectionality by depoliticising its use, reducing it to a mere academic tool and by calling for an expansion of its genealogy and by so doing whitening intersectionality. It is proposed that this is achieved by downplaying ‘the centrality of race in the advent of intersectional thought and activism… and by appearing to find valuable a “purified” intersectionality, quarantined from its exposure to race’ (Bilge, 2013: 413).

While such debates can be an important catalyst for the growth and evolution of academic theories, this rivalry has become counterproductive to the point where some Black feminist scholars have removed their support from intersectionality. In their opinion, a tool designed to highlight their marginalised status in academia is now used as ‘a field of expertise overwhelmingly dominated by White disciplinary feminists who keep race and racialised women at bay’ (Bilge, 2013: 418). Other scholars, however, have attempted to reconcile this dichotomy by presenting arguments to show that a good intersectional application can and should contain analysis from both groups’ views (Carbado et al, 2013; Cho, Crenshaw and McCall, 2013; Hill Collins, 2015).

Reflecting on this argument prompted me to question the use of intersectionality in my research. Am I aligning myself with the European school of thought by attempting
to apply intersectionality in theoretical and methodological ways as an analytical tool? Does the lack of focus on race, as a social inequality, in my research suggests that the use of intersectionality is inappropriate? How can I remain true to the original form of intersectionality and at the same time apply it in this context? To reconcile this dilemma, I borrow from Hill Collins (2015) who reasons that intersectionality possesses definitional and applicational fluidity. Intersectionality can be ‘a field of study, an analytical strategy and critical praxis’ (p. 9). For application to this research, intersectionality is used as an analytical strategy (as discussed in Section 5.3.2).

The following paragraphs of this section discuss gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support as examined through an intersectional lens. The aim is to engage with the experiences of school-leader mothers and to reflect on how these three aspects of intersectionality are encountered in their personal lives.

3.3.4 Gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support

Gender
As used in this thesis, gender relates to the protected characteristic of sex - male, female, third or binary gender (The Equality Act, 2010). It involves how individuals perceive themselves based on the characteristics they display and the group to which they choose to be associated. Here, the gendered group that will be focused on is female. Women in school leadership face various forms of discrimination because of their gender. Coleman’s (2000, 2003, 2007) research presents the gendered experiences of female secondary headteachers in England and Wales.
Her studies contain comments, from female school leaders that catalogue their experiences of gender discrimination, as shown in the examples below:

I inherited a school with a good number of staff who didn’t want a female head. The secretary and caretaker threatened to resign, some male teachers made it clear that they didn’t want a woman telling them what to do.’

( Participant A, Coleman, 2000: 23)

I have worked as a head with male deputies - it is always assumed I am the secretary or at best a deputy by first-time callers who don’t know the school.

( Participant B, Coleman, 2003: 4)

Discrimination towards women headteachers was not only prevalent from staff, parents and the general community but also from school governors.

I overheard governors talking at an interview saying that I could not get the job as they needed a man on the staff! I didn’t get the job.

( Participant D, Coleman, 2007: 387)

Although these quotations are not recent, women still face gender discrimination in their role as school leaders (Fuller, 2017). In support of this, Lumby and Azaola (2014) report that women still struggle to dent the negative assessment of themselves as leaders. As discussed in the previous chapter, this negative perception of female school leaders continues to impact their identities and leadership styles.
Furthermore, women in school leadership are also impacted by popular societal discourses around the woman’s role in the family and how this role influences their choice of paid work outside the home.

Women teachers have difficulties with their work/life balance - there is no time off work for the kids. You cannot go back into teaching at the same level you were after the kids. People are less friendly than ever towards part-time work and job sharing - it makes life difficult for time-tablers etc.

(Coleman, 2007: 389).

The quotations offered in this section emphasise the relevance of examining more closely the gendered perceptions of current women headteachers and those progressing towards headship. As shown in the experiences above, gender on its own was a source of discrimination for the participants in the studies cited. To what extent do women in educational leadership continue to encounter these experiences? If gender on its own can exert such negative impact on the lives of female school leaders, it can be more readily appreciated how severe the effects can be when gender intersects with parenthood and emotional and practical support.

 Parenthood

The onset of parenthood signals a change in priority and motivation for most working professionals (Budig, 2014). Furthermore, as discussed in Section 2.4.2, parenthood can affect career progression and earnings due to employers’ perspectives (Kmec, 2011). A longitudinal study conducted between 1979 and 2006 shows that while men’s earnings increased by 6% when they had children, women’s earning decreased by 4% for each child (Hodges and Budig, 2010; Cain Miller, 2014).

Hodges and Budig (2010) further explain that ‘fatherhood itself may be interpreted by
employers as a signal for valued, unobservable individual traits, such as loyalty or dependability’ (p 718). Furthermore, a comparison of the career progression trajectory, over several years as represented in earnings, shows that women without children and men on average earn more than women with children. Moreover, there is a significant drop in earnings for women during the period of pregnancy and after the birth of the first child (Drum, 2018).

However, since the current research is concerned with female school leaders, the focus here narrows from parenthood to motherhood. The term motherhood, as used in the Equality Act 2010, is characterised by pregnancy and maternity, and that period of time when the parents or carers are responsible for the day-to-day care of the child (Equality Act, 2010). This is generally taken as being synonymous with the compulsory school years¹⁰. This is the definition of motherhood that is followed in this study. As shown in the literature on the impact of motherhood on career progression, (Loder, 2005; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2014) due to the absence of a family-friendly culture in some English and Welsh schools, there are teachers who have traded in their ambitions of school leadership for motherhood. Without more intensive childcare support networks in place these experiences appear to remain incompatible (Schools Week, 2016).

Family-friendly initiatives have been implemented in some workplaces to achieve a better work-life balance. These range from practical support such as lactation facilities, access to affordable day-care and family leave (Perrakis and Martinez,

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¹⁰ Although in the UK, students can leave school at the end of the school year when they turn 16, they are expected to remain in full-time education, apprenticeship or training, or spend at least 20 hours each week working or volunteering while in part-time education or training until they are 18-years-old (https://www.gov.uk/know-when-you-can-leave-school last accessed 3 March 2020).
2012; Wolf-Wendel and Ward, 2014) to more extensive support, such as flexible working arrangements. ‘Both flexible working arrangements (FWAs) and equality and diversity (E&D) are high on the European Union (EU) agenda of economic inclusion and adaptability’ (Gardiner and Tomlinson, 2009: 671). Research findings indicate that there is a link between the introduction of FWAs, employee job satisfaction and profits (Galinsky, Sakai and Wigton, 2011; Leber Herr and Wolfram, 2012).

In line with legislative requirements, some companies have appointed equality and diversity managers to prevent or minimise discrimination towards mothers in these areas. Some schools are already making these changes, but most are slow to move in this direction (Simons et al, 2016; NASUWT, 2017). Furthermore, it has been suggested that in some cases mothers are still not taking up these family-friendly initiatives as there is stigma attached. In some settings, mothers are often made to feel undervalued, are undermined at work and are passed over for promotions (Brown, 2010; Meglich, Mihelic and Zupan, 2016).

The arguments presented above suggest that discrimination towards working mothers has persisted despite the efforts implemented in some schools to minimise these occurrences. Smithson and Stokoe (2005) rightly propose not only a change in culture but also a change in language. Employers are encouraged to put aside the old language of equal opportunities, because men are not the same as women. Under the old language, mothers are silenced and prevented from speaking out about their differences, and consequently, the necessary changes are not put in place to support them. Instead, women are forced to follow the structures in the
workplace, which are designed for men. In contrast, a new pluralistic proactive language is recommended:

(Work-life balance) isn’t just about women juggling a home and family. . . . It’s also about adjusting working patterns so that everyone, regardless of age, race or gender, can find a rhythm that enables them more easily to combine work with their other responsibilities or aspirations

(Smithson and Stokoe, 2005: 149).

Perrakis and Martinez (2012) whose study participants problematise the concept of balance, describing it as patriarchal myth, also support this view. One participant summed up this idea by saying:

It doesn’t resonate with me, the word balance. I think part of it might be the inherent illusion that if you just were better balanced and planned your time more wisely, it would all work out, which is bullshit

(Perrakis and Martinez, 2012: 213).

To address this problem, Perrakis and Martinez (2012) theorise engaging with the idea of sustainability versus work-life balance. This would involve making deliberate life choices that would sustain long-term health and happiness. One example would be choosing to live close to work instead of spending long periods of time commuting to work.

The literature on parenthood points to a history of discrimination towards working mothers, including teachers (Loder, 2005; Coleman, 2007). Despite the implementation of legislation to address inequality and lack of diversity in the wider society, it appears as though the career progression of mothers continues to be hampered by the persistence of patriarchal discourses concerning the role of women
and mothers (Meglich, et al, 2016). To what extent does this discrimination persist and how is this evident in the day-to-day experiences of mothers who are progressing towards headship? The current research seeks to address these questions. (See the research questions in Section 1.3.)

Emotional and practical support

The third area of interest is the impact of emotional and practical support in the lives of school-leader mothers. In this thesis, the term emotional and practical support is understood to be the result of the links and bonds that are formed through association and interaction with family, friends and acquaintances (Boyce, 2020). The result is a social network, characterised by shared values, norms and understandings, that can be drawn on for support, both emotional and practical (Drentea and Moren-Cross, 2005). The inability to tap into such networks can result in individuals experiencing isolation and exclusion. This subject was explored by Ryan et al (2008) in their study into the experiences of newly arrived Polish migrants in London. The researchers found that being able to access social networks was a vital step in tapping into resources that facilitate integration. Those who were unable to make these connections found it difficult to establish themselves in their host society (Ryan et al, 2008). The experiences of the Polish migrants cited here are somewhat similar to those of young teachers moving away from home to take up teaching appointments in different parts of the country. Being separated from their families and friends, some teachers may find themselves devoid of practical support such as assistance with emergency and possibly also regular childcare, help with household chores, and so on. Likewise, they may find that they no longer have someone to hold their hand through challenging times, to give advice and counsel
and provide a shoulder to cry on. A lack of such emotional and practical support may hinder teachers who are mothers from accessing opportunities leading to career progression.

In the literature on social inequalities, factors such as emotional and practical resources are sometimes presented as less important than the established protected characteristics (The Equality Act, 2010; EHRC, 2012) because of their perceived reduced significance to the life choices of women (Hakim, 1991, 1998; McRae, 2003). For example, Hakim’s preference theory proposes that women in high income countries consciously choose how to organise their lives, whether they wish to focus on careers, family responsibilities or both. She proposes that while the minority of women may choose to be career centred or home centred, most women choose to combine family responsibilities with paid work (Hakim, 2002).

Similar to Hakim’s (1991,1998) preference theory, McRae (2003) proposes that women in high income countries such as the USA and the UK 'have genuine choices about how they wish to live, in that there are no major constraints limiting or forcing their choices; and that lifestyle choices of women are now more important than constraints associated with social structure/class or other macro-level influences' (p. 318). While there is an argument for making deliberate life choices that may improve quality of life, and these choices may be more accessible to women living in high income countries, there is also the acknowledgement that there are some aspects of a women’s life, regardless of where she lives, that may be driven by forces that she is unable to control. Some women may also choose to put the needs and interests of others, such as their partners and children, above their own, even treating their
career as subordinate. This power imbalance may be so overt in her circumstances that although she may be living in a high income country, she remains limited in her choices. This may have been initiated, or further escalated, by the presence of other inequalities. In this research, the compounding of such disparities is evident by virtue of being a woman to begin with and then furthered by becoming a mother. Therefore, emotional and practical support is included as an additional site of social inequality because of its impact on compounding inequalities as it intersects with gender and parenthood.

Furthermore, as used in this research, the term emotional and practical support includes historical financial resources at the disposal of an individual at any given time. This relates to the practical aspect of this factor. Teachers, as a group, are generally considered to be financially secure. This is an understandable conclusion since teachers’ salaries, in England and Wales, compare well to those of similar professions. For example, when comparing starting salaries, teachers’ average pay is in the same range as that of medical and nursing graduates but is higher than that of visual and performing arts, business, marketing and management graduates (Whelan, 2019). However, studies also point to teachers who on becoming mothers are less financially secure having to resign reluctantly from their posts, seek other employment outside the profession, take up supply teaching or give up leadership and management responsibilities (Chhatwal, 2015; TUC, 2016). Each of these forced choices results in ‘loss in terms of finance, job security and pension contributions’ (NASUWT, 2017: 9). Those with access to the practical support of financial resources, however, are not necessarily hindered by such challenges.
In addition, the quality of the emotional and practical support given may be influenced by the social and cultural background of the teachers and is evident in the extent to which their families and friends support their choices and aspirations. Their social and cultural background includes the ambitions and ethics that were inculcated and nurtured from an early age and further encouraged through day-to-day interactions. Thus, the availability of emotional and practical support is not restricted to any particular social class but can be generated and utilised by everyone.

Therefore, it is reasonable to conclude that a lack of emotional and practical support can limit women’s choices and escalate the inequalities that they face. The current research will explore the extent to which emotional and practical support, including access to financial resources, impact on the career progression of the participants.

The discussion above emphasises the power of intersectionality in identifying and theorising the compounding of inequalities. It recognises that women’s experiences are not homogeneous and that by focusing on specific overlaps, intersectionality provides a framework for analysing individual lives (Hill Collins and Bilge, 2016).

3.3.5 Summary

Intersectionality is proposed as a powerful tool for analysing the connections between parenthood, gender and emotional and practical support. Figure 2 summarises the arguments presented in this section. On their own, the constructs of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support are each understood to
negatively impact the career choices of female teachers (Chhatwal, 2015; TUC, 2016). However, when these three areas begin to overlap, first in twos and then all three areas overlapping, as shown at the centre of the diagram, the compounding of the inequalities escalates (Collins, 2015). The current research aims to explore this compounded effect on the career progression of teachers who are mothers.

Figure 2: The compounding of inequalities - gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support.
3.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter presented the literature on structuration theory and intersectionality. It discussed the origin and previous application of each theory, explaining reasons for any similarities or differences between the previous and current applications and outlined how each theory is applied to the current research.

Though the application of structuration theory required careful selection to prevent ontological incompatibility with other aspects of the research design, the decision to use Giddens a la carte (den Fond et al, 2012) in the form of duality of structure was useful in analysing the agent-structure relationships and the dualities that were evidenced in the experiences of the participants. This includes analysing the participants’ gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support interactions. Intersectionality was applied to further the discussion from the consideration of the individual characteristics to what happens when these characteristics overlap and are experienced at the same time (Romero, 2018). Furthermore, intersectionality was considered appropriate for this purpose since it recognises the imbalance of power relations between agents and structures that is experienced at these points of overlap. The application of intersectionality has the potential to make visible the effect of these social inequalities on the career progression experiences of school-leader mothers.
Chapter 4 Methods and Methodology

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the details of the research design employed to address the research questions. Section 4.2 outlines the assumptions adopted in line with the philosophical perspectives applied. This is followed by a discussion of the life history approach in Section 4.3, presenting a critique that focuses on its appropriateness for this study. Section 4.4 considers the methodological implications of structuration theory and intersectionality by charting the role of the conceptual framework in the research design. The chapter concludes in Sections 4.5 and 4.6 with details of the sampling methods, participants, research instruments and data collection techniques.

The ethical implications that relate to research design and methodological decisions are engaged with in this chapter. However, since ethics is an important topic in its own right and permeates all aspects of the study including the data analysis, it is discussed in full in Chapter 5.

4.2 Philosophical perspectives

Philosophical perspectives form the foundations of academic research. They support and determine the decisions taken on key elements of a study. As such a reciprocal relationship exists between the chosen philosophical perspectives, the rationale and focus of the study and the conceptual framework. This interconnection further
influences the research design, how data is collected and analysed and the discussion and application of the findings (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016).

Ontological, epistemological and methodological assumptions are essential elements of research design. The ontological stance assumed in my research relates to how I understand the nature of reality and the epistemological stance points to how this understanding relates to the nature of knowledge (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). From an ontological perspective, my study concerns the lived experiences of a unique group of teachers. It aims to tell their stories and share their perceptions of their realities. Acknowledging that there are multiple realities and multiple ways of interpreting the world, I hope to present their realities of how they interact with the culture and structure of the schools in which they work and the discourses around motherhood, gender and career progression that permeate society. Therefore, the ontological assumptions that guided my research are rooted in constructivism as opposed to objectivism, which promotes the belief that what is out there to know exists independent of researchers. The knowledge to be engaged with in the current research is constructed through the interactions and experiences of the participants.

The epistemological assumptions of my research concern the kind of knowledge that is generated and developed, through social interactions, as the research progresses. The reality created through the events and activities engaged in needs to be interpreted to unlock the meanings that these encounters embody. This is the interpretivist stance. In contrast, a positivist stance promotes the idea that truth already exists and that it is out there to be discovered. Haraway (1988) in her argument for situated knowledges (see Section 1.2), describes the positivist’s
approach as ‘the god trick’ (p. 581), ‘a vision from everywhere and nowhere equally and fully’ (p. 584), one that privileges the perspective of the male, white heterosexual and renders all other perspectives invalid and subjective. But since knowledge is never objective and it is impossible to see the world from a neutral, external standpoint, Haraway (1988) proposes the consideration of ‘a more adequate, richer, better account of the world’ (p. 579), that of ‘seeing from the standpoint of the subjugated in order to see well’ (p. 585). In support of this perspective, Clisby and Holdsworth (2014) adds that ‘what is known, and the way that it is known, thereby reflects the situation or the perspective of the knower. This itself is legitimate knowledge’ (p. 12). Therefore, although positivists may describe the knowledge generated from interpretivist studies as soft knowledge (Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur, 2006), I agree with the position taken by Haraway (1988), Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur’s (2006), Clisby and Holdsworth (2014) and others who argue that these diverse forms of knowledge are vital in the understanding of lived experiences. Merriam and Tisdell (2016) add to this view by pointing to qualitative research as being ‘interested in understanding how people interpret their experiences, how they construct their worlds, and what meanings they attribute to their experiences’ (p. 5). Thus, instead of taking a positivist approach to the collection and analysis of the data, an interpretivist approach using qualitative data is better suited for this study.

Furthermore, the ontological and epistemological perspectives outlined above point to engaging with the experiences of others in their social worlds. For a study on the challenges and opportunities of motherhood, career progression and school leadership to contribute effectively to the existing body of knowledge on this subject, its design and findings will need to be examined under established theoretical
lenses, so that they can be understood and applied to context. Therefore, an interpretative analysis of the perspectives of the research participants is necessary to achieve these aims (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Interpretivism’s key focus proposes an understanding that ‘there are multiple realities, or interpretations, of a single event’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 5). Generating the stories of school-leader mothers provides an opportunity to engage with their interpretation of their worlds. By acknowledging the complexity, uncertainty and doubt of social lives, an interpretative stance forces constant reflexivity on claims of knowing (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017). It provides the opportunity to give expression to and celebrate the ‘hidden or silenced lives’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 10) of school-leader mothers.

For the aims of this study to be achieved, there must be a synchronised relationship between the fundamental ideas on which it is constructed and the means to link its theory to practice. I begin this discussion on analysing intersectionality’s fit with the philosophical perspectives outlined above by citing the example of Prins (2006). Prins used a life-history approach to investigate how the life trajectories of her classmates in the Netherlands were influenced by their early childhood experiences of cultural and ethnic identities. She applied an intersectional framework to analyse her work and concluded that a constructivist, rather than a systemic, approach to intersectionality is better suited to answering the type of questions used in life history research. The systematic approach emphasises ‘the impact of systems or structures upon formation of identities’ (p. 279) while in contrast the constructivist approach centres around the ‘dynamic and relational aspects of social identity’ (Prins, 2006: 279). Prins aligns herself with the latter orientation as it stresses the importance of agency in identity formation alongside an interactive view of power. Similarly,
through the lens of interpretivism, my research presents the stories of mothers who are aspiring towards secondary school headship, recounting their perceptions of the opportunities and challenges that they face along the way. At the same time, intersectionality is applied to examine their perception of the external factors that contribute to and hinder their career progression.

To further the discussion on the ontological compatibility between the conceptual framework and the philosophical perspectives of this study, I draw on the ontological arguments of structuration theory. The development of the ontological and epistemological aspects of structuration theory, including which aspects were applied to this study, were presented in Section 3.2.3. Here I emphasise its compatibility with constructivism, interpretivism and life history narrative approach by highlighting its use of the ontic level and ontology-in-situ (Stones, 2005, 2014). These facets of structuration theory focus the analytic lenses on the structures, the agents and the sequence of actions. Thus, this ontological stance is designed to facilitate and interact with levels of subjectivity about what we know, and how we know what we know, as it engages with data on agents and structures. Similarly, through the ontological perspectives of this study, there is an acknowledgement that the participants, acting as agents, have different experiences and encounters and engage differently with the cultures and structures of their schools, as a result, creating different realities and different perspectives of their career progression experiences. These similarities support the compatibility of structuration theory with constructivism, interpretivism and life history narrative approach and facilitate its application in this study. Further to the aspects of similarity and compatibility, the combination of interpretivism, intersectionality and structuration theory brought
additional perspectives to the analysis of the research findings that would not be achieved without this amalgamation. For example, as discussed in Section 3.2.3, while structuration theory explores the dualism between individual themes and factors that impact on the career progression of the participants, intersectionality takes the analysis further by exploring the impact of the compounding of these factors.

Next, I will discuss how the current research’s philosophical perspectives influence the style of writing that I use. Kamler and Thomson (2014) explain that while writing in the first person can prompt claims of subjectivism, at the same time it can create a forum for discussion about the nature and scope of knowledge and the role of the researcher in the research process (p. 101). Epistemological assumptions are therefore involved. By taking an interpretivist, rather than a positivist stance, my aim is to gain a better understanding of how the participants perceive the experiences they encounter and the significance they attach to these experiences. By writing in the first person, I embrace my role as a qualitative researcher engaging fully with the methodological and epistemological assumptions associated with this genre. By doing so, I seek to establish my personal connection to the subject of the research, making myself visible throughout the process by adopting this style of writing (Kamler and Thomson, 2014). Finally, my experiences as a teacher and a mother are likely to resonate with those of my participants. Through critical and continuous reflection on the research design and implementation, I sought to ensure that this awareness of my subjectivity had a positive impact on refining the rationale behind my research and solidifying the links between my topic, research questions, and the
methods used to address these questions: the reason (what) and rigour (how) behind my research (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017).

To summarise this section on philosophical perspectives, my research into motherhood, school leadership and progression towards headship will take an interpretivist approach. The impact of these choices is visible throughout my research from the conceptual framework and research design to the style of writing.

**4.3 A critique of the life history approach**

As presented above in Section 4.2, the nature of my research topic and research questions lends themselves well to a qualitative approach since the focus is on process, understanding and meaning (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). More specifically, a life history narrative approach was the type of qualitative method used. The life history approach is concerned with ‘how individuals talk about and story their experiences and perceptions of the social contexts they inhabit’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 1). Therefore, the life history approach brings to the fore the significance of how the participants perceive their experiences as they relate to particular interactions over a designated period of time.

As an educational practitioner-researcher, I am interested in people and their lives as, ‘Life is education’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: xxii). A narrative inquiry into the lives of teachers who are mothers can give a deep insight into school culture by providing a ‘description of multiple realities’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 39).
I will argue that there are three strengths of the life history approach in educational research which support the decision to use it as the main methodological approach for this research.

Firstly, Clandinin and Connelly (2000) propose that no social phenomenon exists in isolation, that is, lives are not hermetically compartmentalised. There are constant interactions between the different aspects of our social lives. The recognition that teachers are holistic beings and that the different areas of their lives are connected and influence each other is an important concept that permeates this study. The life history approach recognises and endorses this understanding. This indicates that it is an effective method for studying the complexity of social life because it captures the full picture of the participants’ experiences thus providing the opportunity to examine these interactions in context. This engagement with interconnectivity fits well with structuration theory and intersectionality which were employed as methodological and interpretative lenses in this research. Similar to the life history approach, intersectionality acknowledges the interrelationship between the different aspects of social lives and identities. Drawing on an understanding of this connection was a crucial step in eliciting the participants’ experiences through the interviews.

Secondly, a life history approach recognises the importance of time and place, that is, how historical and social contexts and events may affect an individual’s life. A life history approach ensures that the participants’ data are grounded in ‘their particular historical circumstances and context’ (Johnson, 2017: 846). This strength of the life history approach is particularly applicable when considering the impact of popular
discourses focusing on gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support on the lives of the participants in this study. These discourses are historically and culturally specific (Romero, 2018). They may change over time, depending on the locale and the cultural background of the participants. As a result, it was accurately anticipated that the life history approach would be effective in generating data that recognise and situate the teachers’ stories.

Thirdly, the life history approach has the potential to generate data that give insight into how the participants experience, create, and make sense of their social worlds in terms of their identities. This emphasises the complexity of social lives. Scientific and technical language is often inadequate in fully relating life stories, especially aspects enveloping human emotions (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 2). My research engaged with sensitive themes such as miscarriage, IVF, divorce, illness and death. The use of the life history approach provided the framework, language and space to conceptualise effectively these experiences and to communicate how each participant perceives her interaction with these experiences.

The life history approach also has perceived limitations. The main argument centres around the generalisability of the associated research data. The small number of participants typically used in life history research means that it will not achieve generalisability. Moreover, as the data are subjective, it is difficult to validate and generalise in the positivist sense. However, it is important to note that life history work does not aim for generalisability (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). Floyd (2012) explains, ‘attempting to validate the narrative and achieve some form of objective truth goes against the key ontological and epistemological assumptions of the
methodology’ (p. 7). The aim is to give meaning to the participants’ experiences, to
tell their stories by generating relatable, trustworthy and reliable data. Life history
offers ‘a way of exploring the relationship between the culture, the social structure
and individual lives’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 9). ‘(It) is an experience of the
experience’ (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000: 189; word in brackets added).

It is important to note that although there are other research methods that are similar
to life history approach, the decision was made to employ this particular approach
because it is considered best positioned to meet the research aims as embodied in
the research questions. For example, ethnography and case studies are two such
similar approaches. Ethnography is traditionally referred to as a research approach
that describes a culture and seeks to understand a ‘way of life from the viewpoint of
its participants’ (Punch and Oancea, 2014: 156). Therefore, life history is considered
closely linked to ethnography (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). While both aim to
generate thick descriptions, ethnography’s main focus is on the culture as opposed
to individuals.

Likewise, there are similarities between case studies and life history. Both are
considered studies of real-life contexts that set out to collect deep, rich data (Punch
and Oancea, 2014). To achieve this aim, like life history, case studies often use
multiple data sources and multiple data collection methods. However, case studies
have a unique feature. Case studies involve an ‘in-depth contextual study of a
person, people, issue, and place, within a predetermined scope of the study’
(Bhattacharya, 2017: 52). Such studies have very clearly marked boundaries, where
just one case (or a small number of cases) is studied in detail. The aim is to develop
as full an understanding of the case as possible (Punch and Oancea, 2014). While there are a number of approaches, such as ethnography and case study, that can generate rich deep data in their study of settings and participants, life history research was employed for this study since I believe that it best captures how participants experience, create, and make sense of their social worlds.

In summary, the life history approach was selected for this research because it recognises and makes obvious the vital aspect of interconnectivity in the lives of the participants. It also acknowledges the influence of history and location and the complexity of social lives. Therefore, I agree with Goodson and Sikes (2001) who state that, ‘everyone has stories to tell…and life history helps to remind us of this, as it also shows how individual lives are affected by when, where, how and by whom’ (p 2).

The following sections of this chapter will discuss the role of structuration theory and intersectionality in the design and the implementation of the methodological framework of this research.

4.4 Conceptual framework: methodological implications

This section discusses how intersectionality informed the decisions linked to the research design and other methodological implications.
Hill Collins and Bilge (2016) describe intersectionality as ‘a way of understanding and analysing the complexity in the world, in people and in human experiences’ (p 15). This description signals the versatility of intersectionality which is evident in its application to the methodological framework of life history studies. This section presents two examples of such an application to previous life history studies and concludes by drawing on the lessons from these examples to outline how intersectionality informed the methodological choices for the current study on motherhood and secondary school leadership. (See Section 3.3 for a discussion of intersectionality literature and its application to the conceptual framework for this research.)

In the first example, Chadwick’s (2017) analysis of intersectionality and its application to life history work concluded that although intersectionality and life history may initially appear to be a suitable match, there are fundamental differences that need to be reconciled. For example, while narrative work focuses on individual experiences and realities, intersectionality is predominantly group oriented and often focuses on a group with a shared identity. The challenge is to devise a version of intersectionality that highlights how the ‘material, structural and political realities infuse and shape individual stories’ (Chadwick, 2017: 14).

Secondly, Windsong (2018) explains how intersectionality can be incorporated into qualitative interviews by citing examples from her own work. She applied McCall’s intercategorical complexity approach - which searches out and analyses social life in categories - in her research on the social construction of neighbourhood, race and gender (McCall, 2005). To fully investigate this phenomenon, Windsong designed
direct intersectionality questions but found that ‘participants noticeably asked (her) to repeat the intersectionality questions and indicated more confusion over these questions than others’ (Windsong, 2018: 143). This example emphasised the challenge of designing research questions that directly respond to the theoretical framework of the research and at the same time are not leading or biased questions that prompt certain answers.

The two examples presented above on the use of intersectionality in life history work (Chadwick, 2017; Windsong, 2018) were instrumental in the design and implementation of my research methodology. Chadwick’s contribution influenced how I prepared the research instruments for data collection as shown in the interview schedule (Appendix 4). Considering the culture and structure of the schools and how these impact on the individual lives of mothers aspiring towards headship was a vital component in the formulation of the interview questions. Learning from Windsong’s example, while I was keen to ensure that the intersection between the inequality factors under consideration was addressed in the interview questions, in addition to avoiding leading questions, I was careful to use language that was simple and that reduced confusion. For example, the word ‘intersectionality’ was not used in the interview questions. Instead, words such as ‘overlap’, ‘link’ or ‘connection’ were used to tease out this concept.

Regarding the direct application of intersectionality, initially, the three intersectionality components considered for this research and used for data collection were ‘gender’, ‘parenthood’ and ‘access to financial resources’. However, the use of ‘access to financial resources’ proved to be a limitation. During the interviews, in addition to
sharing information on ‘access to financial resources’, the participants also spoke of a range of other factors that significantly contributed to their career progression. At the data analysis stage, it became clear that a more general term was required to describe the full scope of support that was at the disposal of the participants. The research data showed that in addition to ‘access to financial resources’, the participants’ experiences were also impacted by the various types of emotional and practical support from family and friends. The element of practical support also included financial support, both historical and current. Therefore, I made the decision to change the third intersectionality component from ‘access to financial resources’ to ‘emotional and practical support’ since the initial data confirmed that the latter term was more overarching and accurate in capturing the experiences of the participants.

In summary, the core concepts of intersectionality influence the formulation of the research questions and the interview schedule by addressing the interactions between the teachers and their school culture and structure. This was a key concern since an understanding of this relationship is crucial in exploring the motherhood and career progression experiences of the participants. Drawing on the examples of how previous life history studies implemented intersectionality in their methodology informed the design of the research schedule for this study, to reduce confusion and bias and also to enhance the capacity to generate rich, deep data.

The next section of this chapter will focus on the sampling methods and the participants.
4.5 Sampling methods and participants

As discussed in Section 4.3, the life history approach involves discovering, understanding, and gaining insight into a particular social phenomenon (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). For this to be achieved, a purposive sampling method was used. This meant that I deliberately selected participants whom I expected would provide the most information-rich stories to address my research purpose and questions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). Once an initial group of participants was identified, snowball or networking sampling was used to locate and select additional suitable participants. This was achieved through direct contact with professional associations and schools, introductions through professional contacts (schools and universities) and through the use of social media platforms such as Twitter and Facebook.

The speed and connectivity of social media, particularly Twitter, resulted in it being the most successful medium for identifying participants. This is because Twitter provides a platform that taps into professional networking groups for women teachers such as WomenEd and Maternity Teacher Paternity Teacher (MTPT). Through their interactions in these Twitter groups, prospective participants demonstrated an interest in factors affecting the lives and work of mothers who are also secondary school leaders. They presented themselves as ideal candidates for participation in my research. It is worth acknowledging, however, the risk of bias that may be associated with selecting participants from professional networking groups since they may hold particular views linked to the research topic which are not held by other female school leaders that are not members of these groups (Hellawell, 2006).
The criteria for selecting the participants were as follows. Each participant had to be:

i) a female secondary school teacher in England or Wales

ii) the mother of children (or a child), under 18 years old, still in school and living at home

iii) a deputy/assistant headteacher or a senior/middle leader e.g., a head of department

iv) a teacher who is aspiring towards secondary school headship

v) a teacher not previously known to me personally or professionally, prior to participating in the research.

The participants had to meet all the criteria and as far as possible were selected from different parts of England and Wales. Although not integral to the research design, selecting participants from different schools was considered appropriate because this decision was likely to generate data covering a wider range of perspectives and school contexts (Punch and Oancea, 2014).

Criterion (v) was included to avoid a source of bias, that is, to minimise the degree of influence that my relationship with the participants could exert on how they respond to the research instruments. Being familiar with my personal experiences as a school-leader mother could have possibly coloured how they interact with the research process. This is a possible disadvantage of being an insider researcher (Hellawell, 2006). For this reason, I did not include, as participants, teachers from my current school, or those that I worked with in the past or with whom I have any professional or personal connection.
The research design planned for the inclusion of six teachers. Six teachers were chosen since preliminary estimates indicated that this number of participants was adequate to generate ample data required to address the research questions (see Section 4.6.3 for calculations). However, this process did not proceed as smoothly as anticipated. Initially, the verbal consent of all six teachers was secured. However, one participant withdrew before the first interview. With a sample size of six participants, the loss of one participant equates to the loss of a large proportion of the data. It was therefore necessary to find a replacement. To maximise the possibility of successful recruitment, in addition to the techniques used to recruit the original six, I also employed snowball sampling (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). This was done by requesting referrals from the current participants and those from the initial study (see Section 4.6.1 for details on the initial study). Several potential participants were introduced through this process.

While it is disheartening to lose a participant and having to reengage in the recruiting process, opportunities for reflection and improvement emerged from this setback. The design of the data collection process required the participants’ commitment for a full school year (as noted in Section 4.6.2). It was therefore likely that other participants might drop out as the school year progressed, so, the decision was made to recruit more than one replacement to compensate for any further loss.

Furthermore, the experience of losing a participant mid-study, and the possibility of losing others as the study progressed, caused me to reflect on the recruiting and retaining techniques that I used. Could I have presented the study in a more appealing way? Considering the hectic lives of the participants, was asking for three
interviews, preparing artefacts and compiling a photo-journal too excessive? (These data collection elements are discussed in Section 4.6 and 5.4, and the ethical issues arising in the research design in Chapter 5). Would the participants find the nature of the study too personal and consequently shy away from continuing? What could I have done, in a tangible way, to show my appreciation to the participants and their families? Although the responses to these reflective questions eventually proved to have little or no impact on the participants’ decision to continue with the study, an ethical, reflective and reflexive approach is a vital facet of engaging in life history research (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). In the end, two more teachers agreed to take part resulting in a cohort of seven participants. All seven participants completed the whole three stage process.

It is understandable that a sample size of seven participants may be criticised as being insufficient for wider application or having the potential to make any considerable contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Here I present two arguments to refute such criticisms. Firstly, the aim of this research is not to generate findings that can be generalised, but to develop critical, analytical and in-depth insights which can provide new understandings of structures of inequalities (Bhattacharya, 2017). This is made explicit in the philosophical assumptions and research design of this study. Secondly, there is a well-established precedent in gender and educational leadership and management research of impactful studies with small sample sizes. Two recent examples are Chan, Ngai and Choi’s (2016) study of the career histories of eight female school principals in Hong Kong and Vella’s (2020) research on eight senior female leaders in the Maltese education department. The findings of these studies were not designed to be generalised;
however, they added to our understanding of the lived experiences of female school leaders and provided recommendations on developing family-friendly measures and training opportunities within the respective education sectors.

4.6 Research instruments and data collection

4.6.1 Designing and developing the research instruments

This section outlines how the research instruments were designed, developed, tested and then implemented during the data collection phases. A detailed re-examination of the research topic, the focus and rationale, the literature and the research questions, was the starting point in determining the types of research instruments that would best address the research problem. As my research is focused on how secondary school-leader mothers negotiate the challenges and opportunities associated with their roles and responsibilities. I was keen to ‘enter into their perspective’ (Patton, 2015: 426), to hear their experiences.

An initial study was carried out during the first year of this doctoral research with the aim of designing and testing the research instruments. Two mothers with school leadership roles took part in this initial study. To address the research problem, a series of ‘conversations with a purpose’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 7) was determined to be the main source of data collection. These conversations with the participants took the form of a semi-structured interview which was considered most appropriate since it allowed depth and flexibility. In these interviews, some questions were prepared and used to get the participants to begin sharing their experiences
(Bhattacharya, 2017). Once the interviews got under way, probing and spontaneous questions were then utilised to encourage the participants to elaborate on specific points. Given the success of this format in producing deep and rich data, it was also used in the main study (see Appendix 4 for the Interview Schedule).

Other aspects of the initial study that were successful and were carried over to the main study included the use of Skype as the medium through which the interviews took place and the use of artefacts to supplement the interview data. (These aspects will be discussed in more detail in Sections 4.6.3 and 4.6.4.) The data generated from the initial study were not used in the main study.

Two aspects of the research design, from the initial study that required adjustments were the format of the interviews and the use of the participants' personal writings. The pilot interviews were so conversational that they continued for more than an hour and still it was felt that there was much more to be discussed. In keeping with the overall ethics and ethos of the study (see Section 5.4 for details), it was decided that instead of one long interview for the main study, three shorter and more focused interviews would be conducted (Johnson, 2017). Regarding the participants’ personal writings, both pilot participants either wrote blogs or contributed to teachers’ newsletters. These documents were useful in providing secondary data that addressed the research questions. However, as most of the participants in the main study were not experienced writers, this element was excluded. In its place, participants were asked to put together a photo journal which they shared during the third interview. (These improvements will be elaborated on in Section 4.6.3.)
4.6.2 Conducting the interviews

The interviews were conducted at a time and place convenient to the participants. Each of the seven participants was interviewed three times across the school year 2018-2019. The interviews took place within the final weeks of the Winter, Spring and Summer school terms.

The first round of interviews focused on the participants’ experiences of motherhood and educational leadership during their own childhood and school years. These interviews were conducted during the Winter (November/December 2018-19). The second round of interviews took place during the Spring (March/April 2019) and focused on maternity leave, returning to work and career progression. The final interviews were conducted in the Summer (June/July 2019). These were geared towards discussions on work-life balance and career aspirations.

Collecting the interview data at three specific points across the school year presented advantages. Firstly, as mentioned previously, having three separate shorter interviews, as opposed to one lengthy interview, showed consideration for the participants who are all busy working professionals and mothers. Each interview was kept to about an hour so as not to encroach on the participants’ time. This approach is in line with the overall ethos and ethics of the research, drawing on Gilligan’s ethics of care and similar principles discussed in Section 5.4.2.

Secondly, being in communication with the participants over this lengthy period helped to facilitate the development of close relationships and mutual trust between the researcher and the participants. This, I would argue, had a positive impact on the
quality of data generated. As the interviews proceeded across the year, I developed an increasing rapport with the participants resulting in them speaking freely about their experiences and perceptions of being a mother and a school leader. Finally, having three different interviews created the opportunity to discuss a specific life stage in each interview. This meant that the data collection phases were well structured to address the research focus and the research questions.

4.6.3 The use of timelines, artefacts and photo-journals

In preparing for the first interview, the participants were asked to compose a timeline of key events in their lives and careers (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The timelines could be projected into the future to include career aspirations. The timelines were useful in helping the participants get ready for the interviews by honing and structuring their stories around the focus of the research. When putting together their timelines, participants were encouraged to record any significant thoughts or ideas to further illustrate or evidence their timelines. Timelines can be useful in structuring the participants’ memories around the interview themes (see Appendix 9 for an example of a participant’s timeline).

Further to the use of the timelines, during the first two interviews, the participants were asked to bring along and use three or four artefacts to supplement their story telling. Artefacts, as used in this context, refer to items that are significant to the participants’ lives. Norum (2012) explains that artefacts ‘are a unique source of data that often are right in front of us. They shed light on important aspects of a person, society, or culture, enriching any study’ (p. 318). Similarly, Bell (2017), when discussing the significance of artefacts, uses the terms ‘seeing narratives or visual
narratives’ (p. 142) which also emphasises the importance of artefacts in the study of lived experiences. Artefacts included photographs, video clips, awards, items of clothing, books, timetables, ID badges or anything that the participants judged to be relevant to their stories.

In addition to the use of artefacts, the participants also compiled a photo-journal in the last month leading up to the third interview. This comprised one or two photographs taken each week that captured what the participant saw as the essence of life as a mother aspiring towards headship. These photographs could then be ‘deliberately inserted (by the participant) into the interview to prompt discussion, reflection and recollection’ (Tinkler, 2013: 174; words in brackets added). This technique is called photo-elicitation. The use of photo-elicitation in interviews not only facilitates dialogue by acting as a third party to create a relaxed atmosphere, but also helps to generate useful data (Tinkler, 2013). This use of photo-elicitation is popular in educational research and is similar to the reflective photography technique used by Wolfenden and Buckler (2013) with Sudanese teachers. This method involved the ‘creation and interpretation of an image by the research participants rather than the researcher’ (Wolfenden and Buckler, 2013: 191), thereby facilitating the generation of data that are saturated with the participants’ perspectives.

In sum, using timelines, artefacts and photographs as part of the interview process enabled more participant-led interviews that fostered ownership and therefore generated richer and more authentic narratives (Bhattacharya, 2017).
The interviews are summarised in Table 1 (see also Appendix 4 for the Interview Schedule).

**Table 1: Summary of the interviews**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview 1</th>
<th>Interview 2</th>
<th>Interview 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Winter term</td>
<td>Spring term</td>
<td>Summer term</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood, work and educational leadership – the early years</td>
<td>Maternity leave, returning to work and career progression</td>
<td>Work-life balance and looking to the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3 or 4 artefacts</td>
<td>Weekly photo-journal</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Each interview was recorded via Skype, lasted about one hour and when transcribed generated the equivalent of 20 A4 size pages of raw data. Altogether, the raw interview data amounted to about 420 A4 size pages. Despite this fact, it is important to reiterate that the success of a study of this nature does not hinge on the quantity of data it has, but on the quality of that data (Bhattacharya, 2017).

The verification of the interview data with each participant was another crucial step in the data collection process as it addressed ethical considerations. Prior to each interview, the participants were reminded that they had the option to read, edit and approve their transcripts before they were analysed. Only one participant took up this offer. She examined the transcript for the first interview, was satisfied with how it was done and did not request the transcripts for the remaining interviews. Although the other six participants did not request their interview transcripts, I sought to keep them informed by summarising and checking portions of the previous interview at the start of the next interview.
4.6.4 Skype interviews

Deakin and Wakefield (2016) suggest that online interviews should be considered, not only as a complement to traditional onsite, face-to-face interviews, but as a viable alternative. They argue that online interviews provide flexibility in choice of location and time. I will now consider these advantages as they relate to the use of Skype interviewing in this study.

Firstly, although the absence of rapport has been cited as a possible drawback when using online video interviews (Iacono, Symonds and Brown, 2016; Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014), this was not a problem experienced during the interviews for this study. This is because extensive rapport was established with each participant prior to the first round of interviews through direct messaging on Twitter, WhatsApp, SMS messages and by emails. Furthermore, these relationships were maintained across the one-year data collection period. The atmosphere that was encouraged and fostered before and during the interviews also contributed to a favourable environment. In turn, this resulted in the generation of deep, rich data (Floyd, 2012). To elaborate, most of the participants elected to have their interviews from home in the evenings after their children went to bed. The participants were often wearing comfortable clothes, sitting on either the sofa or the bed and having a cup of tea. They appeared comfortable and relaxed in their own surroundings. This reflected the ethos of the research.
Secondly, Skype has an inbuilt feature that enables the interviews to be video recorded. The playback feature can be set to show both parties simultaneously on the screen. This produced a recorded copy of the interviews that as the researcher, I could watch repeatedly. This was useful in the analysis stage as I could rerun specific sections of the interviews to extract the most meaning. In addition, having a video recording of each interview was useful while transcribing. The ease and familiarity that has become synonymous with use of technology ensure that Skype is now considered to be more than an alternative to face-to-face interviewing (Janghorban, Roudsari and Taghipour, 2014), that is, in some case a more practical and viable option.

To summarise this section, the use of timelines, artefacts and photo-journals was instrumental in initiating and maintaining the flow of the interview conversations. These resources signalled the participants’ shared ownership of the process, which resulted in the discussions being more participant-led. Although there were initial concerns with the use of Skype interviewing as the main data collection medium, these concerns proved to be unfounded. Skype interviewing is not only time and cost saving, but also has unforeseen advantages such as creating an environment that has the potential to generate deep, rich and authentic data and through video recording is able to support the data transcription and data analysis stages of the research process.
4.7 Chapter conclusion

This chapter discussed the assumptions and decisions taken regarding the research methods and methodology. The nature of the knowledge that was engaged with in this research and how this knowledge was generated signalled the use of interpretivist lens. These philosophical perspectives were supported by using the life history approach to generate the data. The application of the feminist concept of intersectionality along with structuration theory were the theoretical perspectives that framed the methodological decisions of this study.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with seven secondary school senior teachers who are mothers and have headship aspirations. The interviews were conducted with each participant at three separate points across a full school year. The participants’ timelines, photo-journals and artefacts, such as photographs, items of clothing, certificates, awards and jewellery, were used to supplement the interview data. The use of Skype interviews as the main data collection instrument, though initially approached with caution, resulted in unforeseen benefits, such as the production of more than expected high quality data. In addition, the use of the video recording facility to foster more efficient transcription of the raw interview data and to relive the interviews during the data analysis stage proved to be advantageous.
Chapter 5 Data Analysis and Ethical Considerations

5.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the procedures that were employed in the data analysis process. The chapter begins by outlining the thematic analysis approach that was used to identify the themes developed from the research data. This involved the application of the style of thematic approach proposed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019). Section 5.2.2 offers an account of how the themes were identified from the data. This includes an explanation of how early themes were grouped into subthemes which later formed the three main themes.

Section 5.3 discusses how the conceptual framework was applied to the data analysis process. It reviews how structuration theory and intersectionality were used as analytic tools in previous studies and draws parallels with the current application.

Section 5.4 presents a discussion of the ethical considerations that were engaged with throughout the research. This includes an outline of the formal ethical considerations, in particular the securing of ethical approval from the Open University’s Human Resources Ethic Committee and the participants’ consent, and the crucial role of ethics in life history research.
5.2 Thematic analysis

5.2.1 A thematic analysis approach

‘Data analysis is the process of making sense out of the data’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 72). However, Ravitch and Riggan (2017) take this definition further by adding that ‘data analysis is a series of choices about how you interact with the data’ (p. 125). These choices are influenced by the philosophical assumptions of the research, its conceptual framework and by our own ‘intellectual, ideological and political commitments’ (Ravitch and Riggan, 2017: 125). In this section, I discuss the step-by-step process that I took in identifying key themes in line with my research rationale and questions.

A thematic analysis approach as presented by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2013, 2019) was used to provide structure to the data analysis process. Providing a clear explanation of the steps taken was necessary as this ensured that the research findings can be evaluated and compared with similar studies. A failure to provide this clarity of process could hamper the study’s contribution to the existing body of knowledge. Thematic analysis ensures engagement with the complete data set in a systematic and rigorous manner, rather than cherry picking particular pieces of the data. In this approach, ‘clarity on process and practice of method is vital’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 80).

The type of thematic analysis used was both ‘reflective and subjective’ (Braun and Clarke, 2019: 590). Subjectivity and reflexivity are demonstrated in the decision-making process of the research design and methods. Considering the ontological,
epistemological and methodological assumptions of the research also contribute to the decisions made when applying thematic analysis. Braun and Clarke (2018) liken the application of thematic analysis to purchasing a ‘make your own bear’ (p. 109). Although the teddy bear has the same elements as a readymade teddy bear, because you ‘selected the specific type of fur, eyes, nose and so on, the final bear is a product of your choices’ (Braun and Clarke, 2018: 109). This analogy relates to various decisions made during the analysis process. These will be detailed in the presentation of each phase.

Six distinct phases were employed during this process. These are ‘familiarising yourself with the data, generating initial codes, searching for themes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the report’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87). I began by familiarising myself with the data. I chose to transcribe the interviews myself. I found that transcribing from a video recording, as opposed to an audio recording, was more efficient. Using a video recording meant that I was not only hearing the interviews that I was transcribing, but I was also seeing the interviews and reliving them. As I transcribed, read and re-read the data, I not only noted down important thoughts, but I was also applying a level of interpretation. Ravitch and Riggan (2017) explain that data transcription is a ‘subjective and engaged (process) that holds within it layers of interpretations and that generates meaning based on these interpretations’ (p. 142; word in brackets added). Ethics also played a significant role in this process of subjective interpretation. Ethics guided my desire in remaining true to the participants (Gilligan, 1982, 2014) by being accurate and by retaining the essence of their stories. Another desired effect of transcribing the interview data myself was that it made me more familiar with the
transcripts. During the latter phases of analysing the data, I knew large portions of
the transcripts by heart. This meant that I was thinking and working ahead of the
playback recordings, increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the overall
process.

In addition to transcribing the data, a further layer of the familiarising phase involved
my creating a detailed narrative piece, or vignette, for each participant. The process
of collating the data for each piece proved to be instrumental not only in supporting
my familiarisation with the data set but also in bringing to the fore the individual
participants’ stories. Through this mode of engagement with the data set, I was able
to perceive more readily the issues discussed through each participant’s perspective.
Furthermore, by immersing myself in the individual stories, I was able to begin
identifying connections between each story which proved to be useful during the next
stages of the thematic analysis.

The second phase focused on coding the data. I aimed for a detailed analysis of the
data as it related to the research rationale, questions and conceptual framework.
This decision was theory driven. This was not a theory generating, grounded theory,
approach. I was using the ‘data analysis as a means of answering my research
questions’ (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016: 72). To begin this phase, the auto-coding
themes feature in NVivo was used to generate early themes based on the frequency
and the intensity of words and phrases. The three most popular words and phrases
were school, financial resource and headteachers. Each auto-coded early theme
also had subthemes. For example, financial resources also included terms such as
decent salary. The auto-coding feature proved to be a good starting point in the
identification of early themes. However, the results had to be filtered since this process coded all aspects of the interview data, including words spoken by the interviewer.

Phase 3 involved generating themes. I used my research questions and rationale as starting points to create more complex themes onto which I mapped all related codes. Following the suggestion of Merriam and Tisdell (2016), these themes or categories were developed to be responsive to the purpose of the research, exhaustive, sensitizing and conceptually congruent. In NVivo, this phase was carried out by working through each interview transcript and description of photographs and artefacts. Sentences and phrases were coded into themes (nodes). Some of the themes were identified during the transcription process, as mentioned earlier. Others were added during the coding process. The participants’ vignettes were also coded. The results supported the themes that were emerging from elsewhere. Some early themes from the first round of interviews included:

- Motherhood aspirations when young
- Financial impact of motherhood choices
- Experiences of working mothers
- Experiences of school leadership.

Later, subthemes were added. For example, under the broad theme (parent node) of experiences of school leadership, subthemes (children nodes) including experiences of motherhood and school leadership when young and gendered leadership were later added (see Appendices 5, 6 and 7 for examples of early codes, emerging themes and subthemes).
During phases 4 and 5, I focused on refining the themes. In phase 4, I revisited earlier phases of the analysis process to make sure that all the data included in a specific category were appropriate for that category. The order of the themes was rearranged. Some related themes were clustered together to form more coherent groups. This rearranging process was carried out seamlessly in NVivo by clicking and dragging nodes into desired positions. The act of revisiting and reviewing points to the recursive nature of the process. Far from being linear, it involves refining by moving ‘back and forth as needed, throughout the phases’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 86). Phase 5 focused on defining and naming the themes. The details of each theme are finalised, with clear definitions and names. And ongoing analysis is carried out to check and refine how each theme fits into the overall analysis story.

Phase 6 was focused on writing up or ‘producing the document’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006: 87), interpreting the data and reporting the findings. When presenting the data to ensure impact, direct quotations from the participants were used (Floyd, 2012). Braun and Clarke describe the writing up phase as ‘weaving together the analytic narrative and (vivid) data extracts to tell the reader a coherent and persuasive story about the data, and contextualising it in relation to existing literature’ (Braun and Clarke, 2013: 125). No matter how powerful, data on their own are not enough and so must be grounded in literature and context. Therefore, the interpretation of the stories, by establishing links to content, previous studies and conceptual perspectives, was a crucial part of the analysis and writing up process.
5.2.2 Identifying the main themes

This section explains how I generated the three main themes that were applied to structure the analysis of the research data. The coding phases of the analysis produced subthemes associated with motherhood and progression to secondary school headship. These subthemes included: perceptions of work-life balance, time management, school culture and school structure, experiences of working mothers, how women experience pregnancy and maternity leave, making the best use of maternity leave to progress career, discrimination during the interview process, and feeling judged/guilty about career/personal decisions. The subthemes were further grouped to form three main themes: Gendered leadership, Time and career progression, and Wellbeing and mental health issues. For example, the subthemes Discrimination during the interview process and School culture and school structure became a part of the main theme of Gendered leadership, and the subthemes of How women experience pregnancy and maternity leave and Feeling judged/guilty about career/personal decisions became a part of the main theme of Wellbeing and mental health issues (this is summarised in Table 2 below).
Table 2: Early themes, subthemes and main themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Early themes - parent nodes</th>
<th>Subthemes - child nodes</th>
<th>Main themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to financial resources (26)</td>
<td>- Finances, maternity and childcare (23)</td>
<td>Gendered leadership</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Financial impact on mothers’ life chances (12)</td>
<td>- Career aspirations (37)</td>
<td>- Finances, maternity and childcare (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefacts (21)</td>
<td>- Career progression (48)</td>
<td>- Career progression (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building rapport (21)</td>
<td>- Career progression, pregnancy and maternity leave (22)</td>
<td>- Factors hindering career progression (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career and leadership aspirations inc when young (13)</td>
<td>- Factors hindering career progression (12)</td>
<td>- Queen Bees vs supportive women leaders (13)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Queen Bees vs supportive women leaders (13)</td>
<td>- Getting a hard time from other women leaders (14)</td>
<td>- Experiences of discrimination during the interview process (3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Getting a hard time from other women leaders (14)</td>
<td>- Experiences of motherhood and school leadership when young (12)</td>
<td>- Experiences of motherhood and school leadership when young (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally tricky situations – miscarriages, IVF, divorce, experiences of others (27)</td>
<td>- Career aspirations (37)</td>
<td>- Gendered leadership (41)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of discrimination during the interview process (3)</td>
<td>- Career progression (48)</td>
<td>- Strong independent women (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of school leadership (54)</td>
<td>- Career progression, pregnancy and maternity leave (22)</td>
<td>- Influences of parents on life chances (33)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Factors hindering career progression (12)</td>
<td>- Queen Bees vs supportive women leaders (13)</td>
<td>- Influences of teachers and other role models (19)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Getting a hard time from other women leaders (14)</td>
<td>- Getting a hard time from other women leaders (14)</td>
<td>- Not wanting to appear weak while pregnant (11)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of working mothers (49)</td>
<td>- Experiences of motherhood and school leadership when young (12)</td>
<td>- How participants experienced maternity leave (21)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Gendered leadership (41)</td>
<td>- Gendered leadership (41)</td>
<td>- KIT days (26)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Strong independent women (15)</td>
<td>- KIT days (26)</td>
<td>- Initiatives put in place to support teachers who are mothers (57)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Influences of parents on life chances (33)</td>
<td>- Initiatives put in place to support teachers who are mothers (57)</td>
<td>- Motherhood experiences (32)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Influences of teachers and other role models (19)</td>
<td>- Feeling guilty because of having children (14)</td>
<td>- Perception of being limited as a female (15)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave (3)</td>
<td>- Feeling judged for going back to work too early or not early enough (11)</td>
<td>- Wanting to make a difference (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Not wanting to appear weak while pregnant (11)</td>
<td>- How participants experienced maternity leave (21)</td>
<td>- Childcare arrangement and support network (38)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- How participants experienced maternity leave (21)</td>
<td>- KIT days (26)</td>
<td>- Time management (35)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- KIT days (26)</td>
<td>- Initiatives put in place to support teachers who are mothers (57)</td>
<td>- School structure and school culture of staff pregnancy and maternity leave (46)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- Initiatives put in place to support teachers who are mothers (57)</td>
<td>- Making the best use of maternity leave to progress career (21)</td>
<td>- Returning to work after maternity leave (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early themes - parent nodes</td>
<td>Subthemes - child nodes</td>
<td>Main themes</td>
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<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable quotes (15)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Time and career progression</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood aspiration when young (9)</td>
<td>- Motherhood experiences (32)</td>
<td>- Finances, maternity and childcare (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perception of being limited as a female (15)</td>
<td></td>
<td>- Career aspirations (37)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of work life balance (51)</td>
<td>- Childcare arrangement and support network (38)</td>
<td>- Career progression (48)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- Time management (35)</td>
<td>- Career progression, pregnancy and maternity leave (22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School structure and school culture (80)</td>
<td>- School structure and school culture of staff pregnancy and</td>
<td>- Factors hindering career progression (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>maternity leave (46)</td>
<td>- Making the best use of maternity leave to progress career (21)</td>
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<td></td>
<td>- Returning to work after maternity leave (12)</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to make a difference (12)</td>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Wellbeing and mental health issues</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Finances, maternity and childcare (23)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Financial impact on mothers’ life chances (12)</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>- Factors hindering career progression (12)</td>
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<td>- Queen Bees vs supportive women leaders (13)</td>
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<td>- Getting a hard time from other women leaders (14)</td>
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<td>- Experiences of discrimination during the interview process (3)</td>
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<td>- Emotionally tricky situations – miscarriages, IVF, divorce, experiences of others (27)</td>
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<td>- Feeling guilty because of having children (14)</td>
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<td>- Feeling judged for going back to work too early or not early enough (11)</td>
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<td>- Not wanting to appear weak while pregnant (11)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- How participants experienced maternity leave (21)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Memorable quotes (15)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Wanting to make a difference (12)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>- Returning to work after maternity leave (12)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
By examining the subthemes that make up the main theme of *Gendered leadership*, it was observed that gendered leadership, in this context, refers to more than the styles and perspectives demonstrated by the headteachers and line managers of the participants. The understanding of this theme extends to include how the participants experienced and perceived their relationships with their headteachers and line managers. These interactions and experiences may not be gender specific, for example, some female headteachers and line managers may behave in ways that may be understood as counter to societal gender role expectations. Therefore, the overall style of leadership experienced by the participants could be described as relational. Some headteachers and line managers tailored their interactions with the participants based on a positive awareness of the intersectionality factors at play in the lives of the participants.

Table 2 shows how the main themes emerged from the thematic analysis. It shows the early themes (parent nodes) and subthemes (child nodes) into which all the research data were organised during the initial stages of the thematic analysis. The numbers in brackets indicate the total amounts of individual references that were coded as evidence addressing the relevant theme or subtheme. For example, across the data set, there were 51 general references to *Perception of work life balance*, however more specifically 38 references related to *Childcare arrangements and support network* and 35 were linked to *Time management*.

Furthermore, in the latter stages of the thematic analysis, it became clear that one subtheme could fit under more than one main theme. To illustrate, the subtheme *Experiences of discrimination during the interview process* fits under the main theme...
of Gendered leadership and under Wellbeing and mental health issues. This is because the data references for this subtheme relate experiences of participants being treated with bias at interviews because they are mothers, and how these experiences impacted on their mental health. Likewise, the subtheme Factors hindering career progression links to the main themes of Gendered leadership and Time and career progression because the data coded under this subtheme support the interpretation that in the experiences of the participants some factors that hindered their career progression arose because of their gender. These factors in turn exerted influence on how the participants managed their time and their career progression.

The third column in Table 2 shows the final classification of evidence supporting the three main themes as carried out during phases 4 and 5 of the thematic analysis. Each main theme is populated with all the references from the data set that is associated with that particular main theme. Organising the findings in this way proved to be practical in locating appropriate references for the presentation of findings and discussion sections of this thesis.

5.3 Conceptual framework and analytical implications

This section outlines how structuration theory and intersectionality contributed to the analysis and discussion of the research findings.


5.3.1 Structuration theory: analytical implications

Elements of structuration theory were used to theorise the research findings linked to the impact of the participants' school culture and structure on their career progression. This analysis was framed around the interconnectivity of structure and agency. The participants’ exercise of agency as they interact with their school culture and structure was theorised using structuration theory’s concept of the duality of structure (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005, 2014). The work of Smith (2011, 2015), Woodhouse and Peddler (2017), McKillop and Moorosi (2017) and Guihen (2018) was also used to analyse the role of agency in the career progression of school leaders who are mothers (see Section 7.3.2), and how this agency was supported or in tension with structural norms.

Furthermore, the notion of duality of structure strengthened aspects of the analysis relating to the connections between the apparent dualisms as presented in the intersectionality factors. This analysis provided an explanation as to why seemingly opposite aspects of the participants' experiences complement each other forming a subtle but crucial relationship that shaped the participants' experiences. For example, although the public and private spheres of the participants' lives may appear as a dualism, when examined under the duality of structure lens, an understanding of their interdependency was brought into focus (see Sections 7.2.2 and 7.5).
5.3.2 Intersectionality: analytical implications

There is a well-established tradition of intersectionality as an analytic tool. In 1991, Crenshaw used three facets, structural, political and representational, to frame her arguments and provide a description of how intersectional analysis can be categorised (Crenshaw, 1991; Hill Collins, 2015). Other theorists, such as McCall (2005) and Choo and Feree (2010) built on Crenshaw’s work by developing analytic categories for different types of intersectional research. McCall’s three categories (or complexities), anticatergorical, intracategorical and intercategorical, aim to provide an intersectional description of social life across the spectrum from its simple individual components to its more complex categories (McCall, 2005). Similarly, Choo and Feree’s three types of intersectional research, group-centred, process-centred and system-centred, seek to explore the historical and structural interconnections and power-relations at play in relationships and structures (Choo and Ferree, 2010).

The intersectional analysis of the current research drew on various aspects of these frameworks outlined above to examine the complexity of the participants’ interactions with the enduring structures of inequalities in their social lives that influence their decision-making process around motherhood and career progression. For example, aspects of the analysis of the intersection between parenthood and gender took a structural approach (Crenshaw, 1991) in its focus on how societal structures create expectations around what it means to be a woman and a mother and how these expectations influence the lives of school-leader mothers. Further literature on the work-life balance of mothers, and teachers in particular, that was used to frame this aspect of the discussion included Hochschild (1997), Doherty (2004), Loder (2005),
Hodges and Budig (2010), Chhatwal (2015), and Whelan (2019). In contrast, some areas of the discussion on parenthood and emotional and social support focused on the simple individual components of social life (McCall, 2005). This included a consideration of how the participants’ career decision-making processes were shaped by their reflection on how readily they could access emotional and practical support and on the experiences of their mothers and grandmothers. These aspects of the discussion were further supplemented by arguments on emotional and practical support and teacher wellbeing proposed by writers such as Claridge (2004), Ryan et al (2008), TUC (2016), Worth and Van den Brande (2019) and Bryce (2020). The application of intersectionality to the findings is presented in Section 7.4 and includes Figure 4, which provides a visual representation of the compounding of inequalities at various points of intersection.

5.4 Ethical considerations

5.4.1 Introduction

Ethics is a common thread that ran through the entire research and tied it together. It was present in my thinking from the moment the rationale for the research was established, through to the research design, the gathering and analysing of data, and the presentation of the research. Burgess, Sieminski and Arthur, (2006) described ethics as comprising of the 3 Rs: reflexivity, relationships and rationale. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) proposed the concept of wakefulness since ethical matters will shift and change as the study progresses. Goodson and Sikes (2001) also used the ideas of reflexivity and reflectivity to explain the role of ethics in life history research.
Other writers have designed ethical grids and frameworks to help researchers engage with ethical considerations at all stages of their research (Stutchbury and Fox, 2009). Regardless of the approach, ethics should not be an add-on feature but should permeate every aspect of the research process, from start to finish.

The formal ethical considerations for my research involved consulting and familiarising myself with the ethical and legal guidelines set out in British Educational Research Association (BERA) and the British Psychological Society (BPS) particularly the section on Code of Human Research Ethics. A checklist questionnaire was next completed and submitted to The Open University’s Data Protection Office to confirm that the ethical decisions that were planned met the standards required for human research. In addition, a formal application was made to The Open University’s Human Resources Ethic Committee and approved (see Appendix 1). This was a rigorous process which involved identifying and justifying all the ethical issues that were likely to be encountered throughout the research.

The securing of formal consent from all seven participants was also an integral part of the ethical considerations. This involved emailing a consent form and a leaflet that provided additional information on the researcher, the purpose of research, the role of the participants in the study and how the data would be collected and used. Each participant was required to sign and return the consent form prior to the start of the interview process (see Appendices 2 and 3 for the Information leaflet and the Consent Form).
5.4.2 Ethics of care

In her book ‘In a Different Voice’, Gilligan (1982) proposes a radical new way of conceiving morality. She challenges the male dominated moral codes and expectations of the day, which were centred on an ethic of justice as the norm, by putting forward a *different voice* in the debate. This voice was fuelled by a feminist approach. It spoke of a morality of care and ties moral development to relationships and responsibilities. This was a radical concept at the time and marked the beginning of a change in the understanding of who we are fundamentally. Caring and empathy, which were previously perceived as *problems* in women’s development, were now starting to be recognised as human *strengths* (Wasson, 1998; Gilligan, 2014).

‘The ethics of care guides us in acting carefully in the human world’ (Gilligan, 2014: 103). This is particularly true when carrying out research with people. The BERA Guidelines (2018) under the heading ‘Responsibilities to participants’ explain that:

Educational researchers should operate within an ethic of respect for any persons – including themselves – involved in or touched by the research they are undertaking. Individuals should be treated fairly, sensitively, and with dignity and freedom from prejudice
(p. 6).

Caring for the wellbeing of the participants means putting morality ahead of codes whereby the spirit of the law preceded the letter of the law (Shaw, 2008). Elsewhere, this approach is termed ‘virtue ethics’ and is understood as ‘good acts flow from good people’ (Israel, 2015: 8).
Guided by Gilligan’s ethics of care, an emphasis on relationships and responsibilities permeates this research. The rationale behind the research, its design and methodology and how the data are analysed and written up were all guided by care and consideration for the participants. Decision-making was always preceded by the question, ‘How would I like to be treated in this situation?’ As discussed in Section 1.2, being a school-leader mother, I identify with the participants’ circumstances. This positionality equipped me with the advantage of being able to anticipate and prepare for challenging situations. The specific methodological decisions in line with the ethics of care were discussed in Sections 4.5 and 4.6.

The ethics of care also permeated the data analysis decisions of this research. For example, it informed the decision-making process around what data to include or exclude. During the interviews, sensitive and confidential matters were discussed. On a couple of occasions, such discussions had the potential to produce rich, deep data. However, by including some aspects of this data the identity of the participants and their schools could be compromised. In this case, an ethic of care philosophy dictated that these aspects of the data were not included.

5.4.3 Ethics and the life history approach

There are many ethical issues associated with life history research. Firstly, the nature of life history research is such that it engages with personal and emotional aspects of the participants’ lives. Preparing for and engaging in the interview process could possibly be distressing to participants (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). It is therefore the role of the interviewer to protect and respect the participants (Israel, 2015). How deep should the interviewer probe? If something traumatic is uncovered,
should the interviewer get professional help for the participant? As this relates to the current research, these issues were addressed prior to the interviews by suggesting to each participant to arrange to have someone to speak with if the interviews unearth emotionally unsettling feelings (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Although some interviews did include discussions of emotionally challenging topics, such as divorce and separation, IVF treatment and the death of loved ones, no interview got to the point where it had to be stopped or the interviewer had to change tack in light of a participant becoming distressed. However, being aware of the impact of life history process on participants and putting measures in place to address these issues are in line with the principles of the ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982, 2014) and virtue ethics (Israel, 2015).

Secondly, ethics involves being aware of the relationship between the researcher and the participants and how this will impact on the quality of the data collected. This includes building a rapport with each participant so that during the interviews, questions can be adjusted in response to unspoken cues such as body language and other non-verbal expressions, which was employed in these interviews particularly when framing spontaneous and follow-up questions. This relationship is rooted in trust so that the participants feel able to open up to the researcher and share their life story (Shaw, 2008) as discussed in Sections 4.5 and 4.6.

Furthermore, it is vital that the researcher is aware of the effects of any power relations that may be at work and introduce strategies to minimise their impact on the quality of the data generated (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 108). This had particular relevance in my research. To minimise this impact, I included as a criterion for
participant selection that the participants should not be known by me either socially or professionally. Additionally, in early emails and during the interviews, I shared information about myself to establish commonality with the participants. Knowing that I am a teacher and a mother, as they are, and that I also worked as a middle leader with headship aspirations potentially reduced the imbalance of power.

Thirdly, as in the case of my research, there is a feminist ethical commitment to tell the stories of women (Israel, 2015). This commitment drew together some key facets of my research: the feminist theoretical concept of intersectionality which shines light on the points of intersection of key sites of social inequalities and emphasises the escalation of their effect at these points of intersection, the ethics of care and virtue ethics as discussed above and the nature of the methodology of life history work. Life history research can be ‘emancipatory and empowering. It has the potential to enable ordinary individuals to tell their story, to give their version, to name their silent lives’ (Goodson and Sikes, 2001: 99). While the remit of this research does not extend to social or political activism, it does encompass the desire to share the stories of mothers who are aspiring towards secondary school headship: to give them a voice.

Finally, ethics should also include what happens after the research. How will the data be presented and disseminated? How will the identities of my participants and that of their schools be protected? This may mean omitting good data or not being able to use direct quotations and changing all the names used in the research to ensure the anonymity of the participants. The idea of reciprocity may be useful when engaging with these dilemmas (Goodson and Sikes, 2001). The question is: ‘How can we give
back to them the knowledge they gave us?’ (Shaw, 2008, p. 408). One way that I addressed this concern was by being true to their stories in the way that I presented these stories. Another way was by ensuring joint ownership of data throughout the process (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Out of respect for the participants’ shared time and stories, active communication with the participants was fostered during the final stages of this research, ensuring that they were kept informed about the findings of the research. At the end of the research, a summary of the findings was also discussed with each participant.

In summarising this section, consideration for the wellbeing of the participants is the essence of the ethics of care. Building strong relationships, and by so doing, ensuring that the participants remain a part of the decision-making process throughout the research, resulted in rich, deep data and contented participants. Macfarlane (2010) sums up ethical considerations in this way, ‘Ethics is a bit like jazz, in that it is about more than simply following the notes on the page. It demands improvisation and an ability to be an interpreter of moods and situations’ (p. 8). Ethical issues must always be considered in context, as they will shift and change as the research progresses and are unique to each research study.

5.5 Chapter conclusion

The chapter began with a description of the step-by-step process that was carried out with a thematic analysis on the research data. The NVivo software was used to support the phases of thematic analysis and to categorise and store the data. Having
transcribed the interviews myself, I became familiar with the data which contributed to the speed and accuracy of the data analysis process.

This chapter also discussed the application of structuration theory and intersectionality to the analysis process of this research. Through the concepts of structure and agency and duality of structure, structuration theory was used to analyse what happens when the participants interact with their environments and how these interactions enhance or hinder their career progression. Intersectionality was used to investigate the compounding of inequalities at the points of intersection between gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support. Taken as a whole, the aim of the analysis was to provide new understandings of the lived experiences of school-leader mothers.

The chapter concluded with a presentation of the ethical considerations that were engaged in across the duration of this study, including their influence on the research design and methods. In so doing, an ethic of care was integral from the seeking of formal approval from the university to the decision to use Skype interviews.
Chapter 6 Perceptions of School Leadership, Career Progression and Motherhood

6.1 Introduction

In this chapter the findings of the research are presented in two sections: a consideration of the participants’ perceptions of motherhood, school leadership and career progression, and an analysis of the factors associated with aspiration to secondary school headship.

The chapter begins with an overview of the demographic background of the participants as an introduction to each participant prior to the presentation of their vignettes in Section 6.2.2. The vignettes paint a picture of each participant showing how their lived experiences shape their perceptions of motherhood, career progression and school leadership. The aim is to focus on the unique experiences shared and thereby capture the essence of each participant’s story. These short narratives further act as a medium that amplifies the interconnections of the three main themes that were identified by the thematic analysis process as they present in the lived experiences of the participants. These themes are Gendered leadership, Time and career progression, and Wellbeing and mental health issues (see Section 5.2 for details on how the three themes are defined and were generated).

Taken as a whole, all seven vignettes offer an understanding of the motherhood and career progression experiences of the participants as they aspire towards headship.

The chapter continues by exploring the findings linked to each of the three main themes individually. While the previous section of this chapter focusses on the
participants’ perspectives, this latter section continues to address the research questions by exploring the data from each theme in a comprehensive way.

6.2 Perceptions of motherhood, school leadership and career progression: the participants’ stories

6.2.1 Demographics of the participants

This section presents the demographic data for each participant to provide the background information required to construct a social profile for each participant and begins exploring their lived experiences. A consideration of the demographic data in this section and the vignettes in Section 6.2.2 results in the creation of a life history profile of each participant. Presenting the data in this way breathes life into each participant’s narrative. This is appropriate since learning more about the participants as individuals will enhance the discussions linked to their motherhood and career progressions experiences, which are to follow in Section 6.3 and Chapter 7.
Table 3: Participants' demographic profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Age Range</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Social Class as a Child**</th>
<th>Marital Status</th>
<th>No. of Children</th>
<th>Current Position in School</th>
<th>Working Arrangements</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Verity</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White English</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant headteacher</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Natalie</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White English</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant principal</td>
<td>Full-time (flexible working arrangements on initial return from maternity leave)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White English</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Divorced (in a relationship)</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assistant headteacher</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White English</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Married (2\textsuperscript{nd} marriage)</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>Literacy coordinator</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ella</td>
<td>35-40</td>
<td>White Welsh</td>
<td>Middle class</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Head of department</td>
<td>Full-time (recently return to full-time work)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Francesca</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>White English</td>
<td>Upper middle class</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>Assistant headteacher</td>
<td>Full-time</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chloe</td>
<td>30-35</td>
<td>Black English</td>
<td>Working class</td>
<td>Married</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>Assistant headteacher</td>
<td>Full-time (part-time on return from maternity leave)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Participants names have been changed to ensure anonymity

**These social class categories were self-defined by the participants
The information presented in Table 3 reflected the demographic profiles of the participants at the time of the final interview, during the spring of 2019. At that time, all seven participants were between the ages of 30 to 40 years. Six lived in England and one in Wales. Chloe was the only Black participant. The other six were white. All seven teachers identified as heterosexuals with six married and the seventh in a stable relationship. Most participants had one or two children. Maria was the anomaly in this case as she had four children. The self-identified social classes of the participants while growing up were varied, with four from working class backgrounds, two from middle class backgrounds and one was upper middle class. Some participants experienced changes in their circumstances across the 1-year period during which the interviews were conducted. For example, at different points during this time, Francesca, Natalie and Chloe were on maternity leave. Sharon and her partner were trying for a baby. Verity and Maria were actively applying for promotions. By the time of the third interview, all seven participants were working full-time. However, Ella had only recently upgraded from part-time work, Natalie intended to work flexibly on her initial return from maternity leave and Chloe had successfully negotiated part-time work for her return from maternity leave.

Although the demographic data revealed some similarities between the participants, for example, all are heterosexual, most are white and most lived in England, it also demonstrated diversity in their historic social backgrounds, the number of children and their positions of responsibility.
6.2.2 Vignettes of participants

In keeping with the life history approach, this section presents a narrative of each participant’s story. The aim of these vignettes is to provide a window into the lives of the participants, their experiences of motherhood and career progression. By so doing, the vignettes present findings that address the MRQ: What are the motherhood and career progression experiences of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship in England and Wales?

In addition, as explained in Sections 4.6.2 and 4.6.3, all seven participants were asked to prepare a timeline for use during the interviews. Examples of participants’ timelines are presented in Appendix 9. Information from the participants’ timelines also contributed to the vignettes as presented below.

The inclusion of narratives as part of the presentation of research findings is a well-established approach. Highlighting its significance, Sims (2003) proposes that ‘storytelling and experience are not separable. Experience is only made available, through memory, when it is turned into a story’ (p. 1197). In her research, Sims (2003) uses the vignettes of four middle managers to provide a unique perspective on how they experience the ‘loneliness, precariousness and vulnerability that characterise middle management’ (p. 1195). Likewise, Moorosi’s (2020) study on the construction of leadership identities of African women school leaders presents narratives of the stories of the three key participants. I agree with Moorosi’s (2020) proposition that this approach is effective in making ‘sense of the holistic influence on the leader identity development of each participant’ and that ‘methodologies that are underpinned by stories make a nuanced analysis more accessible’ (Moorosi, 2020,
This understanding contributed to my decision to use narratives to share the experiences of my participants.

Other examples of the use of narratives in research with resonance to my study include Prins (2006) in her study of identity formation, Killingsworth et al., (2010) to explore the gender dynamics of an educational leadership preparation programme and Christensen and Jensen (2012) on the methodological implications of combining intersectionality and life-story narratives. These and other examples demonstrate the impactfulness of sharing the participants' perspectives through their stories.

**Verity**\(^ {11} \): *The world is your oyster!*

Verity grew up on the outskirts of a city in the Midlands, the only child of a working-class family. Although her parents do not have degrees themselves, from early on, they instilled in her the value of higher education and lifelong learning. After completing a first degree in English, Verity was keen to make a difference and soon took up training as a teacher, being partly attracted by the government’s incentives that were then in place, for example, the golden hello\(^ {12} \) and the cancelation of student loans.

Verity’s mother gave up work when she was born. Verity comments that she felt her mother wanted to continue working. She loved her job as a secretary at Rolls Royce. But that was not the norm back then for mothers to continue working. She explains

\(^ {11} \) The names of all the participants and their contributors have been changed to ensure anonymity.

\(^ {12} \) The golden hello was a cash incentive of £5000 that was instituted, by the Tony Blair government, in September 2000 and was used to encourage more students to enter the teaching profession in languages ([http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/398688.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/education/398688.stm)). This initiative was discontinued in September 2011.
that mothers were almost pressured to stay at home. If they did not, they were made to feel as though they were letting their children down. Verity feels that if her father was earning enough to afford the additional costs such as childcare, then probably her mother could have continued working. However, when Verity was in secondary school, her mother went back to work, this time for the Ministry of Defence.

Verity repeatedly speaks about the influence of her mother on shaping her life choices. She fondly recalls being subjected to her mother’s ‘diatribe of Marxist lectures’ infused with the feminist mantra of the 80s, ‘Get a job. Get a career. Earn some money. Be independent.’ Through what Verity describes as ‘academic snobbery’, her mother instilled in her the importance of education, career and lifelong learning. Growing up, Verity felt as though she could achieve anything. She felt empowered by her mother’s words, ‘The world is your oyster!’

Since Verity does not remember many female leaders as role models in school, having her parents, especially her mother, as the base of her support network was crucial.

I think my perception of leadership was you are the scary guy who has to tell people off. And you are distant, and you are apart, and you are alone. And somehow you have got some miraculous characteristic that has made you what that is. You are kinna special and apart from the rest of us

(Verity, Interview 1).

Contrary to this, she recalls her history teacher, Miss Moore, who was also head of the sixth form, as having a profound impact on her early perception of women leaders in education.
Influenced by her upbringing, Verity ensured that she had a fully established career and was financially secure before contemplating having children. When she had her first child, Verity had already completed a Master’s degree and was head of department at her school. Her husband was a stockbroker and so they could ‘throw money at’ having a family and continuing to progress in their careers. This ‘throwing money at the problem’ took the form of a full-time nanny. Verity described this choice as having someone she could rely on ‘because I cannot do my job, pick them (her 2 children) up from nursery, take them to nursery and do it. And I am not prepared to.’

Unfortunately, as the economic recession took root, Verity’s husband lost his job in the city. He decided to take a career break and become a stay-at-home dad. Verity jokes, ‘And again, my support is, why I can do this job in the way that I can, is my husband is the stay-at-home mum. So, he is the feminist in this relationship.’

*Photograph 1: Day out with the children (Verity, AHT, Mother of 2)*
Looking back at the experience of her first pregnancy, Verity reminisces on how supportive her former school was in providing her with a replacement for the last two months leading up to her maternity leave. As head of department, Verity's workload was reduced to leadership and administrative responsibilities only. She had no teaching timetable. She comments that she naively thought that was the norm in all schools. However, she is keen to mention the supportive ethos that her current headteacher promotes in school. For example, he allows staff to go to their children's Sports Day and Nativity Play. Verity is appreciative of this type of support. Referring to Photograph 1, she stresses the importance of spending time with her children.

Verity became pregnant with her second child while in her current role as assistant headteacher. Being a member of SLT, she stresses that while pregnant she felt reluctant to ask for support even though she was physically struggling. She believed she had to set an example for the other staff. She relates, 'I was still on a full duty and teaching timetable. Nothing at all was taken away… it was really tough and tiring. But you don't feel you can ask for things to be taken away because you are not ill.' To complicate matters, two other teachers were also pregnant at the same time. One was also an assistant headteacher, who was pregnant with twins but continued with her duties until her maternity leave. Verity confesses that she kept telling herself, 'If she manages to keep going, so should you. So, just suck it up and keep going. This woman hasn't (asked for help) and she is pregnant with twins!'

Although Verity admits to 'switching off' during maternity leave, she explains that she planned her pregnancies around her career progression and is 'rootless and efficiently organised with the time while at work.' She says, ‘In order to make my life
work, it has to be like a military operation… I probably planned it to an inch of its life.’

She defends her choices by explaining that she believes pregnancy and maternity leave does retard women’s career progression. In her experience, her headteacher is her age. Like her, he has two young children. In addition, he has been teaching for the same number of years. However, being a male, he was able to progress quicker since he was not hampered by time lose due to pregnancy and maternity leave. She also speaks about ‘delaying tactics’, meaning while she is keen to be appointed as a deputy headteacher, she will wait for the right job. She further clarifies, ‘What I am looking for has to fit my family life. I am not looking to travel one hour to get to school.’

Verity is devoted to promoting career progression for other women. She developed and now leads a Women in Leadership group at her school. The aim of this working group is to provide a safe place for female teachers, including those who are mothers, to discuss their concerns about motherhood and career progression and to be strengthened by the experiences of others. In addition to working with teachers who are mothers, Verity explains that one of her foci for the school year (2018-2019) is to train the members of her school’s SLT on how to support teachers during pregnancy and maternity leave. This includes from being positive during the initial conversation where the teacher discloses that she is pregnant to ensuring a smooth transition when returning to work from maternity leave.

Even though Verity is instrumental in bolstering the career of the women in her school, she admits that there are no structured initiatives in place to support her career progression. However, she reads widely and is keen to use research findings
to inform her work. Through reflection, she has identified areas in her practice that need improvement if she is to secure a deputy headteacher post. She hopes to address these areas by shadowing deputy headteachers whose roles involve oversight of these areas. I am pleased to report that since the interviews, Verity interviewed successfully and has accepted the role of deputy headteacher in her current school and took up this post in September 2020.

**Natalie – A supportive and nurturing culture enables career progression**

Natalie is an assistant principal working in a large comprehensive school in East England. She lives in a small village with her husband and two-year-old daughter and at the time of the first interview, they were expecting their second child. Looking back at when she was growing up, Natalie describes her family as being ‘slightly odd’ as both her parents worked and shared the household and childcare responsibilities. Her mother worked part time when Natalie was young. However, later she returned to full time teaching and progressed to becoming an assistant headteacher. Being slightly older, her father who was a deputy headteacher retired when she was in secondary school and became the main caregiver. She relates that although the women in her family always worked, in her friends’ families, it was the fathers who went out to work while the mothers stayed at home and maybe had a ‘little time job that fitted around school hours’. She recalls that some of her friends’ mothers ‘possibly could be very well educated but you never knew because they would be working in Tesco.’ In contrast, because her father had a well-paid job, her
mother was able to spend time with her as a child and at the same time continue developing her career.

Natalie comments on the benefits of growing up in a supportive and nurturing culture. She never felt restricted because she was a girl. There was no glass ceiling. She relates a conversation with her father when she revealed that she wanted to be a doctor. Her father said, ‘You don’t like blood. Don’t be ridiculous.’ She emphasises that his objection was not based on gender. It was not, ‘You are a woman so you can’t do this!’ Her teachers were also extremely encouraging. Regarding Mr Thomas, the headteacher of her secondary school, Natalie says, ‘Yes, he was a man, not a woman. But he was incredibly supportive of me. And would always say I could do whatever I wanted... he was always there.’

Today, while Natalie admits that she finds it challenging balancing her home responsibilities and her role in school, she credits her success to the continuous encouragement received from her parents and her husband. For example, her parents live nearly and continue to extend support in practical ways such as emergency childcare arrangements. She also recalls being hesitant about applying for her current post of assistant principal because it was advertised as full time, but her husband reassured her by saying, ‘Well, give it a go. Speak to the head. See if you can have it four days.’ She admits that without his encouragement she would not have had the confidence to have that conversation with the headteacher resulting in her being offered the job for four days per week.
Natalie speaks of the supportive ethos that her headteacher promotes in school and how this impact on her pregnancy, maternity leave and career progression experiences. When a job was advertised across the academy trust for a network lead post, being pregnant, Natalie was uncertain whether she should apply. She describes the reaction of her headteacher:

And then (HT’s name) spoke to me and said, 'Are you going for that job?' And she knew I was pregnant. She was like, 'Don't you dare that being pregnant stop you. If we need to make adjustments, we will make adjustment.' But she was very much in the option that's what stops women. That is how women end up with that big pay gap. That is how women don't get anywhere

(Natalie, Interview 2).

The other staff also mirror the supportive nature of her headteacher. As a senior leader at school, Natalie is required to do duty three times each day. But as her pregnancy advanced, she began struggling physically. However, the other members of SLT reassured her that she no longer needed to do duty. She reflects, 'No one is going to see any weakness in you if you are not stood outside the playground for the whole of the lunch time when you are teaching all day as well.' In addition, an assistant principal and his wife were also expecting a baby at that same time. Reminiscing, Natalie says, 'He looked out for me quite a lot, which was nice.'

The caring culture of the school was also evident in her headteacher insisting on Natalie getting an occupational health referral early in her pregnancy. As her pregnancy entered the third trimester, Natalie became increasingly tired. Her feet and ankles were badly swollen resulting in her midwife recommending that she
should decrease her hours at work or go on maternity leave. Having an occupational health referral in place provided the paperwork needed to put together flexible work arrangements. From that point onwards, Natalie was allowed to work from home and only went into school to teach her year 11 students who were preparing for the GCSE examinations.

Natalie had contrasting experiences of maternity leave and return to work for each of her two pregnancies. For her first child, she did not engage with her then school during maternity leave. She felt frustrated. She needed another focus. She wanted to ‘keep her brain ticking over’, to take part in continuous professional development (CPD) but got no guidance from the school on what was available. Adding to this, no preparations were put in place for her return to work. On her first day back, she felt as though no one knew she would be back to work on that day. She remembers thinking to herself, ‘What is the point of this? I just left (baby) at nursery. You are wasting my time. Why am I bothering to be wasting my time here? What am I doing? What is the point?’ Following this experience, she became disenchanted with her work and began exploring other career options. In time though, she realised it was the school that was a bad fit, not the profession. ‘I started looking for jobs. I found a job that I like. And I landed on my feet!’

In contrast, during her second maternity leave, Natalie was engaged with the MTPT CPD project and was appointed as an area representative. During her maternity leave, she also converted a local telephone box into a community library. (Photograph of telephone box library shown in Photograph 2.) In addition to doing

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13 See Sections 2.4.3 and 4.5 for a discussion on the aims and activities of the MTPT CPD project.
supplementary work in school while on maternity leave, she also made use of all ten keeping in touch (KIT) days. Furthermore, she negotiated a staggered return from maternity leave. During the first term back, she worked flexibly gradually building up the number of hours in school leading to her returning full time in the second term.

Photograph 2: The community library, a maternity CPD project (Natalie, AHT, mother of 2)

Natalie’s positive maternity experiences at her current school have motivated her to seek out ways to support the staff in general, but especially mothers who are aspiring towards headship roles. She explains that one of her main tasks on returning to work was to update the school’s policy on maternity/paternity leave and to formalise information about what support is available to staff. She emphasises the necessity for these improvements because although her school is family-friendly, there were no formal policies addressing these areas. This vagueness meant that staff were often scared to ask for help. By bringing the policies up to date, Natalie aims to remove ambiguity and to create an information rich school culture in which
teachers felt looked after. She hopes this change will support not only teachers who are mothers but everyone, including ‘the teacher who needs to take her mum to a hospital appointment and the teacher who is having the vet out to look at her sick horse.’

Natalie regrets that it is still a ‘rarity’ to see school leaders who are mothers of young children, while it is almost expected that male school leaders are fathers. She relates an experience of a workmate visiting her while she was on maternity leave and saying “I couldn’t believe it when you take on the role. I couldn’t believe it! I thought you we mad! I didn’t see any way that you were going to make it work.” Having had these experiences, Natalie is committed to do all she can to ‘debunk the myth’ that mothers of young children cannot be school leaders. To make this point, she plans to present at an upcoming educational conference with her baby in a carrier. She is determined to send this clear message to all mothers who are aspiring to school leadership:

You can do both! Don’t stop being ambitious! Don’t stop doing things because you have got small children!

(Natalie, Interview 3)

Natalie remains convinced, from her personal experiences, that in a supportive and nurturing environment it is possible to be a school leader and a mother of young children.
Sharon: For the love of teaching

Growing up in a working-class community in the East Midlands, Sharon felt she was surrounded by strong women who did what they had to ‘to help put food on the table’. Her mother always worked, ‘Mum has done everything from a butcher to a bus driver to a prison officer.’ This was not unusual for Sharon. She was used to seeing women working outside the home. Many women in her community worked at a local clothing factory as seamstresses. Imitating this pattern of industriousness, before qualifying as a teacher, Sharon did multiple jobs including working in a pub in the evenings while at university, teaching adults life drawing and graphics at the local community centre and working part-time as a graphic designer for the local council. However, Sharon comments that although most of the women that she knew worked, ‘it wasn't something that they strived to have a career in. It was just to get money on the table.’ That said, her mother always promoted the value of a career and higher education not only for her children, but also for herself, and she went back to university when her children grew up and left home. Sharon fondly remembers her mother saying, ‘I am going back to get MY degree now!’

Having been ‘brought up on very little money’, Sharon was determined to make something of her life. She relates a conversation at her university admission interview when she was asked why she should be given the space. She replied, ‘Everyone else in my village work at this knickers factory down the road. And I don't want to be one of them. I want to drive pass them all in a red Ferrari!’ She showed the same attitude towards starting a family and was resolved to wait until she was on a ‘decent salary’.
I just felt that my children shouldn’t see me going without for them. Because I saw Mum and Dad going without buying new clothes, going without holidays, going without just all the time for us. And it made me sad, you know. I felt that was c**p (Sharon, Interview 1).

So, she ‘waited and waited’ until she became an advanced skills teacher (AST) and was earning ‘good money’, before having her son. At the time of the interview, he was ten years old.

*Photograph 3: Pages from Baby’s scrapbook (Sharon, AHT, mother of 1)*
Pregnancy was a special time for Sharon. She put her skills, as an art teacher, to work by compiling a journal/scrapbook detailing designs of Baby’s room, drawings, photographs and writings. (Pages from the scrapbook are shown above). Her workmates also shared her happiness and enthusiasm. Sharon recalls how her line manager reacted when she told her she was expecting a baby, ‘She was dead excited and stuff, clapping like a seal lion... She was not fazed by it.’

Sadly, this period of euphoria did not last. Shortly after having her son, her marriage, in her words, went ‘down the swanny’. She found herself starting a new job as an assistant headteacher, as a single mother with a young baby. Despite being very organised, it was an extremely stressful time. She felt as though she was doing ‘a half a** job of everything.’ This was amplified by the insensitivity of her headteacher, who Sharon describes as ‘bizarre and unapproachable for a female.’ On their return from school breaks, the headteacher would ask about their holidays and ‘brag about her cruise.’ Sharon recalls her reaction:

And I would think, ‘F*** off! I haven't had (a good holiday). I still have to get up even though the alarm clock isn't on. And I still have to get up 7 times in the night. And I am looking after a small person all day. I am knackered!... You cow! Really, you could have said anything else... that is the worst thing you could possibly say to me to motivate me to come back to work now... She was just cold. She was cold (Sharon, Interview 2).

Sharon’s frustrations were further compounded when the childcare arrangements with her in-laws began to breakdown. She recalls her son clinging to her and her having to ‘peel him off’ when she left him with them in the mornings. And how he
would be ‘literally at the door as soon as he saw my car coming in the drive.’ This uncomfortable situation was emotionally challenging for Sharon to cope with and had a knock-on effect on her work life. ‘That made going into work difficult… you go into work with a head full of cr** just having a row with your mother-in-law on the doorstep.’ In time, she was able to find alternate childcare arrangements.

In her current school, Sharon is proud of the balanced gender mix and working relationship of the SLT. She thinks of how far things have moved on from when she was in school as a student. She remembers that back then, although most of her teachers were females, the leadership roles were mostly occupied by males. This continued into her early career. As an NQT, she recalls, ‘quite a lot of female staff were either my age … and the older more senior staff were males. The heads of department were males.’ In the early days of her being an AST, Sharon also admits to feeling intimidated, ‘Cos you go into Art departments run by some bloke… and he would like this young chick coming in and telling me how to do my job. And it wasn't very easy.’

Today, Sharon speaks highly of the family-friendly culture that her present SLT promotes and models in school. Most members of SLT, in her current school, are parents. The headteacher has three young children and is mindful of the responsibilities of being a parent. He says at the end of SLT meetings, 'Ok it is half past 4. Go home and see your families.' The members of SLT will not hesitate to provide cover for staff if on short notice their children are unwell, or they have to sort out childcare issue, or other parent specific problems. Sharon’s school also provides a pickup and creche service for the children of SLT members on evenings when

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there are governors meetings and other lengthy administrative engagements. Sharon explains that although these initiatives are significant for teachers who are mothers, this is a small part of the overall ethos of the school in championing the wellbeing of all staff and students. For example, a wellbeing day is organised each term. In the previous term, on McMillian Coffee Morning, the whole school went on a walk. And when they returned, they all had coffee, tea or hot chocolate and cakes. For the current term’s wellbeing day, the headteacher is shutting the school and the entire school is going to the seaside.

Furthermore, Sharon is highly commendable of the career progression initiatives that are available in school and within their academies trust. An important part of the appraisal system is the ‘develop yourself’ target. A well-structured CPD programme is in place to support all staff in achieving their targets. Commenting on her personal career aspirations, Sharon explains, ‘If I said to (headteacher) tomorrow, “Look, I would like to aspire to be a deputy headteacher, what can the trust do for me?” There would be loads. Oh, there would be loads. There would be like you can go and shadow this person for a term. You can do a secondment as a deputy for a couple years somewhere else.’
Photograph 4: I love my job! 'Staff got talent' show & doing press-ups at an assembly (Sharon, AHT, mother of 1)

So, despite personal challenges, Sharon has retained her enthusiasm and love for her work. In addition to being a part of a wellbeing conscious, family friendly and career development friendly school, she is pleased that her current role offers opportunities to put her creativity to work. She fully immerses herself in ‘the fun part’ school life, as shown in the two photographs above.

Where I am at the moment is the best job I have had, and I have the most fun currently with the responsibilities I have got

(Sharon, Interview 2).
Maria – The quest for a senior leadership position

Maria grew up in a rural community in the north of England. She is the second child of a large family and always wanted to have a big family of her own. Maria is now the ‘proud mother’ of four boys ranging from ages two to fourteen. Thinking back to when she was a child, Maria recalls that her neighbour was ‘one of the few career-oriented women’ that she knew. In her experience, it was uncommon for women to work outside of the home. In the case of her family, her dad, who was a quantity surveyor, worked and her mother took care of the home and the children. She felt that it would not be financially viable for both parents to work and at the same time pay for the mortgage and childcare for all the children. Therefore, Maria reflecting on her relationship with her neighbour concluded that, ‘She was a good influence, I suppose, from my perspective of not knowing many working women.’ That said, Maria is quick to point out that although her mother did not work secularly, she had ‘very strong leadership skills.’ Prior to having children, her mother was a riding instructor working in a male dominated environment. So, she ‘wasn’t any kind of pushover.’ Despite coming from what she describes as a ‘traditional background’, without many working women as role models, Maria says that it never occurred to her to become a ‘stay at home parent’. She was always pushing herself forward, ‘looking for the next thing to do in life.’ When she was young her passion was competitive horse show jumping, but she also contemplated becoming an equine chiropractor. This led to her doing a degree in equine science. In time however, her horse show jumping dreams did not materialise. She then began working as a science technician in a secondary school and later completed a PGCE and became a trained science teacher.
At the time of the first interview, Maria was a teacher of science and the whole school literacy coordinator. However, she had previously held the post of head of department in three separate schools but has found the securing an appointment as a senior leader difficult. Maria ascribes her slow career progression to the challenges of work-life balance coupled with discrimination. She recalls a time when she was struggling ‘to get anyone to pick up the children from childcare.’ This was prolonged and impacted negatively on her work. She had to temporarily reduce her working hours and give up her position of responsibility until she was able to secure more reliable childcare arrangements.

Maria also relates instances when one or the other of her sons fell ill and how this impacted on her work. When her third son contracted chicken pox twice in one month, she had to take time off work to care for him. This happened during the early days of her being appointed to a new post, as had of department. She felt this left a negative impression on the minds of her line managers who from then on questioned her commitment to her work. Maria also had to forfeit attending a job interview when her youngest was admitted to hospital with sepsis. To add to this, once she had used up her two days compassionate leave, her pay was docked for the remainder of the time that she was off work staying with her son in the hospital.

On another occasion while she was still head of department, she relates being systematically bullied by her line manager. ‘He just kept knocking me down and knocking me down… I had to put in a grievance (complaint) against him cause he just bullied me the whole time.’ Maria also struggled under the heavy workload at that school. She said, ‘I was working 70-hour weeks, longer and harder than my
husband who is a deputy headteacher! …I just couldn’t do it. It was not because I wanted to stop leading. It was just that I had decided that I couldn’t sustain working like that.’ In the end, she felt she was forced to resign from her role as head of department and return to her previous school as a teacher of science.

Maria’s career progression journey continued to be characterised by unsupportive line managers and school cultures. Her pregnancy and maternity experiences were also thwarted with challenges. Although Maria had two sons from a previous marriage, she experienced secondary infertility and was unable to have children at the start of her second marriage. However, with IVF treatment, she had two further sons, now five and two years old. Maria felt that she was treated differently at school because she was having a third and fourth, compared to other teachers who were having their first and second. Very little support was given. She was expected to just ‘get on with it.’ This created practical challenges because she suffered from gestational diabetes, high blood pressure and SPD (symphysis pelvis dysfunction) which caused her health to deteriorate in the last weeks of her pregnancy. Due to the lack of support, in both instances, she was eventually signed off work before her official maternity leave was due to begin. In addition, during her third maternity leave, the school was unable to find a replacement for her. She found herself trying to manage the department from home. She says, ‘I was very hands on throughout. And I was like, “No! Look, no! I need to be kept in the loop because I am not coming back to some s*** happening that nobody has told me about!” Maria believes that failures in the school’s structure forced her to continue working during her maternity leave.
Furthermore, during her fourth pregnancy, Maria was constantly subjected to unprofessional and insensitive remarks from line manager. She repeatedly alluded that Maria’s pregnancy was affecting the smooth running of the department. Things were going wrong, and it was ‘her fault.’ For example, in a department meeting, she announced, ‘Oh well, we had planned to divide the year 9 groups from being 5 to 6 groups. But we can’t do that now because you are going off on maternity leave.’ Reflecting on her experiences of pregnancy and maternity leave and how this affected her relationship with her superiors and also her career progression, Maria comments:

> So, what I have found, is that the people who have been the most judgemental about some of my choices… are people who have got children who did choose to take extensive periods of time with their children… It made me think that I am wrong in trying to do two things at once. They are the most judgemental people. It is often women who are between 5 or 10 years older than me who had had to make choice, as I have said, potentially had to delay their career plans because of having children (Maria, Interview 2).

Maria had several unsuccessful attempts at securing an assistant headteacher post in the last three years. Despite many applications, she has only been invited to two interviews. At one of these interviews, she was seven months pregnant with her youngest. Although she is now convinced that she was not discriminated against because she was pregnant, she explains that being pregnant made her feel insecure during the interview. She felt she was being judged and this in turn influenced her performance. On the other hand, Maria is certain that she was discriminated against on other occasions. For example, while on maternity leave, prior to applying, she
visited a school with her baby, she was not invited back for an interview. She thinks, ‘Because I turned up to walk round with a baby. They were like, “No!”

Maria has now arrived at the conclusion that to increase her prospects of being appointed as an assistant headteacher, she will exclude ‘all reference to family’ from any communication prior or during interviews. She revised her application letter and removed any indication of her being a mother. Phrases such as, ‘During my maternity leave, I did this research…’ and, ‘I have four children…’ have been deleted with good results. She says, ‘I instantly got an interview and came second in that one. So, I was a bit closer that time.’

Despite being reflective about her experiences, the accumulation of negative experiences has started to erode Maria’s self-confidence. By the third interview with me, Maria is beginning to question her ability to be a senior leader and at the same time care for her four sons. She admits:

I think I have kind of hit a bit of a flat spot with it really. Because things haven’t quite worked out the way how I wanted them to work out. And in the last couple months I have lost a bit of heart with it… And I think if you are like constantly chasing. I think I am a bit exhausted with chasing the next step towards leadership. And that is quite sad because it was a goal for me for such a long time

(Maria, Interview 3).

However, Maria comments that participating in the research have given her the opportunity to adjust her thinking about career progression and the interview process. She is reading widely on the topic and applying all she can to her personal
situation. She has sought out career-support networks and arranged coaching sessions with successful women school leaders.

Her hard work and perseverance paid off when in January 2020 Maria was appointed as an assistant headteacher. She is delighted and tweeted, ‘I finally did it!’

**Francesca: Modelling effective leadership and parenting**

Francesca lives in London with her husband and two young daughters. At the time of the first interview, she was on her second maternity leave. Her baby was two weeks old, and her older daughter was two years old. Francesca is the older of two daughters in her family. As a child, both her parents worked. She describes her mother as being ‘a senior leader as long as (she) have known her.’ As the chair of the (City) Health Authority and later when she managed her own consultancy business, Francesca says of her mother, ‘She worked hard. She worked late. She worked until 11:30, 12 some nights. And that was normal.’ When Francesca was thirteen years old, her mother was awarded a CBE. She reflects, ‘that was really probably the first time that I realised the extent of what a leader she was. That she was being recognised.’ Being financially secure by means of their careers, her parents were able to afford a private school education for Francesca and her sister. They also employed a nanny to care for the girls.

Having both parents who worked was not unusual for Francesca when she was a child. She recalls, ‘it was the norm for everyone to work, including women.’ But there were exceptions. For example, she draws a comparison between her family and her
husband’s family. Both her mother-in-law and her sister-in-law have a ‘similar education’ to her. They are also teachers. But they gave up their jobs, when they started having children, and made the decision to raise their children instead of working secularly. ‘My mother kept working and I keep working. His mother gave up work when she started having her children and so did his sister.’ Francesca explains that although most of her salary will be going to childcare, she has never thought of not working. She believes that as her children get older, her ‘future earning will continue to increase.’ She was keen to emphasise that like her mother, she also enjoys working. ‘We get fulfilment from it.’

Francesca felt that attending an all-girls’ private school provided insulation from the wider world experiences. Most of her teachers were females including the senior leaders and the headteachers. She admits, ‘I wasn't really aware of sexism until I started working myself.’ Francesca always had a desire to lead and manage which she explains as, ‘I always have a bit of tendency to organise things.’ She recounts her time as the vice president of the Association of Jewish Sixth Formers and how much she appreciated that ‘early access to leadership’ which involved putting on events and providing peer support for other young people. After successfully completing her A' level examinations, Francesca went on to study Psychology at one of the top universities in the UK. There she held various student leadership roles that created opportunities for her to interact closely with her university’s college leadership team.

After university, Francesca trained as a teacher through the Teach First Programme. She explains that Teach First promoted the option of leadership from early on. This
led to her starting a Master’s degree in leadership with the Institute of Education in her second year of teaching and securing her first management role – Teaching and Learning Leader in English – in her third year. Her school further developed her leadership capacity by enrolling her on a two-year Teacher Leaders course. On completing this course, she was appointed as Induction Tutor. This role involved managing the training and professional development of the NQTs and teacher trainees in her school.

In 2016, five years after training as a teacher, Francesca began applying for senior leadership roles. However, she contemplated whether she could achieve a suitable work-life balance at her then current school. This became even more pertinent when she and her husband decided to start a family. She describes the culture of the school as ‘a very intense environment and a very long hours kind of place’ where SLT would pop over to Tesco to get their dinner before continuing working until seven or eight every night. Francesca knew that this was not a viable model of working for her and this was confirmed when one of the SLT members had a breakdown. This prompted her to begin applying to other schools. Francesca was so convinced that she would get a senior leadership appointment elsewhere, that when she went on maternity leave, she packed all her personal belongings and cleared her office.

In the first week of her maternity leave, Francesca visited a school that had advertised for an assistant headteacher. She describes her experience as follows:

> Because I was on maternity leave, I was able to visit the school. Obviously, my school that I was working would have given me a day for the interview. But they
wouldn’t have given me a day to visit. And that was so important… It was an incredible opportunity to get the visit. Then I decided to apply and obviously had more time to do my application. I was not worried about marking and doing my work as well. Then I got invited to interview… So being off in that 3 weeks before giving birth was an amazing opportunity for applying for a role. And then obviously getting the role just before having my baby meant that I felt made up. It was amazing (Francesca, Interview 2).

In addition to using her maternity leave to successfully apply for a senior leadership role, Francesca also used that time to prepare for her new role. She engaged with the MTPT CPD project and marked examination papers, which provided the opportunity to familiarise herself with new subject specifications. She also visited schools and gave presentations at conferences. Francesca explains that she never hid or minimised the fact that she was a mother and that being a mother plays a significant role in her choices and experiences. This can be seen in the Twitter post and the newspaper clipping in the photograph below. Baby often accompanies her to conferences and workshops.
After 7 months on maternity leave, Francesca began her new full-time role as an assistant headteacher. She grasped the opportunity to ‘model leadership and parenting and to forge strong relationships with colleagues.’ She explains that having a baby, a reason to go home, made it easier to find a balance. She relates an occasion when she decided to leave a Sixth Form Option Evening early after completing all her responsibilities:

And the next day, the head of PE who was on the stall next to me said she saw me did that and she said, ‘I am really inspired by you because you had the confidence to
ask and I would have never thought of doing that. And it is really good to see that you can be a leader and a mother at the same time.' That made me feel good

( Francesca, Interview 2).

That said, Francesca is keen to 'give credit' to her school. She explains that they appointed her as senior leadership knowing she was eight months pregnant:

They recognised that someone who is there 8 to 4:30 and doing a really good job is more valuable than someone who works their socks off and just burn themselves out … I find myself thinking I was just so lucky to find myself a school with that culture.

( Francesca, Interview 2).

She commends her school for being keen to facilitate part-time and flexible working arrangements for staff, provide a wide range of internal and external CPD opportunities and create small leadership and management roles ‘to help (teachers) get one step up.’ On a personal level, Francesca had adjusted her way of working to be more supportive of her school’s ethos. For example, if she sends emails out of work hours, she always uses an email signature that says, ‘I may send emails out of hours. Please know that I don't expect you to reply until we are back at school.’

While she is maximising on the time that she has available to send emails, she is eager to reassure the recipients that she does not expect an immediate action.

Reflecting on her career achievements, Francesca ascribes her success in balancing leadership and parenting to a combination of experiences gained through her family and her education. She feels endued with ‘a lot of confidence and belief.’ A sense of:

Yeah, you can like go get it. Like go do it if that is what you want to do. And reach for the sky! And don't hold back! And don't be held back by anything!
**Ella – You can have it all, but not all at the same time!**

I wouldn’t say I was groundbreaking in anyway in my family. If anything, I am doing nothing in comparison to the women in my family

(Ella, Interview 1).

Ella is from ‘a family of accomplished women… Education, that was the big thing.’ She proudly relates that there was the expectation that the women in her family would go to university and would balance a career and family life. Her grandmother’s cousin was one of the first women in North Wales to go to university, where she read Classics. Both Ella’s grandmothers worked. Her father’s mum was a nurse. Her mother’s mum went to study biology at The University of Manchester, ‘but she was called home when the war broke out.’ Although she did not complete her studies, Ella’s grandmother instilled independence in her three daughters who all went to university and had successful careers. Ella’s older aunt was a headteacher of a secondary school and her mother was a headteacher at the local primary school and later an inspector. Her father was a deputy headteacher at the local secondary school.

Ella’s first memory of a female leader in education was her mother, smartly dressed, taking assembly at school. Fuelled by such positive experiences, Ella describes the moment when she decided she wanted to become a school leader:

I remember being in year 7 and seeing the then deputy head of the school clearing the corridor with her voice. It must have been raining or the door was locked. And
she cleared the corridor. You know, strong female. And she then went away, and nobody came in after! And I remember thinking, 'I have got to do that'

(Ella, Interview 1).

From that time onward, Ella began reaching out for leadership positions. She was captain of the hockey team every year from year 7 and was also head girl. She studied English Literature at university and spend three years in the police force before training to become a teacher. By the time she got married and had her daughter, who is now 5, Ella was already head of department. Two years later she had a little boy.

Looking back, Ella is in awe of her mother’s ability to balance work and family life. Although she was the main caregiver for her and her brother, Ella remembers that her mother always cooked ‘proper meals.’ She was also an active member of the community. For example, she was the organist at the local chapel and organised fairs and other activities. Ella surmises that one coping strategy was that her mother took her everywhere. ‘She was playing (the organ) and I was turning the pages.’ Ella now does the same thing with her daughter. ‘I am on the pre-school committee, and we did the fashion show last night and (daughter) came with me… I guess I am following in my Mum’s footsteps’ - prioritising mother and daughter time. This also extends to enjoying other activities together such as styling her daughter’s hair. This is shown in Photograph 6 below. Ella believes that spending dedicated time with her children is a vital aspect of being a mother.
Ella thinks back on the structure and culture of her school and how this affected her when she was pregnant. For example, on the matter of managing the students’ behaviour, she said:

I don't think they understand the fact that I was pregnant… having to go in and deal with difficult classes … and (students) were messing about for the cover teacher. And going in and shouting and your adrenaline coursing through you. It is not good for the baby

(Ella, Interview 2).

She also relates an incident when the heel of her shoe got caught in a pothole in the school’s carpark causing her to fall. She was pregnant, in her third trimester. ‘And it was quite bad really because one of my shoes went over my head and landed in
front of me. And when I looked behind me, my assessment books were like a Hansel and Gretel trail behind me.' Fortunately, neither Ella nor her baby were injured. But she did speak to the headteacher’s secretary about filling the pothole and making sure that other hazards were taken care of to minimise the probability of similar incidents occurring.

Despite these negative experiences, Ella loves teaching. At the time of the interviews, she has been head of English for ten years at her current school. Since returning from her first maternity leave, for her first child, she has been working part time - three days each week. Ella relates how excited she was about returning to work. ‘I felt like a race car that had been pulled into the side to change its tyres. I was just raring to go. I just wanted to get back into it!’ She went on to explain that she planned ‘kick a** lessons… Just sort of to say, “I am back! Bet you missed me! I want you to have missed me. So, come on!”’

Reflecting on the impact of motherhood on her career, she says:

I am in a quagmire of despair at the moment… but I feel I have stagnated rather than gone back to the beginning. Which was a good thing (the headteacher) allowed me to stay as head of English

(Ella, Interview 2).

That said, she acknowledges that she has had a ‘good run’ but knows she will need to increase her hours as she aspires towards senior leadership. She says, ‘There was an assistant headship that went internally in my school when I was on maternity leave with (son). So, I called the headmaster about it, and he said, “You have to be full time.”’ On another occasion when she applied externally for an assistant
headteacher’s post, her headteacher advised her to disclose on her application that she was part time. She was not comfortable doing so but felt she needed to comply because ‘headteachers call each other up and say, “Well, what is this person like?” He would torpedo me by saying that. “I don't think she is ready because she is only on 3 days.”’ Experiences such as these have convinced her that she should be prepared to increase her number of days in school in order to make the next step up in her career. But she believes that her children are too young for her to work full time in a leadership position.

I can't be making toast and pouring a third bowl of coco pops if I am trying to phone a recruitment agency to get a cover teacher in… I am at the moment in a bit of a quandary because I just don't want to be delegating the upbringing of my kids to somebody else. That is not why I had them!

(Ella, Interview 2)

Ella endeavours to be reassured by her mantra, ‘You can have everything. Just not at the same time.’ However, she realises that she now needs to begin focusing on her career. ‘I said to myself when I turned 40, “Your 30s have been about the children, your 40s is going to be about your career.”’ Taking all these factors into consideration, prior to the third interview, Ella agreed to return to work four days, spread out across five days. Her school has been supportive by putting her free sessions at first and last lessons so that she can still do the school runs. In addition, she is grasping opportunities to be proactive around the school: reaching out for professional development opportunities such as shadowing senior leaders, raising her profile by doing duty at hot spots around the school and making suggestions that impact on whole school agenda. Ella remains confident that when it is the right time
for her family, she will be able to secure a senior leadership position and begin her progression to becoming a headteacher.

**Chloe: Is having children career suicide?**

Chloe is the youngest of her parents’ three children. Being second generation Black Caribbean, she explains that as a child her family didn’t have the ‘luxury of strong finances.’ Her mother worked at the local job centre and her father did factory work. There were ‘no historical funds to tap into’. Without the safety net of financial resources, there was no room for experimentation or failure. You had only one chance. ‘It just takes a boiler to go and all of a sudden everything is on its backside.’

Reflecting on her mother’s experiences, Chloe believes her mother wanted to be a teacher but gave up her career prospects for her children. Chloe doesn’t want her own daughter to think that she was capable of more but didn't achieve her full potential because of her. Comparing her quality of life and prospects as a girl to that of her daughter, Chloe is confident that by the time her daughter gets to university she will have a ‘huge net underneath her… because we have set up very strong roots already. So, she will go even further, hopefully, than we have.’ Despite these challenges, while Chloe was still in school, her mother went to university and completed a first degree in History. The acquisition of this qualification not only improved her mother’s outlook and confidence but that of the entire family. For example, this course of action has proven to be a huge motivation for Chloe. She is so appreciative of her mother’s sacrifices and in awe of her resilience that she dedicates each of her career achievements to her, ‘This is for you, Mum!’
After graduating from university, Chloe worked as a behaviour specialist teaching assistant for two years before training as a teacher. She admits that she didn’t achieve a ‘good degree’ and as a result she was reluctantly accepted onto the teacher training course. However, she describes herself as ‘career driven and bloody-minded,’ always asking ‘what’s next?’ This was evident when after only three years as a teacher of Information Technology, she progressed to the post of SENCo. Then three years later, she was promoted to assistant headteacher. Chloe explains her drive:

I remember getting frustrated as a TA. I couldn’t do anything, so I needed to be a teacher. And as a teacher I couldn’t do anything, so I needed to be a head of house. Got frustrated as a head of house needed to be a SENCo. Got frustrated needed to be an assistant head. I am frustrated again. So, I am like, I need to be a headteacher (Chloe, Interview 1).

However, behind this meteoric career advancement, Chloe wrestles to find a path between the seemingly disconnect of motherhood and career progression:

I don’t feel ready to stop having children. But I am very serious. I am currently on SLT and I want to progress more… I haven’t done anything wrong by wanting to be successful and wanting to have children… Is this career suicide?

(Chloe, Interview 2)

She recounts how anxious she was when she became pregnant and how she searched up quite a lot about how late you can tell your employer that you are pregnant. This was concerning for her because she was in charge of a pupil referral unit (PRU). And working with vulnerable young people with severe behavioural challenges meant that on occasions they had to be physically restrained.
Although still ambitious, Chloe is now experiencing a major ‘shift in mentality’ around how she perceives the relationship between motherhood and career. She relates that when she became pregnant, she felt guilty and ashamed. She felt as though she was a ‘drain on her school’ by falling pregnant within the first year in post as an AHT. At present, her MAT is undergoing restructuring and she was offered an attractive post which would involve a considerable commute. She admits that in the past she would have said, ‘Yes! I'll do it. I'll travel! I'll do it!’ She now rationalises that she has already given a lot to education and has more to give. But at present, her family comes first. Her resolve is not to neglect her family responsibilities to further her career. Instead, she is keen to find the right balance between these two very important aspects of her life. As shown in Photograph 7 below, at times this may involve combining both. In the photograph, Chloe is working at the computer and at the same time she is caring for her daughter.
In support of her newly found perspective, Chloe relates how she has been organising her life during maternity leave and her plans for return to work. She intends to take all ten KIT days: ‘for financial reasons and for the sake of my brain,’ she jokes. But then soberingly remarks that she would take the whole year off if she could afford it. However, her last month’s payslip gave her a stomach-ache because she hadn’t had a payslip like that since she was ’16 and working at Marks and Spencer’s.’ Despite her financial concerns, Chloe has made the decision to return to work part-time, four days per week, as an AHT but in a lesser role with more flexibility. She comments that this 4 days/3 days split will be an amazing opportunity.
to prioritise mother-daughter time but is also determined to use her Fridays off as productively as possible. Her mother also has Fridays off work and will support with childcare if she wanted to ‘start consulting, or go do some training, or carry on with my writing.’

Although Chloe has always been economical and strategic with her time and intends to maintain these routines when she returns to work, she is under no illusions that there will be challenges but is determined to achieve a good work-life balance. She recounts some of her successful modes of working which include having a digital work life from 7am to 6pm which means she will not check or respond to emails outside these hours, not always working in her office but instead using ‘hiding places’ where she will not be disturbed, using her PPA time for PPA and not for socialising with her colleagues, and being clever with her marking by providing feedback sheets for students. Chloe also talks about the importance of exercise as a part of her routine, ‘when I am exercising everything is clear… (when) exercise is there then everything else comes into balance.’ She finds ingenious was of prioritising exercise such as opting to teach the students, at her PRU, Physical Education and taking them to the gym.

Chloe believes that she is often seen as ‘easy going.’ But she prefers to be likened to a swan. ‘You look like a swan on the surface, but underwater it is crazy. You are paddling like crazy.’ Infused with determination, she outlines her next move:

If you tell me I can’t do something…I will blooming do it!... I need to be a headteacher. But I am going to take a 5-year kid break and education had better be ready for me when I am come back!

(Chloe, Interview 1)
6.2.3 Summary

Further to introducing each of the seven participants, the demographics of the participants and the vignettes presented in this section addressed the MRQ by opening a window to the participants’ lives and providing a unique perspective into their dreams and aspirations towards school headship. All seven stories showed how the participants’ backgrounds and experiences when growing up shaped their decision-making processes as adults. Verity admitted that her mother’s ‘academic snobbery’ and ‘diatribe of Marxist lectures’ infused with ‘feminist mantras of the 80s’ shaped her life choices. Ella believed that coming from a family of high achieving women gave her the desire and confidence to lead from an early age. Moreover, having parents who were both school leaders created a supportive and nurturing environment in which Natalie felt that there was no glass ceiling.

In addition, the vignettes provide insight into how all the participants negotiated the challenges and opportunities they faced in their personal and professional lives. Their stories show a keen self-awareness of where they are in their career journey, where they want to get to and what they need to do to achieve their goals. For example, Chloe is determined to become a headteacher but has found it necessary to take a ‘5-year kid break’ before continuing her progression. Furthermore, all the participants were able to identify the barriers to their career progression and took steps or provided suggestions on how these barriers can be challenged or minimised. For example, both Maria and Francesca made the decision to change schools as the cultures in their previous schools were not compatible to their lifestyles as school-leader mothers.
Examination of these findings on the motherhood and career progression experiences of the participants will continue in the next section through a presentation of the main themes that were identified from the thematic analysis.

6.3 Aspiring to secondary school headship

This section presents the participants’ career progression experiences and perceptions organised around the three main themes identified in the thematic analysis (described in Section 5.2.2). It addresses the research questions’ focus on the aspects of motherhood and career progression experiences, school culture and school structure and the impact of motherhood on career progression. This section also connects the three main themes to the three major debates introduced in Section 1.2: the underrepresentation of women in headship positions, recruitment and retention issues and teacher wellbeing and mental health concerns.

6.3.1 Gendered leadership

Three distinct areas were identified through the thematic analysis of the participants’ narratives on how they experienced gendered leadership. These areas were gender discrimination, better assistance for pregnant and maternity mothers and those returning from maternity leave and adopting a school culture and structure that support school-leader mothers with their career progression.

Personal experiences of gender discrimination were not evident in all instances. Four of the seven participants spoke highly of the supportive manner in which they were
treated at their schools\textsuperscript{14}. However, the others experienced overt gender discrimination. For instance, Chloe explained that on several occasions, she felt restricted in what she could say. If she felt passionate about a particular course of action, she had not ‘been able to articulate (her)self,’ because some of her male colleagues ‘felt threatened’ by her voice.

I remember once I have been called aggressive. I am not an aggressive person at all. It was a male member of staff. We were both on the same level. We were both SLT at the time... But he kept giving me the head of IT things to do. And I was like, ‘I haven’t got the time to do it.’ And I remember being called into the head’s office and like, ‘Oh, you know (So-and-so) said you have been quite aggressive about you not doing this.’ And I was like, ‘Hang on a second, it is not my job. It is his job. So how am I being called it because of what I said to him? I can’t do it. I haven’t got the time to do it. It is not my job.’

(Chloe, Interview 1).

Over time, Chloe was forced to ‘curb how (she was) with certain people for fear of being labelled as aggressive.’ In Chloe’s experience she felt, when displaying the same characteristics, a male teacher would be considered passionate while a female teacher would be described as aggressive.

Furthermore, Chloe felt that gender discrimination was evident during job interviews and appointments. She explained:

\textsuperscript{14} All participants, except Ella and Chloe, shared experiences from more than one school. These experiences are sometimes contrasting and may account for apparent contradictions in the findings. For example, Francesca shared experiences from two different schools. Her first school was unsupportive, but her second school was not. Also, some participants occupied different roles and had different line managers and headteachers while at the same school. Therefore, quantities presented in relation to particular experiences are unlikely to be a proportion out of seven.
It doesn't matter if the male counterpart is the best person, that's fine. But I've definitely seen sometimes the male gets a job who was not the best person for the job, but the school has thought strategically about how it is going to impact them further down the line. ‘She got married last year. We all know what is going to happen’... I think sometimes I feel like a target. Like as in, ‘Do we want to employ her? She is going to have children.’ …I obviously don’t want to go to interviews with my wedding ring on… It is the unwritten thing

(Chloe, Interview 3).

Francesca added from her experiences:

As much as it would be illegal to discriminate against me based on that (having young children or likely to have children soon), the fact is they could have easily not shortlisted me for another reason

(Francesca, Interview 2).

In line with Chloe’s and Francesca’s comments above, Maria also experienced gender discrimination first-hand while applying for senior positions. She felt that she was not appointed because she was a mother of young children. Maria believed that she was repeatedly turned down because she spoke openly of having a young family and even took her baby along with her when she visited schools prior to interviewing. Following such experiences, she altered her application letter. She says,

If it were a male who walked in and was the same age, they would not even consider it. The fact is a young man having a family would not impact on his work as it would a woman

(Maria, Interview 3).

Similarly, Chloe reflected on the impact of becoming a parent on the careers of male versus female teachers. She expressed frustration about how a break in work due to
maternity leave can impact on a female teacher’s career progression. In her case, being unable to return to the same responsibilities after maternity leave.

(It is) really irritating because a male would never have to. They can have kids and just carry on with their trajectory. I feel like (it’s) really irritating that for me to have had to spend the last 3 months of my maternity deciding whether to go back to being a just teacher, basically. And that it looked like I was going to have to do. Because that was so frustrating

(Chloe, Interview 2; words in brackets added).

In addition to gender discrimination at the job interview and appointment phase, the participants also related their experiences of gendered leadership during pregnancy and maternity leave. As noted before, there were exemplary experiences of family-friendly schools. For example, when Natalie was uncertain about applying for a trust-wide position (in a MAT) while she was pregnant, her female headteacher encouraged her to apply for the post, reassuring her not to let being pregnant stop her and that the school will adjust if needed. (See Natalie’s vignette in Section 6.2.2.) Later practical support was extended during the third trimester of her pregnancy when she began to struggle physically. She was allowed to discontinue break and lunchtime duties and eventually provisions were put in place so that she could work flexibly from home for most of the time.

So, I am literally just teaching year 11. I am in school to teach year 11. I have two year 11 classes. And then I am working from home. I am kinna doing a combination of working and resting

(Natalie, Interview 2).

This supportive culture was established and modelled by the leadership team in Natalie’s school and mirrored by the other members of staff. Natalie said,
No one is going to see any weakness in you if you are not stood outside in the playground for the whole of the lunch time when you are teaching all day as well (Natalie, Interview 2).

Other participants also had positive experiences during their time of pregnancy and maternity leave. Francesca applied for a leadership position while on maternity leave. She was appointed to the role of assistant headteacher three weeks before giving birth. (See Francesca’s vignette in Section 6.2.2.) During her first pregnancy, Verity was supported with early maternity cover, two months before her maternity leave, so that she could focus on the administrative side of her role.

(Son) was due in October, so I worked up to October half term. But that was really good, looking back now, was actually from the start of the year the school put in an acting head of department… And I did not have a (teaching) timetable. All I did when I got back after the summer was... admin-based without any lessons, which was fantastic really

Verity, Interview 2; words in brackets are added).

In contrast to the three examples cited above, stories emerged from Maria, Chloe and Sharon of subtle decisions or omissions that contributed to unpleasant experiences during pregnancy and maternity leave. Maria’s experiences are at the extreme end of the spectrum. Although unwell and leading a large core department that was experiencing challenging circumstances, she was not supported with a lighter workload, resulting in her having to be signed off work prior to the start date of her maternity leave.

About 24 or 25 weeks, I started to be unwell. My pelvis was unstable. And I started to have lots of readings of high blood pressure. It took me by surprise… I didn’t realise
at the time, but I was suffering really badly from gestational diabetes. But it was undiagnosed... until about 30 weeks... (With) the combination of the SPD and the undiagnosed of blood sugar being all over the place, I really started to struggle. This was with (third son). I was head of department. I had people off left, right and centre. I was trying to cover them... (T)hey didn’t put anything in place (Maria, Interview 2).

Other experiences were less explicit but still impactful. Chloe, for example, went into school on a KIT Day and found her office completely bare. Although she was aware that she would be changing offices when she returned to work, she felt violated. Someone else came in and packed away all her personal belongings without including her in the process or informing her that this was going to happen. She said, ‘I just felt painted over.’ To avoid similar situations, Chloe suggested a standardised exit meeting for all teachers about to go on maternity leave. This would include the completion of a questionnaire with questions such as, ‘Would you like us to remain in touch with you throughout your maternity leave? Would you like us to signpost things to you throughout maternity leave? How would you like to use your KIT days?’

Ella added the value of also having a return-to-work meeting. She said:

.... when you come back making you aware that you can do (a) sort of phased return. Like if you have got your cover still there, you don't have to just take over your timetable things. And just sitting you down and making you abreast of all the new things that the school has taken on (Ella, Interview 2; word in brackets added).

Both Ella and Chloe felt that such meetings would provide the school with enough information to tailor their interaction with each individual teacher while they are on
maternity leave, put in place a pattern for the desired level of communication and provide the appropriate support for them when they return to work.

Furthermore, the extent to which the participants’ schools designed and implemented procedures to support pregnant mothers, those on maternity leave and those returning to work, gave insight into the schools’ culture and structure. The interview data for this research revealed that although four of the participants’ current schools have worked hard over the years to institute a family-friendly culture and supportive structures such as part-time and flexible working arrangements, as in Natalie’s example, the three remaining participants’ schools (that is Chloe, Verity and Maria) were reported to adhere to a culture of *suck it up and get on with it*. In these climates, teachers are scared to ask for help because they don’t want to be perceived as weak. This was the case during Verity’s second pregnancy. There was another assistant headteacher in her school who was pregnant with twins but continued carrying out all her duties to the start of her maternity leave. Verity confesses that she kept telling herself,

> If she manages to keep going, so should you. So, just suck it up and keep going.

> This woman hasn't (asked for help) and she is pregnant with twins!' And her feet, her whole leg, she was just like a massive fluid (swollen badly). And she was still getting on with it. And you are like, ‘I can’t ask for this because just look at her. She is just getting on with it. I have got to get on with it’

(Verity, Interview 2; words in brackets are added).

In addition, elements of the culture of a school can also be made evident in the degree of autonomy that teachers are afforded. Chloe felt she was not trusted to take some of her KIT days working from home:
The most frustrating part of my maternity is that I have a female head… she is a bit devoid of empathy and I don’t think she knows she is. Because as I said, things like me working from home, I think she thought I wanted the day off’ (Chloe, Interview 2).

Further to the suggestions given above, other practical changes that the participants would like to see instituted in their schools include on-site childcare for all school staff and senior management posts being advertised as part-time or job share.

Co-head as a standard model, not an exception… I think two heads are better than one. I think it would set an amazing example to the others in that whether it is part time or whether they share the role, that big roles can be sustainable. I think co-heads would be cool. A cool systemwide change to make (Francesca, Interview 3).

Although these suggestions might appear to be unrealistic for some schools, the participants felt that these were achievable if schools become ‘a bit more inventive and innovative with how (they) look at things’ (Ella, Interview 3).

Similar to Chloe’s negative experiences with her female headteacher mentioned above, other participants also disclosed how their relationships with their female line managers impacted adversely on their experiences of career progression and motherhood. Sharon and Maria had repeated negative interactions around gender specific issues with their female line managers. Sharon felt that her headteacher was insensitive.

She was a bit strange, like a machine and treated you like a machine. She wasn’t easy to talk to even though she was a female (Sharon, Interview 2).
This was particularly evident at a time when Sharon was struggling to balance her home and school responsibilities. On their return from school breaks, her headteacher would ask about their holidays and ‘brag about her cruise.’ Sharon’s reaction was:

Really, you could have said anything else… that is the worst thing you could possibly say to me to motivate me to come back to work now... She was just cold. She was cold.

(Sharon, Interview 2).

Though subtle, Sharon felt that these interactions had a devastating effect on her work and sense of worth.

Similarly, two participants shared experiences of their line managers reacting in unprofessional ways in response to them being pregnant or on maternity leave. Maria was constantly subjected to unprofessional and insensitive remarks from her female line manager. She was publicly and repeatedly blamed for staff shortage challenges that the department was facing because she was due to go on maternity leave. Her line manager implied that Maria’s pregnancy was affecting the smooth running of the department. Maria related,

And my head of department just kept making the most stupid comments about how things were my fault. She said, ‘Oh well, we had planned to divide the Year 9 groups from being five to six groups. But we can't do that now because you are going off on maternity leave’… And her line manager who was an assistant headteacher… said, ‘You can't say that. You are not allowed to say that.’

(Maria, Interview 2).
In line with their experiences, Chloe, Sharon and Maria expressed that the irony of being treated badly by other females over perceived problematic issues that are inherent to females made it even harder to endure. They related that the prolonged unsupportive and insensitive behaviours eroded their confidence and at times discouraged them from aspiring to further responsibilities.

However, discrimination was not only displayed by female line managers. In the case of Francesca, when she told her line manager that she was expecting a baby, his response was, ‘F**k me!’ She explained that this reaction was characteristic of ‘some of the attitudes that I encountered at that school … a very intense environment and a very long hours kind of place’ (Francesca, Interview 1). This experience, she said, was typical of the unsupportive culture that was fostered in that school ranging from unrealistic time expectations of the SLT group to the unprofessional behaviour of some senior staff. This culture contributed to Francesca’s decision to resign during her maternity leave (see Section 6.2.2 for Francesca’s vignette).

From the experiences presented in this section, it can be deduced that relational leadership continues to affect the career progression of the participants. Furthermore, gendered leadership continues to hinder career progression when present in cultures that discriminate against teachers who are mothers. The findings show that while some schools are working hard to minimise this impact, others fall short of examining their interactions and adjusting their ways of working to better support school-leader mothers.
6.3.2 Time and career progression

Through the thematic analysis, time was identified as a recurring theme that all seven participants mentioned on numerous occasions across all three sets of interviews. The participants spoke of how they organised their time, how they prioritised their activities to make best use of their time and how they compartmentalised different aspects of their lives in an effort to achieve a healthy work-life interaction.

On the aspect of organising time, Maria said,

I am quite strict with my time at work. I don't get in until 8am. And then I am leaving at 4pm every day... I will work through lunch time and stuff at school, so I don't have to stay long. I do eight hours solid

(Maria, Interview 3).

Similar sentiments were echoed by Ella, Francesca and Verity. Chloe elaborated on how she uses her time at work by explaining,

I genuinely use my PPAs to get stuff done... I would never work in my office during PPAs. I would always disappear. Because if I was in my office then people would find me and give me more things to do or disrupt me

(Chloe, Interview 1).

The participants explained that the best use of time also involved creating schedules and sticking to them. Verity said,

I plan everything to within an inch of its life

(Verity, Interview 2).

Chloe spoke about a big whiteboard in her office with a 'massive list.' She added,

And I always have a list on my pad, and I have got a list on my phone. And my diary, I diarise everything as well. Because there is so much going on that I can forget
In line with these comments, Natalie spoke of planning for the productive use of time after school before leaving for home.

Sometimes I end up stuck dealing with some issues going on…And you don’t know how long it is going to be before you get back to your office at that point. And sometimes I have meetings after school and I find that actually before I know it, it is 5 o’clock and what have I done?

(Chloe, Interview 3)

Being strict with time also extended to organising activities at home, ensuring that home life and school life dovetailed well - in Verity’s words, ‘Like a military operation.’ Maria explained:

It is knowing whose role is what in terms of jobs to be done at home… And the kids get involved as well. Like (first son) and (second son) have their jobs that they have to do. So, they do dishwasher and they do hoover the house and sort their washing

(Maria, Interview 2).

This level of support to keep home-life organised often extends beyond the children and husbands. All seven participants include as part of their support network extended family members, such as parents and in-laws. In most instances, the support is in the form of childcare but also extends to cooking meals, cleaning the house and doing the gardening. All participants related that having a strong support network is vital to ensuring that tasks are achieved.

Most participants try not to take schoolwork home, but it becomes inevitable that sometimes this does happen. At these times, they stressed the importance of
compartmentalising their lives, by setting aside dedicated time for each activity so that everything gets done:

I have my school time. I have my home time. I have my time to do horses. I have my time when I go running. And I do that. And I am about 5 different people at 5 different times of the day
(Maria, Interview 2).

Ella further explained that compartmentalising also involves preparing mentally to change from one activity to the next. Ella spoke of making sure that:

I feel ready to leave school so that I can give everything to the children when I come back. Or, actually spend some time with my husband. Bless him. That is what I would say is the most important thing. It is compartmentalising
(Ella, Interview 3).

In addition to making time for their children, spouses and themselves, for the participants, compartmentalising also includes managing the digital aspect of their work life. Chloe noted,

I have a digital work life which is 7am till 6pm and that actually works with my work-life balance… I remember chilling watching TV and something popped up (on my phone) and it actually killed my weekend
(Chloe, Interview 3).

As a result, between seven in the evenings and six in the mornings and on weekends, she does not aim to take work telephone calls, read or respond to emails or engage in any aspect of work on her phone, laptop or other devices. To further prioritise family time during school holidays, Chloe works by a formula,

I work a ratio. So, if it is a week, I work one day in the holiday. If it is two weeks, I work two days. If it is the six weeks, I won't work at all. Because it is a 6-week holiday!
A further aspect of time that was discussed involved how maternity leave time was
experienced by the various participants. While Sharon and Verity made a conscience
decision to distance themselves from the world of work and to focus on their new
babies and families, Francesca, Chloe, Natalie and Maria saw maternity leave as
gained time to further their professional development. During their maternity leaves,
all four of these participants became actively involved with the MTPT CPD project. In
addition to providing access to a network of ambitious teachers who are parents, the
MTPT CPD project offers CPD courses that promote the development of leadership
and management skills. The marking of external examination papers was another
popular professional development option, along with attending and presenting at
conferences. Maria also carried out a small-scale research project with the Forest
Teaching Alliance15 during her most recent maternity leave.

Working part-time was another way that other participants maximised family time
while still progressing with their careers. Natalie described this arrangement as
‘trying to get the best of both worlds.’ Ella saw this as an opportunity to ‘take time off
work now to be with the children by working part-time while at the same time
cementing the skills required for senior leadership.’ However, by the final interview in
the summer term of 2019, Ella had returned to full-time work. She felt this was an
important step in acquiring a senior leadership post since it is the expectation of
schools in the area where she lives is that senior leaders should work full-time.

15 The Forest Teaching Alliance is based at the Dene Magna School in The Forest of Dene in Gloucestershire,
providing training and development for teachers and school leaders. This includes initial teacher training, early
career training, leadership support development and school to school support
https://www.denemagna.co.uk/page/?title=Forest+Teaching+Alliance&pid=402.
Although she felt convinced that this was the right decision for her career and her family, she admitted that she was finding it challenging to fit everything in, but she was determined not to 'let people down.'

Deep reflection was another feature of the participants' discussions on the theme of time. They spoke about the impact of time on their careers and shared their perceptions of what they needed to do to progress further in their careers. Ella, who has given a lot of thought to her next step, was able to itemise specific leadership skills that she needed to work on and when she would do this:

I think I need to brush up on my data. I know how to use 4-Matrix. I know how to use SIMs… But I think I need to become better about my data analysis… try to use my school as a trial and get something off the ground with teaching and learning. Try and do something myself

(Ella, Interview 3).

Finding enough time to acquire these skills was one factor that contributed to her returning to work full-time.

Other participants reflected more generally on time barriers to the career progression of school-leader mothers and made suggestions on how these could be addressed. For example, Chloe described the timetabling process in secondary schools as a possible barrier to career progression but explained that getting the timetable right for teachers who are mothers can be instrumental in supporting their career progression. She said,

I just think that the timetable is the biggest enemy of motherhood. Because… even if it works one year, it might not work out the next year. Or if it works in one school, it
might be horrendous in the next school. So, I think that is what I would change. It is not even, I think, that big of a change. It is just that that is what we always do (Chloe, Interview 3).

And as discussed in the previous section of this chapter, both Francesca and Chloe suggest the ideas of job-share and flexible working as crucial components in facilitating the career progression of mothers. The participants felt that job share is not only applicable for headteachers but is instrumental in creating developmental opportunities in middle and senior leadership. Chloe’s response to those who remain obstructive to this idea is

Have you not seen about co-heads now? If someone can share a school, I am sure they can share a year group

(Chloe, Interview 3).

Francesca’s proposal is ‘to have co-heads as a standard model, not an exception.’

This section explored the perceived connections between time and the career progression for teachers who are mothers. Although each participant experienced time differently depending on their role in school and their individual family circumstances, there were some common threads that were evident in the interview data. All seven participants spoke of the importance of managing their time efficiently. This was achieved by scheduling and prioritising activities.

Compartmentalisation was another feature of effective time management mentioned by most of the participants. This ensured time with family and friends and facilitated a healthy work-life balance. Three participants were able to maximise time with their children by working part-time or by working flexibly at specific points in their career. The participants also reflected on those aspects of time that were embedded in the
culture and structure of their school, and Chloe proposed that structures, such as the timetable, need not be a barrier but could be used to support career progression. Adjusting the school culture to embrace different ways of working such as job-share and flexible working arrangements were further suggestions put forward by the participants that would help mothers who are teachers with their career progress.

6.3.3 Wellbeing and mental health issues

A consideration of wellbeing and mental health issues is the third main theme that emerged from the data. Discussions around wellbeing and mental health were sensitive and at times emotional. The participants spoke candidly about how they experienced pregnancy and maternity leave, how they coped with career disappointment and rejection, and other aspects of their personal lives such as divorce, still births, miscarriages and fertility issues. The data generated under this theme emphasised the connection between the participants' personal and public lives and by extension their career progression.

Firstly, the period of pregnancy and maternity leave was a unique time for each participant. However, there were similarities in their experiences, such as anticipating the reaction of their line manager to their pregnancy. Natalie was concerned about telling her line manager that she was pregnant because she became pregnant within weeks of starting to work at that school. She worried they would question the quality of her work, her honesty and her dedication. Chloe also struggled to tell her line manager that she was pregnant for similar reasons.

I did find telling my head really stressful. And I felt that I was like overcompensating. I was like, 'And I won't let this affect my work. Like, I love working here.' And when I
look back, I shouldn't have to… I think it sad that I had to feel so anxious. I searched up quite a lot about how late you can tell your employer that you are pregnant (Chloe, Interview 2).

Furthermore, some participants saw the time of pregnancy and maternity as an opportunity for continuous professional development and to spend quality time with their new baby and other family members, while others struggled with the psychological impact brought on by isolation and lack of routine. For example, Maria took early maternity leave due to health complications escalated by a lack of support at work. She found being at home ‘really hard… quite an isolating experience.’ To combat this feeling of loneliness during her second pregnancy, and when she was head of department, Maria attempted to continue leading and managing the department from home. This, she said, was not well received by the staff, who felt they were not trusted and that their every action was micromanaged through daily emails and telephone calls.

So, I was absolutely adamant that I was going to run the department from home by email. I kept emailing and I kept emailing. And my friend who was deputy headteacher said, ‘Right (Maria), you can only email once per week.’ Because I kept emailing. I was trying to micromanage from home. And obviously, it was quite annoying for them because I was not there. So, I just needed to let go and not to do it (Maria, Interview 2).

Similar to Maria’s experience, Ella found herself working during her maternity leave. However, unlike Maria, she did not offer to continue working but felt she had to because a replacement was not appointed to take over her responsibilities. Ella related an experience of being telephoned at home, on the 23rd of December, by the mother of a new teacher who had collapsed in the streets because ‘she had worked
herself into the ground.’ Despite being sympathetic, Ella respectfully explained to the mother,

‘I am on maternity leave. I will have to contact the head and you will have to deal with him.’ So, I phoned the head and said, ‘This is what happened. I am having to tell you because I am on maternity leave. I don’t know what you want me to do.’

(Ella, Interview 2)

In addition, although she really wanted to, Ella found it difficult to completely leave work behind during her second maternity leave. The department had begun delivering a new specification and although she did put everything in place prior to leaving, the staff constantly contacted her for clarification and reassurance. This became overwhelming because her baby was unwell and although the headteacher was aware of the situation, she felt that he made no effort to curtail the level of contact. Therefore, Ella felt forced to take matters into her own hands and write to the department,

‘Please don’t contact me because we are at (City) Children’s Hospital and I can’t deal with all these text messages at the moment. Or please at least just once a week at the moment.’ But the head knew. I was a bit cross, if I am honest, because the head knew

(Ella, Interview 2).

In contrast, other participants had a more balanced experience of maternity leave. They managed the degree of contact with their school by carefully planning and executing their KIT days in line with their other activities. At the far end of the spectrum, others chose to limit their contact with school, totally immersing themselves in the experience of being a new mother. The photos below show two
examples of knitting projects that Sharon did during her maternity leave.

Photograph 8: Knitting while on maternity leave (Sharon, AHT, mother of 1)

Yet other mothers spoke of attending baby and toddlers ‘Bounce and Rhyme’ groups, enjoying picnics with other new mothers and going for long walks with Baby and the dog.

Photograph 9: Long walks with Baby and the dog (Natalie, AHT, mother of 2)
In addition to the experiences encountered during maternity leave and pregnancy, a second aspect of being a working mother that the participants felt contributed to the escalation of their anxiety and stress levels was being scrutinised and judged by others about their personal and career decisions. These judgmental interactions resulted in feelings of guilt. Maria explained that she would normally return to work 16 weeks after having each baby. She added,

> Women are shocked by the fact that I do that and think that I am some sort of mother from hell because I do not care about my kids. And I get these stupid comments like, “How could you leave them so young?” And I was like, “My husband went back when he was 4 days old. Nobody judged him. You are judging me. I have gone back at 16 weeks”

(Maria, Interview 2)

In contrast, Francesca felt judged for taking an entire year off work. She was made to feel as though she did not value her career by being away from work for such a long time. However, as related in Section 6.3.2, some participants, such as Francesca invested in their professional development while on maternity leave. This ensured that they were not necessarily disadvantaged when they returned to work.

Further feelings of guilt also came from not spending enough time with their children and at school. This resulted in a conflict of emotions as the participants wrestle to balance both responsibilities:

> I always felt guilty if I had to stay late or had a parents’ evening. You are coming home, and you know they are already in bed, and they don't see you

(Sharon, Interview 2).
It was miserable for me being signed off because I did not want to get signed off and I felt guilty
(Maria, Interview 2).

Some participants also shared their concerns about not spending enough time with their partners and in general how they treated their partners. This too brought on feelings of guilt and inadequacy. Ella related:

I treat my husband almost like a teenage son from a first marriage. Or head boy. He can do what you tell him to do if you provide him with the list. When he does the drop off, he goes to the pre-school, and he goes to the primary school with a list of things to hand in
(Ella, Interview 3).

Thirdly, in addition to the stresses brought on by the experiences of maternity leave and feelings of guilt for not spending enough time with their families or spending too much time with their families, some participants also struggled to cope with career disappointment and rejection. This mainly presented itself in the form of comparing their achievements with those of their peers and feeling left behind. Verity said,

I am working for a headteacher, at the moment, who is the same age as me and has been in teaching the same time as me. And I am an assistant head
(Verity, Interview 2).

Likewise, speaking about teachers that she trained with, Ella added:

They were head of department at 25 and I always felt behind. And they were assistant heads at 31 and one of them is now a headteacher and she is 41. And the other one is a deputy, and she is 40… You can feel the same way with EduTwitter. You see these people who are full-time, 34, heads of English and assistant
headteachers with 3 children and have done a book and are presenting at all these things and they are blogging. And you think, 'Oh my God!'

(Ella, Interview 3).

Career disappointment and rejection were also experienced when the participants missed out on job appointments. As already considered in Section 6.3.1, Maria felt that she was turned down because she had young children. She spoke of the that is involved in preparing for, attending and recovering from the interview.

But it takes such a large amount of emotional energy to apply for the job and to think about what you are going to put in the application. It takes hours and hours. And then the interview - it is really exhausting. And you have long days. And you really put yourself through it emotionally. And the risk is disappointment and rejection

(Maria, Interview 3).

Similarly, Ella was so overwhelmed with fear of rejection that she did not attend an interview for an assistant head teacher’s post. Although she was shortlisted for interview (and afterwards was told that she was one of the strongest candidates), she could not bring herself to attend the interview.

I used the excuse of I didn't want to move the house. I didn't want to take the children and move them and things. But underneath it all, I was just paralysed with fear. That is the truth of it. I was too scared to do it

(Ella, Interview 3).

Having had time to reflect on the experience, Ella is now ready to try again. She is determined to focus on her own career development and not compare her progress with that of others. She said,

I have what it takes and (will) not to be psyched out by other people. *Those who toot their horns the loudest are often in the thickest of fogs*!
Finally, traumatic personal experiences such as the breakdown of a relationship or marriage leading to divorce, the loss of a baby through termination, miscarriage or still birth and experiencing fertility issues resulting in IVF treatment further impacted on the wellbeing and mental health of some participants. Both Sharon and Maria got divorced and spoke of how this affected their work at school. Sharon shared how she was supported by her headteacher during this challenging time when her relationship ended:

And I just absolutely roared for an hour, and he was mortified but he was so good. I said, 'Don't send me home. The worst thing you can do is send me home where I am sat in 4 walls. I want to be in school. But right now, I am not fit to teach at the minute. I will be by period 2.' And he said, 'Look. I will support you with whatever you need. If you need the day off. If you need the afternoon. If you feel emotional, ping me a text and I will pop down and cover your lesson while you go and have a cup of tea or whatever’

(Sharon, Interview 3).

Sharon also spoke about the emotional hurt she felt after her divorce when she saw ‘perfect dads on their own with their toddlers having a good time’ and ‘happy smiley couples who are kissy-kissy, lovey-lovey with babies, and I am like, “Why is this not happening to me?! Why has mine gone all horribly wrong?!”’

Sharon’s frustrations were further compounded when the childcare arrangements with her in-laws began to break down. She recalls her son clinging to her and she having to ‘peel him off’ when she left him with them in the mornings. And how he would be ‘literally at the door as soon as he saw (her) car coming in the drive.’
uncomfortable situation was emotionally challenging for Sharon to cope with and had a knock-on effect on her work life.

That made going into work difficult… you go into work with a head full of cr** just having a row with your mother-in-law on the doorstep

(Sharon, Interview 2).

In time, Sharon was able to find alternate childcare arrangements which not only helped to defuse the tension between her and her in-laws but promoted the headspace for her to focus while at work.

Similar to the loss of a spouse through divorce, experiencing the death of a baby can also take an enormous emotional toll on the family and work. Both Chloe and Natalie suffered miscarriages. As a result, they explained that when they became pregnant the second time, they were very careful about when and how they told anyone at school. This was particularly challenging for Natalie because she was far along into her first pregnancy when her baby died. Her colleagues already knew that she was expecting a baby and they were all excited for her. This made her grief very public. She explained that although she felt comforted by their kind words and acts of condolences, it all contributed to an emotionally saturated environment which amplified her grief and made working at school difficult. This experience contributed to her moving to another school soon afterwards.

The death of a baby can also impact on others at work. When Ella was expecting her first baby, there was a colleague in her department whose wife was also pregnant, four weeks further along. Their unborn baby developed ‘spina bifida and other catastrophic conditions’. The pregnancy had to be terminated.
He emailed me in the holidays to say, ‘We had to terminate the baby.’… And he had to come back to school to see me a that time over the summer from 12 weeks to showing at 18/19 weeks… So that was quite sad because we had a problem and it turned out ok. And I did not know whether to text him and say everything was ok. But I am quite pleased I didn’t because obviously when we were finding out that everything was ok, he was discovering that everything wasn’t. So that was very sad because obviously he would have had a child about a month before us (Ella, Interview 2).

Ella explained that to an extent she felt guilty because her baby survived and his did not. This loss added a degree of strain to their working relationship.

For some participants, the process of conceiving a baby was not straight forward and very stressful. Both Chloe and Maria shared in their interviews that they experienced fertility issues and had to undergo IVF treatments. Maria’s story was unusual because she had two children naturally with her first husband. But when she remarried and began trying for a baby with her new husband, they discovered that they were unable to conceive naturally because she had developed secondary infertility linked to polycystic ovaries. She subsequently had two more children, but throughout the process Maria said felt she was being judged for trying so hard to have more children when she already had two (and later three). These feelings of guilt would surface on multiple occasions. For example, she said,

Me turning up with my three children in the IVF clinic, sitting in the waiting room with poor people who, you know, were really struggling to have their first one. I felt like so terrible

(Maria, Interview 1).
She further explained that she was very careful about asking for time off at work whether it was for embryo transfers, morning sickness or scans because of her perception of how others felt about her having more children.

    I had not told them that I was going to have an embryo transfer... I had the embryo transfer on a Saturday. So, I did not involve any school time

(Maria, Interview 2).

As can be seen from the presentation of findings in this section, all seven participants shared aspects of their personal lives that impacted on their mental health and wellbeing and in turn their work at school. Whether it was their experiences of pregnancy and maternity leave, their coping with career disappointment and rejection, dealing with divorce or the loss of a baby, their stories show that there is a close relationship between their private and public lives. How they experience the personal issues, discussed in this section, does impact on their work and by extension their career progression.

6.4 Chapter conclusion

This chapter presented some key findings from the research data. Firstly, information on the demographics of the participants was given. This served as an introduction to each participant, outlining a character profile that was later developed through the vignettes. The vignettes did more than share the motherhood and career progression experiences of each participant. In keeping with the life history narrative approach, it was vital to present the information in a way that preserves the essence and authenticity of each participant’s story. Therefore, by using vignettes, as opposed to
another style of presentation, a window was opened to the lives of each participant through which their experiences and perceptions of the messy interplay between motherhood and school leadership could be documented.

The chapter also presented a thematic arrangement of the main factors identified as impacting on the progression towards secondary school headship of the participants. Their experiences revealed that gendered leadership continues to be impacted by discrimination which is particularly evident during the pregnancy and maternity phase, and the job interview and appointment process. Encouraging though was the finding that some participants had positive, supportive experiences. This points to a disparity in the school cultures and school structures of the participants, which draws attention to SRQ1: *What is the perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?* How each participant perceived and organised their time also impacted on their career progression choices. Some participants chose to work part-time or work flexibly so that they can spend more time with their families being fully aware that this choice came with the sacrifice of slow or even stagnant career progression. Conversely, others put childcare arrangements in place and drew on their support networks so that they can continue to work full-time as they believe this would be the best decision for their families and careers.

The final theme explored the sensitive domain of wellbeing and mental health. The participants’ shared experiences in this area show a direct link between this aspect of their lives and their career progression. This emphasised the importance of understanding teachers' lives in a holistic way that recognises the interplay between
their personal and professional lives. Experiences in one aspect of their lives will have a knock-on effect in other areas. Whether the participants experienced loss in the form of divorce, miscarriages, terminations or still births, or whether they encounter rejection or disappointment when applying for a job, or experience guilt as a result of being judged by others or for comparing their achievements with that of others, these experiences though at play in their private lives do impact on their work and career progression.

In the next chapter, I will address the research questions by interpreting these findings in light of the literature, specifically through the lenses of structuration theory and intersectionality.
Chapter 7 Gendered Leadership, Agency and Intersectionality

7.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings by combining them with the existing literature to address the research questions. The chapter begins by considering the perceived impact of motherhood on career progression. Here the aspects of gendered leadership, and wellbeing and mental health implications are discussed to address SRQ1: *What is the perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

The discussion widens, in Section 7.3, to include an evaluation of how the prevailing cultures and structures, in the participants’ schools, were perceived to interact and shape their career progression. This section addresses SRQ2: *To what extent is the career progression of middle and senior school leaders who are mothers perceived to be supported by the culture and the structure of their schools?*

Section 7.4 considers the accumulated impact of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support on the career progression of the participants. An analysis of the participants’ experiences of how the challenges they encounter were compounded as the different inequalities overlap will form the core of this argument in addressing SRQ3: *What is the perceived combined impact of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support on the career progression of secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*
7.2 The perceived impact of motherhood on career progression

In this section, the participants’ perceptions are discussed in relation to two of the main themes that emerged from the analysis of the findings: gendered leadership, and wellbeing and mental health. In addition, insights on the theme of time and career progression are included throughout the discussion. Further to being identified as a main theme, time was found to play an integral part in the other two main themes, so it is important to consider its combined impact with gendered leadership and wellbeing and mental health. For example, the findings showed that time was a crucial part of the participants’ experiences about decisions on when to start a family or when to apply for a leadership position, how they managed the time they spent at school and the time spent at home and how this impacted on their mental health and career progression. Therefore, the discussion of time is integrated with that of the other two themes across this section as it highlighted the interconnections.

Structuration theory’s duality of structure (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) is used to further the discussions around the reciprocal relationship between apparent dichotomies, such as the public and private lives of the participants and the intersectional factors. As with the initial analysis in Chapter 6, the perceptions of the participants play a crucial role in this chapter. By exploring their situated knowledges, the discussions present ‘a more adequate, richer, better account of the world’ (Haraway, 1988: 579) inhabited by the participants. In this way, this section offers new understandings around these themes as it addresses SRQ1: What is the
perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?

7.2.1 Gendered leadership, motherhood and career progression

During the analysis of the research data, numerous experiences, narrated by the participants, were categorised under the theme of gendered leadership. These accounts were presented in Section 6.3.1. In this section, the discussion is focused on the interactions between the participants and their line managers and the participants’ experiences while pregnant and on maternity leave and during the job interview process. This discussion will examine the extent to which the participants perceived that these interactions influenced their career progression.

The participants recognised that the quality of the relationship that they fostered with their headteachers, and other senior leaders, had a significant impact on their career progression. Of note were the gendered interactions with line managers and headteachers as demonstrated by the headteachers and line managers leadership styles. Both male and female school leaders who were perceived as being kind, caring, collaborative and people-orientated (Coleman, 2003) were also those who facilitated the career progression of the participants. Predominantly in the experiences of two participants, this facilitation included creating small leadership roles and training opportunities, authorising flexible working arrangements during pregnancy and maternity leave, ensuring that appropriate cover was in place prior to maternity leave and enabling a staggered return to work after maternity leave. By so doing, it could be said that these school leaders followed a distributed leadership
model (Harris and DeFlaminis, 2016). In this way, by creating small developmental leadership roles, the school leaders were sharing out, that is, distributing leadership responsibilities among junior staff. This gave the less experienced staff the opportunity to develop leadership skills. It can also be argued that a mothering style of leadership (Lumby and Azaola, 2014) was demonstrated when both male and female headteachers displayed personal interest in promoting the career progression of the participants. By accessing small developmental leadership roles and training opportunities, the experience of two of the participants in this study show ways in which middle leaders can develop leadership skills required for more senior leadership positions.

Furthermore, positive interactions were recounted with senior leaders who show awareness of external influences upon their staff. Participants discussed their own involvement, and that of their line managers, with groups such as EduTwitter, MTPT and WomenEd, and how this engagement had impacted on their perceptions and experiences of motherhood and career progression. Although only specifically reported for two headteachers, one male and one female, it was found that the headteachers who were actively involved, both regionally and nationally, in the conversations around motherhood and school leadership were also found to be supportive in practical day-to-day ways and in the long term through supporting the participants’ career preparation and development. This spirit of solidarity appeared to be infectious. It motivated two participants to develop and lead initiatives in their schools that are geared at empowering teachers who are mothers to navigate their career journey challenges. One participant designed and implemented a Women in
Leadership working lunch group and another updated and created policies that govern the school’s interaction with teachers during pregnancy and maternity leave.

Although two participants achieved significant career progression because of working in positive and supportive environments, four participants reported experiencing discrimination from their headteachers and line managers which they argued stunted their career progression (as discussed in Section 6.3.1). Three participants experienced what they saw as gender-related negative interactions at work. On the surface these encounters may have appeared to be non-gender specific, as though they were merely professional misunderstandings between colleagues. However, when examined more closely by the participants, they interpreted these interactions as gender discrimination. This was the case when one participant was described as aggressive and later reported to the headteacher by a male colleague (as discussed in Section 6.3.1). This interaction points to a subtle but effective form of gender discrimination, where female leaders are judged more adversely than their male counterparts. As noted in the literature, assertive female leaders are often titled with epithets such as ‘dragon lady’ and ‘battle-axe’ (Eagly and Karau, 2002).

When these negative interactions are associated with female line managers and headteachers, as was in the case of the three participants mentioned in the previous paragraphs, this can signal the presence of the ‘queen bee phenomenon’ (Derks et al, 2016). By being insensitive and obstructive, some female line managers demonstrate a lack of solidarity and career progression support for school-leader mothers. It is, however, important to explore the reasons dictating such actions,
which in turn will enable the experiences to be understood more clearly. As explained in Section 2.2.3, Derks et al (2016) suggest that the queen bee phenomenon is not a typical female behaviour but is often a response to discrimination and identity threat demonstrated by some females when operating in discriminatory, male dominated environments, that is, a form of self-preserving behaviour in an unsupportive environment. Four research participants’ stories revealed that some female headteachers that they have worked with had made sacrifices to achieve and maintain their positions. For some, these sacrifices included not having children and/or not getting married. The historical statistics show that, although the numbers are increasing, traditionally the percentage of female headteachers with children is considerably lower than the percentage of male headteachers with children (Fuller, 2017). Some female headteachers, who practised in unsupportive school environments and had to make significant personal sacrifices to further their careers, could be affected by their experiences to the point of becoming callous towards teachers who are mothers.

A similar explanation for such unfavourable interactions is offered by Eagly and Karau (2002), (discussed in Section 2.2.3), who point to bias towards female leaders stemming from a perceived inconsistency in how they embody traditional expectations about female behaviours and leadership roles. This form of discrimination causes female leaders to face a double bind of prejudice. On one hand, this comes from those who believe that they are not feminine enough, and on the other hand, this originates from those who believe they are not leader enough (Rudman et al, 2012). These stereotypical expectations can also force female
leaders to alter their interactions to fit in, resulting in the negative experiences discussed earlier (in Section 6.3).

Another interpretation of this can be seen by applying the duality of structure concept (Giddens, 1984; Stones, 2005) to the understanding of gendered leadership. In this study, the degree of support received by participants was not necessarily linked to the gender of their line manages. Female headteachers were not always supportive and male headteachers unsupportive or vice versa. Not all female line managers were ‘queen bees’ (Derk et al, 2016) and not all male line managers were ‘big men who shout’ (Coleman, 2000). Therefore, this finding does not align with previous literature that suggests that leadership styles and perspectives tend to be gender specific (Coleman, 2000, 2001; Lumby and Azaola, 2014). Instead, this finding implies that a more relational type of leadership style was at play. In the experiences of the participants, this proved to be a key factor that guided the relationships between the participants and their line managers rather than gender. Supportive line managers were both males and females, and their interactions with the participants demonstrated an understanding of the factors impacting the experiences of the participants. Therefore, by emphasising equal attention and mutual dependency between apparent dichotomous ideas (Elbasha and Wright, 2017), a duality of structure analysis offers further insights into our understanding of leadership styles and perspectives by encouraging us to move away from a stereotypical and narrow perception that males and females lead in specific, opposing ways.

In addition to experiencing discrimination in school, three participants related their experiences and fears of being discriminated against during the job interview
process (as discussed in Section 6.3.1). In their perception, being a mother contributed to them being refused interviews and appointments, as employers might be concerned with divided loyalties and loss of work time due to maternity leave and childcare matters. The motherhood penalty-fatherhood bonus concept can be applied to understand these experiences and concerns. As noted in Section 2.4.2, Chhatwal’s (2015) discusses the negative impact of becoming a mother has on pay, training opportunities and prospects for promotion. For many employers, becoming a father signals increased dedication while becoming a mother, points to divided loyalties. Perceived increased dedication in the workplace is rewarded with job promotions. Likewise, incorrectly assumed divided loyalties will result in mothers being passed over for promotion. These decisions may be fuelled by patriarchal attitudes. Some in positions of authority continue to entertain the opinion that fathers should go out to work, while mothers should stay home and care for the children (Doherty, 2004; Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). However, as can be seen from the findings of this research, the issues are much more complex. The participants’ experiences showed that their loyalties were often divided between their responsibilities at home and at school. In addition, they were further restricted, in ways that their partners were not, by societal expectations of what it means to be a mother. As a result, some participants were still being denied the opportunities for career progression in schools.

Furthermore, the duality of structure lens makes more visible the dualism of parenthood in being both enabling and constraining. As discussed above and in Sections 2.4.2 and 6.2, parenthood can be enabling, by means of the fatherhood bonus, maternity CPD, opportunities to develop supportive school structures and the
participants becoming empowered through collaboration with other school-leader mothers via professional networks. On the other hand, the participants' experiences show that the constraining aspects of parenthood may include the motherhood penalty and discrimination against school-leader mothers particularly during pregnancy, maternity leave and on job interviews. A duality of structure analysis of the parenthood experiences of the participants adds to our understanding of not only the negative experiences but also the positive impact of parenthood on the career progression of school-leader mothers.

In summary, this discussion makes clear that despite the national implementation of policies and legislation to protect female teachers (The Equality Act, 2010; EHRC, 2012; PSED, 2012), gendered discrimination still existed in the participants’ schools, albeit occasionally in more subtle forms. Although overt confrontations and outright gendered criticisms (Coleman, 2001; Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013) towards the participants were limited, they reported that discrimination continues to hinder their career progression. Of interest is the finding that in addition to experiencing discrimination from male colleagues and stakeholders, the participants also experienced insensitive and obstructive behaviours from their female line managers and headteachers. These interactions resulted in a marked impact on confidence and self-worth and by extension on career progression prospects. Furthermore, some male headteachers were found to be sensitive, empathic and supportive in practical ways and helped with career progression. This points to a relational type of leadership, in comparison to a gendered type of leadership that is often presented in the literature (see Sections 2.2.2 and 2.2.3). In conclusion, for the participants, positive interactions translated into positive career progression support, but negative
interactions resulted in strained relationships, loss of confidence and loss of opportunities for career progression.

7.2.2 Wellbeing, mental health and career progression

Wellbeing and mental health issues were found to be a main theme during the data analysis process. This section discusses the major motherhood challenges that the participants faced publicly at school, privately at home and internally within themselves. The discussion uses duality of structure to illuminate how these challenges impacted on the participants’ mental health and in turn their career progression.

A consideration of the environment in which teachers are practising shows that there is an increasing number of children and adults in England and Wales who are suffering from mental health issues (NHS Digital, 2020). Since schools are at the forefront of this crisis (Department of Health and Department of Education, 2017), teachers are expected to adopt a mentally healthy culture in schools and model good mental health themselves (Adams, 2020). This section leads with a discussion of how the participants work at maintaining good mental health despite their personal challenges.

The research findings highlight increasing teacher workload and work intensification as factors that contributed directly to the decline of the participants’ mental health and wellbeing. The participants’ stories of how their working conditions impacted their mental health and wellbeing included feeling pressured to work long hours in
school, having to take work home and being expected to meet unrealistic targets without been given adequate resources to carry out assigned tasks.

One way in which this was particularly evident was during the period of pregnancy prior to maternity leave. While some participants’ schools instituted robust preparations resulting in reduced timetables and even the option of flexible working arrangements, other participants’ schools were described as lax and unsupportive in their preparations. As discussed in Section 6.2.2 and 6.3.3, adequate arrangements were not put in place to support these participants, resulting in a breakdown in both their physical and mental health. Unsupportive cultures in their schools fostered an environment in which the participants felt unable to ask for support with workload during pregnancy.

Experiences around increasing teacher workload and work intensification were an issue for the participants and are also reflected in the wider society (Education Support Partnership, 2019; Wood, 2019). Worth and Van den Brande (2019) contribute to this debate by proposing that teaching is one of the most stressful professions. Making a similar point, McBrearty (2019), writing in the Teacher Wellbeing Index, alludes to the stoic nature and public service ethos of teachers as a possible explanation for them not asking for or insisting on support. Even though they may be unwell, these teachers will keep going, until they reach a crisis point (Education Support Partnership, 2019). The statistics presented in the Teacher Wellbeing Index 2019 show that the participants’ experiences and decisions are not unusual. It reports that although about 80% of both male and female educators experience mental health symptoms because of their work, 65% do not feel
confident enough to discuss their problems with their employers (Education Support Partnership, 2019). The situation is even more acute for pregnant teachers since some may not want to appear weak or unable to carry out their responsibilities because they are pregnant. The current research findings suggest that if the appropriate support systems are not present in schools, pregnant mothers may feel that they must persist despite struggling mentally and physically.

Further to the stresses that are school based, the participants were also affected by challenges that originated within their private, personal spheres. The heart-breaking accounts of major personal life events - such as divorces, still births, miscarriages and fertility issues - cannot be considered in isolation, distinct and apart from the public experiences connected to work at school. Sections 6.2.2 and 6.3.3 (Sharon: For the love of teaching), discussed how these experiences impacted on the participants’ professional relationships and the quality of their work. These examples further point to barriers in the career experiences of teachers who are mothers. Given the stressful nature of the teaching profession (Worth and Van de Brande, 2019), resulting in an increasing number of teachers suffering from stress, depression and other mental health conditions (Education Support Partnership, 2019, 2020), for the participants, the problem became compounded with the inclusion of the unique challenges brought on by motherhood. The findings suggest that being confronted with pressures at school and pressures at home can have a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of teachers who are mothers.

In addition to facing public and private challenges, the participants also faced internal challenges associated with feeling guilty for not being able to adequately fulfil their
responsibilities, both personal and professional. This was despite their efforts to manage their time effectively. Although Loder (2005) describes working mothers as ‘time-architects’ (p. 750), being experts at managing and making time, stresses associated with achieving a good work-life balance featured strongly as a concern for the participants. The guilt they suffered for not spending enough time with their children and their spouses was compounded by further guilt from not spending enough time on schoolwork. Drawing on Wood’s (2019) concept that time is experienced through rhythms, one way in which the participants worked at reducing this feeling of guilt was by being thoroughly familiar with the peak and trough times of their work and by compartmentalisation. Despite these efforts, the idea of presenteeism or face time continues to dominate popular educational leadership discourses (Coleman, 2007; Fuller, 2017; Adams, 2020). For a school leader to be considered effective, they are expected to be one of the first to arrive at school in the mornings and among the last to leave at night. As discussed in Section 6.3.2, the participants felt that these expectations put them in a precarious situation, facing the double-edged sword of balancing the responsibilities of their families and that of their careers, resulting in a negative impact on their career progression prospects.

Another internal challenge that the participants wrestled with is a feeling of being inferior when comparing their career achievements with those of their colleagues. Some found themselves stuck on the career progression ladder, or even slipping backwards, while some of their contemporaries kept moving forward. For these participants, taking time off work for maternity leave and/or choosing to work part-time to care for young children equated to time lost in the career progression ascent. One participant commented that she always felt left behind. Male colleagues with
similar number of years in practice had progressed to the posts of deputy headteacher and headteacher, while she felt as though she is left stuck in a lower position. Another participant had to return to being a main pay scale teacher with generic responsibilities. Similarly, some female teachers that they trained with have also achieved senior leadership and headship posts, albeit often at the expense of not having children. These experiences left these participants feeling as though they are always playing catch up. One of the participants mentioned above related that her circumstances resulted in a loss of confidence and at times she questioned whether she has what it takes to continue with her career progression.

Further examination of these experiences through a duality of structure lens can produce additional insights about the interconnections between the professional and personal lives of the participants. In Section 6.3.2, I shared the participants’ perceptions on compartmentalisation both as a device for organising their time and for separating their public and private lives. Although the participants expended much effort in establishing this distinction, their narratives portray the realisation that a knock-on effect between these two aspects of their lives is unavoidable. This understanding is further highlighted by the participants’ mental health and wellbeing experiences discussed in Section 6.3.3. Their accounts revealed that whether it was the breakdown of relationships, morning sickness, miscarriages, IVF treatments or the illness of their children, these very private experiences all impacted their work. A duality of structure analysis of these experiences shows that the participants’ public and private lives are not separate domains, but instead can be perceived as different sides of the same coin. That may explain why the participants’ efforts to separate these two spheres of their lives through compartmentalisation, and to prevent
aspects of their private lives from seeping through to their public lives proved challenging. A duality of structure application further shows interdependence by linking the two concepts under consideration. It suggests considering both aspects as equally important. This nuanced understanding is a key finding of this study as it provided additional insights into our interpretation of the career progression experiences of school-leader mothers.

This sub-section discussed some of the challenges unique to motherhood that were faced by participants and shed light on how these challenges impact their career progression. The use of duality of structure brought to the fore the links between the public and private lives of the participants. Whether these challenges are encountered at work, in the family or internally such as feeling of guilt and lack of self-worth, the cumulated result produces a detrimental impact on the mental health and wellbeing of the teacher which in turn presents barriers to career progression.

In summary, this discussion on gendered leadership, teacher wellbeing and time addressed SRQ1 by adding to the existing understanding of the career progression journey of teachers who are mothers in significant ways. Although their experiences varied, most of the participants related that they faced gendered discrimination predominantly through the subtle day-to-day interactions with their superiors and during the job interview process. These discriminatory behaviours were not only perpetrated by male headteachers and line managers but also by some female superiors. Likewise, some male headteachers and line managers were found to be sensitive, empathetic and supportive. These findings point to the presence of a relational type of leadership that runs counter to discourses of gendered leadership
in the literature. Furthermore, four participants reported a degeneration in their mental health and wellbeing, brought on by lack of support at school during pregnancy and maternity leave. This was further compounded by specific, private experiences associated with motherhood, such as dealing with miscarriages, stillbirths and fertility issues. Altogether, the participants’ stories revealed that motherhood presents unique challenges which impact negatively on their career progression.

The conceptual framework and literature used in this section to discuss how the impact of motherhood on career progression are linked to how schools are organised and operated in relation to the participants’ mental health and wellbeing. Further aspects of the conceptual framework, such as the application of structure and agency, will be developed in Section 7.3 which will explore the perceived relationship between the participants’ career progression and the culture and structure of their schools.

7.3 The role of school culture and school structure in shaping career progression

This section addresses SRQ2: To what extent is the career progression of middle and senior school leaders who are mothers perceived to be supported by the culture and the structure of their schools? It begins by presenting the findings on perceptions of school culture and school structure through the participants’ experiences of support in attending their children’s school activities,
practical assistance with day-to-day aspects of school life and the modelling of good practice linked to work-life balance. These specific experiences were selected for further discussion as they were important findings and were identified, by the participants, as areas having the potential to impact considerably on their career progression. The experiences of the participants show that the factors linked to school culture and school structure are complex and inter-related and that school-leader mothers tend to thrive in family-friendly schools.

In Section 7.3.2, the discussion focuses on how the participants demonstrated agency through their CPD choices. The discussion theorises how these acts of agency can modify the structures influencing the career progression of the participants.

The section concludes by suggesting how the relationship between agent, culture and structure, in the case of the research participants, may be conceptualised. Specifically, it looks at the possible impact on the career progression of the teachers’ attitudes towards their career progression combined with the degree of support offered by their schools.

7.3.1 The complexity of school culture and school structure

This section discusses three significant ways in which school culture and school structure supported or hindered the career progression of the participants. This discussion applies the concept of structure in the traditional sense as proposed by
Hofstede, 2011; Miller, 2018b; Shafer, 2018 and others, rather than Giddens’ broader notion of structure (see Sections 2.2.5 and 3.2.2).

The research data revealed that one way in which schools can support school leaders who are mothers is by allowing them time off work to attend their children’s sports days, assemblies, music recitals, nativity plays and similar activities. All seven participants shared that, to varying degrees, their schools were willing to give them time off work for these reasons. As discussed in Section 6.2.2, some participants contributed to the formalisation of these policies and modelled effective practice on requesting time off work to attend activities involving their children. Such actions are significant since policies and practices vary across the participants’ schools. For some participants, teachers are given time off if they notify those concerned in good time and find another teacher to cover their lesson(s) in their absence. This arrangement suggests that although there is a reasonably supportive school culture in place, the school structure would need further adjustments to formalise this support. Although this was not the case in their own schools, other participants spoke of teachers whose schools will allow time off only for medical appointments, illness or other legally binding reasons, such as moving house.

Although, on the surface, attending an activity at one’s child’s school may appear to be insignificant, these activities hold much symbolism and importance in the parent-child relationship. It may be implied that these activities create a space in which parents can publicly acknowledge and celebrate the achievements of their children. The participants related how their children feel loved and appreciated when they, as parents, are present on these occasions. Conversely, their children expressed
disappointment and rejection when they are unable to attend. It can be inferred from these experiences that a school’s recognition of the importance of these activities to the parent-child relationship is often seen in the degree to which the school is prepared to adjust its existing culture and structure to facilitate attendance.

Adjusting the culture of a school can be challenging since culture is understood to be *the way we do things around here*, a shared understanding of what we pay attention to, how we act and what we value (Miller, 2018b). Therefore, school culture can be ambiguous and difficult to pinpoint (Shafer, 2018) and slow to change. Despite this ambiguity, school culture plays a key role in how school leadership is enacted and how school structures are designed and operated, since it is the role of the leadership group to build and maintain the values, principles, styles and behaviours within the school (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). The experiences of the participants confirmed that one way in which this is evident is through the fostering of a supportive, family-friendly culture within the school. This could be seen in the extent to which pregnant participants, those on maternity leave and those who had young children were supported to carry out their responsibilities.

A second way in which the research findings show that schools can support the career progression of leaders who are mothers is with practical day-to-day aspects of school life, especially during the period of pregnancy and maternity leave. Section 6.3.1 discussed the accounts of schools that made provisions to bring their culture and structure more in line with empowering school-leader mothers to carry out their responsibilities. These provisions included ensuring that an occupational health assessment was carried out early on in pregnancy and implementing flexible working
arrangements prior to maternity leave and afterwards, allowing for a staggered return to full-time work. These provisions and other such as the creation of small leadership roles supported the participants while pregnant, ensured that the participants’ responsibilities were covered during maternity leave and provided developmental leadership opportunities.

Similarly, two participants explained how having a risk assessment in place was useful in providing support for them to adjust their ways of working as their pregnancy progressed. Support included site teams ensuring that footpaths were always de-iced, trollies were provided for carrying books and other heavy resources and having the option to be released from standing up duties. Structural arrangements were also considered, such as recruiting replacements and adjusting timetables in preparation for maternity leave. From the narratives presented in Section 6.2.2, these two participants related that this degree of support made them feel confident and reassured them that, despite being pregnant and having young children, they would be supported in carrying out their responsibilities as school leaders. Therefore, it can be inferred that the extent to which school culture and school structure are designed to support teachers who are mothers in practical day-to-day ways in carrying out their responsibilities can have an impact on their career progression.

A third way in which the research findings show that schools can support the career progression of school-leader mothers is by modelling good practice linked to work-life balance. This was particularly evident in the practice of three participants. For these participants, striving for a good work-life balance meant negotiating part-time
or flexible working arrangements so that they could spend more time with their children and spouses, managing their time carefully so they did not have to work late and not being apologetic about being pregnant or justifying how they intend to carry out their responsibilities while caring for a young baby. These participants ascribed the success of achieving a good work-life balance to the support of their family-friendly school culture, emotional and practical support from family and friends, along with skilful time management, hard work and diligence. In addition, two participants cited the examples of their line managers in modelling good work-life balance for school-leader mothers. (These narratives were presented in Section 6.2.2: Chloe & Francesca.) This points to the importance of establishing and fostering desired ways of operating as a crucial part of school culture. School leaders are charged with the responsibility of modelling these key values and behaviours (Hallinger and Heck, 2003). These experiences of the research participants support the understanding that, establishing and maintaining a supportive school culture and a responsive and flexible school structure can contribute, both directly and indirectly, to the career progression of school leaders who are mothers.

This discussion has pointed to the complexity of school culture and structure as demonstrated in the diverse experiences, perceptions and responses of the research participants. Despite the differences, the findings suggest that having a family-friendly school culture and structure provide school leaders with confidence knowing that their current positions of responsibilities and their career progression will not be hampered if they are pregnant, on maternity leave, or must care for their young children. By extension, it can be inferred from the research data, that if schools support mothers, they will likely be inclusive to all other staff. The systems that are in
place are likely to work to the benefit of all teachers, not only those who are mothers. In this way teachers who are caregivers, those who are studying, those who are unwell, those who have emergencies at home, and so on, are likely to be able to access support in carrying out their work responsibilities and career progression despite their personal circumstances.

7.3.2 Agency and career progression

The relationship between agency and structure is considered a key component in establishing an understanding of social life and has been used to conceptualise the findings of academic studies (Whittington, 2015; Elbasha and Wright, 2017). Through a discussion of the participants’ experiences, this section proposes insights on how the participants, acting as proactive agents, interacted with and modified their career journeys, through decision-making. In addition to engaging with the concept of agency in the Giddean sense (Giddens, 1984), throughout this discussion, this understanding is also supplemented by the definition of agency proposed by Smith (2011b) (see Section 2.3.3).

One way in which the participants demonstrated agency was seen in the day-to-day career progression decisions that they made. Considered individually, these decisions may seem insignificant. However, take as a whole, a pattern was established which could be interpreted as working towards career progression. As discussed in Sections 6.2.2 and 7.2, although experiencing frustration and guilt for not being able to secure senior leadership positions, two participants reflected on their circumstances and took positive steps. These strategies included accessing
CPD to address any perceived gaps in their leadership skills and adjusting their job interview preparation. For one of these participants, these tweaks and modifications resulted in her interviewing successfully and securing an appointment as an assistant headteacher.

Further to of their day-to-day career progression decisions, some participants also demonstrated agency in steering their career progression by engaging in CPD while on maternity leave. Although this was not done by all seven participants, the four who chose this course of action saw this period as one full of opportunities (see Section 6.3.2). In the experiences of these four participants, maternity leave provided possibilities for reflection and growth. To further their career progression, during maternity leave, these teachers visited other schools, attended courses, presented at conferences, carried out research, did extended reading and engaged with grassroot and social media-based professional organisations. Such involvement resulted in the sharing of effective practice with their schools, gaining certificates and other qualifications, taking up executive roles within professional organisations and an increase in subject specific knowledge, experience and confidence.

These experiences are significant as they run counter to discourses in the existing literature. Previous studies suggest that female teachers’ career progression is distinct from that of male teachers (Smith, 2015) due to gender differences at specific life stages (Brimrose et al, 2014; McKillop and Moorosi, 2017). This distinction or divergence is particularly evident for mothers (see Section 2.3.3). As a result, some female teachers’ careers may become restricted in terms of career progression when they become mothers since motherhood is often cited as a
structural barrier to career progression (TUC, 2016). Furthermore, the onset of motherhood is often seen as having divided loyalties and characterised by a reduction in career progression (Chhatwal, 2015). While this might remain the case for some teachers, however, for these four participants, a period previously considered in the literature to be a pause in the career progression journey was reconfigured into a period of significant growth.

In addition, these experiences are relevant in adding to our understanding of female teachers’ career progression pathways. Although educational researchers stress the relevance of leadership preparation and development as crucial stages in the route to school headship (Bush, 2009, 2018; Cliffe, Fuller and Moorosi, 2018), the focus is often on formal, organised school-led provision. However, the participants’ experiences in this study shed light on the informal, teacher-led decisions and leadership training opportunities that impacted positively on the participants’ career progression.

All participants were keen to further their own professional development and to use their influence and experience to assist other teachers who are mothers. Their stories were saturated with the discourses of solidarity and support. They wanted to make a difference not only for themselves but for others like them. One participant started a leadership group to support other women. The others explored networking opportunities to both give and receive support on their leadership journey. These experiences are in line with Coleman’s (2010) discussion of the emergence and relevance of professional networking groups supporting women at work. As is brought out in the participants’ experiences, and supported by the literature,
networking and mentoring are both key components in the career progression of women (Ibarra, Ely and Kolb, 2013; Bush, 2016; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019). This form of collective support has been instrumental in providing not only practical support but also emotional support.

How agency affects career progression can be further explored by categorising the different degree of teacher agency alongside school culture and structure considered so far in this discussion. Figure 3 shows a matrix that summarises this relationship based on the findings of this study. To apply this matrix to the experiences of the participants, we need to note that six of the seven participants practised in supportive schools at some point in their recent careers. However, Chloe worked in unsupportive environments throughout her career but remained very proactive towards her career progression. Her personal drive prevented her career from stagnating. She described herself as always pushing towards the next goal, becoming frustrated with the restrictions of her current post and wanting to move up to the next rung of the career ladder. In contrast, Sharon’s personal circumstances restricted her proactiveness towards her career progression. Her divorce, then later the breakdown of a long-term relationship, affected her in both emotional and practical ways. Being a single parent meant a shift in her priorities from that of driving her career forward to ensuring her son’s wellbeing. However, Sharon was keen to point out that her current school is part of an academies trust that is known for supporting career progression through a well-structured CPD programme. She was confident that when her circumstances improve, the support will be there for her to continue working towards her aspirations.
With further reference to the agency-structure/culture matrix in Figure 3, it can be suggested from their responses that the participants can be positioned as taking either a reactive or proactive stance. The research findings show the participants that I have characterised as proactive tended to actively seek out and create opportunities for career development. These teachers are also keen to grasp opportunities that are at their disposal. In contrast, the pursuit of career progression opportunities may not be considered paramount to reactive teachers. This does not mean that they are unambitious or apathetic but may be unable to engage because of their personal circumstances, such as the extent of childcare and other family responsibilities. Lack of support in their school environment may also contribute to the reactive behaviour (Derks et al, 2016; Eagly and Karau, 2002). At the other side of the matrix, the school environment is categorised as supportive or non-supportive. A supportive school facilitates a family-friendly culture and provides opportunities for career progression through the structures in place. Conversely, a non-supportive school does little, or nothing, to minimise the barriers that hinder the career progression of school-leader mothers.
### SCHOOL CULTURE & STRUCTURE

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>AGENCY</th>
<th>SUPPORTIVE</th>
<th>NON-SUPPORTIVE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| PROACTIVE | Proactive teachers working in supportive schools will create/use opportunities available to further career progression. Career progression may be accelerated.  
*Ellie, Natalie, Verity, Maria and Francesca – current posts* | Proactive teachers working in non-supportive schools will seek to create opportunities for career progression. Career progression may be slow but not necessarily stagnant.  
*Francesca and Maria – previous posts  
Chloe - current post* |
| REACTIVE | Reactive teachers working in supportive schools may not be able to actively pursue career progression even though opportunities are available. Career progression may be slow but not necessarily stagnant.  
*Ellie – previously in current post  
Sharon - current post* | Reactive teachers working in non-supportive schools are likely to experience stagnant career progression due to lack of opportunities and/or inability to take up opportunities.  
*Sharon - previous post* |

**Figure 3: Matrix conceptualising the relationship between career progression, agency, school culture and structure as illustrated by the participants’ stories**

Positioning each participant in the matrix and using the categories of proactive/reactive agency alongside supportive/unsupportive school culture and structure to frame their experiences shows the relationship between teacher agency and school environment on career progression. Although this is a simplified interpretation of complex interactions, the application of this matrix would propose that a proactive teacher working in a supportive school would be more likely to progress in their career. In the same way, a reactive teacher who is working in a non-supportive school would be less likely to achieve their career aspirations.

There are similarities between this agency-culture/structure matrix and Smith’s (2011b) typology of female teachers’ approach to career (see Section 2.3.3). For
example, both analytic devices engage with the career progression of female teachers and explore the role of agency in their career progression journeys. However, Smith studied female teachers at various points of their career, from NQTs to headteachers, while the current research focuses on a precise group of teachers at a specific point in their careers, namely, middle and senior secondary school teachers who are aspiring towards headship and are mothers of young children. In addition, while Smith’s typology focuses on her participants’ ‘self-perceptions regarding degree of personal agency in career decisions’ and ‘approach to career’ (Smith, 2011b: 13), the current matrix includes a second axis that brings school culture and school structure into the discussion. Therefore, the current matrix adds to Smith’s work in that it explores, not only self-perceptions, but also how these relate to perceptions of school culture and structure and by extension the role of external factors such as the impact of personal circumstances and school leadership on the career progression of the participants.

In conclusion, Section 7.3 addressed SRQ2 by discussing the impact of the participants’ school structure and culture and the role of agency in the career decisions. The participants’ stories point to the key role of agency in facilitating or limiting their career progression journey. The career decisions they make show that they perceive that their career journeys are different from those of men (Smith, 2015). Furthermore, the participants’ experiences show that school-leader mothers engage in CPD during maternity leave, a finding not reflected in previous studies. This shows that ‘women can, and do, make decisions for themselves and take steps to shape their own lives and careers’ (Smith, 2011a: 8). The participants actively demonstrated agency in their career decision-making. Finally, the agency-
culture/structure matrix suggested that school culture and structure can generate both opportunities and challenges for school-leader mothers. Although school culture and school structure are complex, the findings suggest that when school culture is family-friendly and school structure is responsive and flexible then school-leader mothers are more likely to thrive, and their career progression is supported.

7.4 Intersectionality, motherhood and career progression

In this section, SRQ3 is addressed: \textit{What is the perceived combined impact of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support on the career progression of secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?}

The discussion addresses each point of the intersectional analysis: gender and parenthood, gender and emotional and practical support, parenthood and emotional and practical support. This is followed by considering the area of overlap between all three factors. The discussion draws on the motherhood and career progression experiences from the research findings to illustrate the compounding of inequalities at these points of intersection. By bringing to the fore the experiences and perceptions of the participants, the discussion highlights the importance of ‘seeing from the perspective of the subjugated in order to see well’ (Haraway, 1988: 585).

Figure 4 shows a visual representation of the points of intersection that will be discussed in this section.
Gender and parenthood

Firstly, an examination of the gender and parenthood intersection highlights a compounding of circumstances that hinder the career progression of school-leader mothers. Although all seven participants were employed out of the home, they were still expected to shoulder the bulk of the childcare and household responsibilities. The participants spoke of their partners ‘helping out’ or being responsible for certain tasks, such as doing the bedtime routine on a certain day.
Furthermore, although all participants were the main caregivers and house managers at home, they went further by taking ownership and showing pride in these roles. As presented in Section 6.3.2, they related with pride their skill at organising their time to balance their work and home responsibilities. In addition, they saw their husbands as not being equally responsible for childcare and household duties and/or as not being capable of adequately carrying out these duties. Ella spoke of giving her husband a list when he went to do the school pick up or drop off to ensure that he did not forget to attend to all the things that needed addressing. She also spoke of ‘giving’ her husband more responsibility around the house. This further underlines her perception of seeing the childcare and household duties as her responsibilities such that she can ‘give’ more to her husband. Likewise, her husband also saw these duties as her responsibilities. She spoke of times when he ‘offered to babysit on Saturday’ causing her to think, ‘You are not babysitting. It is your child’ (Ella, Interview 3). Even in households, where her husband was the main caregiver, perceptions of the mother’s duty towards her children and the household responsibilities still came to the fore:

(E)ven though I work full time… I still get home to make dinner. And organise birthdays and things like that. You know what I mean? And it is like you still bear a burden somehow because culturally that is how we are set up.

(Verity, Interview 3).

The examples cited above confirm the challenges mothers face in achieving a good work-life and wellbeing balance. By and large, the participants were facing ‘the dilemma of the double day’ (Loder, 2005: 750), doing ‘the second shift’ (Hochschild, 1997: 258). Their experiences and accounts confirm the persistence of patriarchal discourses that influence societal expectations on the role of the mother within the
family (Loder, 2005). By adhering to these norms, school-leader mothers may find that their career progression is hindered due to the added responsibilities of caring for the children and the home.

Further to the challenges faced at home, the experiences of the participants, as discussed in Sections 7.2 and 7.3, also showed that teaching can be a stressful job (Worth and Van den Brande, 2019) which becomes even more demanding at the leadership level (Education Support Partnership, 2019). These experiences imply that when gender and parenthood challenges at the workplace and at home overlap the result is an unfavourable impact on the participants’ career progression towards school leadership.

In addition to gender specific experiences, the participants also recounted how they were impacted by the stigma attached to motherhood in relation to career progression. As discussed previously, Chloe questioned whether the decision to have children was career suicide and contemplated not wearing her wedding ring to job interviews. Francesca argued that some schools might deliberately discriminate against mothers but cite other reasons for not appointing them. Maria was also convinced that she was not appointed because she was a mother. Likewise, Natalie was concerned about telling her line manager that she was pregnant. She said:

I was petrified about talking to them because I had only been in the job not very long at all. So, I found out a few weeks in(to) September. And I told them just after October half term. By which point, I was panicking about what I was going to say and all this

(Natalie, Interview 2).
When gendered expectations of female teachers intersect with the societal expectations of motherhood, the challenges of career progression are further compounded. Examining these experiences adds to our understanding of what it means to be a female school leader and a mother and emphasises the intensification of the challenges faced at the intersection of these two layers.

**Gender and emotional and practical support**

Secondly, the intersection between gender and emotional and practical support also resulted in the compounding of inequalities associated with motherhood and career progression. Of the seven participants, four received regular emotional and practical support from their parents and/or in-laws. Natalie admitted that she was worried about moving away from home because her parents, who were retired, would not be close by to help with childcare. However, she was able to receive support from her mother-in-law. Later when she decided to return to work full time, her husband reduced his workload so that he could assume more childcare responsibilities. Natalie was convinced that without this practical and emotional support, she would not have been able to apply successfully and carry out her duties as an assistant principal. She said:

It was because mum, dad and (husband) kept telling me that. I wouldn't have applied for the job if it hadn't been for them. And even things like working at my current school, the advert was full time. If it hadn't been for (husband) saying, 'Well, give it a go. Speak to the head. See if you can have it 4 days.' If he had not given me that encouragement, I wouldn't (have) even applied for the job because it said full time and I did not want full time

(Natalie, Interview 3; word in brackets added).
Maria also received support from her family members. She explained that her two older sons did not go to nursery, while she was at work, but they were cared for by her parents and her then in-laws. ‘I was quite lucky that it did not cost a lot for those two. Whereas these two [the younger boys] cost me a fortune’ (Maria, Interview 2). Maria stressed that she continued to get help from her ex-in-laws even after her divorce. Prior to the death of her ex-father in-law, ‘they use to come around and do my cleaning and gardening’ (Maria, Interview 3). Years later, her two younger sons, from her current marriage, still called her ex-mother in-law ‘Granny’. Her youngest son, who was two years old, ‘thinks that their [the older boys’] Granny is his Granny’ (Maria, Interview 2). This experience demonstrates the close relationship that Maria’s ex-mother-in-law continued to maintain with Maria and her sons and the emotional benefits that they derived from this relationship. Maria believed that the support that she received from her parents and in-laws helped her to balance her work-life interactions.

Similarly, Ella’s parents and in-laws also helped with childcare. During the time when Ella worked three days each week, her parents and in-laws took care of her children for those three days. She related that although her parents lived an hour and three quarters away, every Monday morning, they would leave home at 5am and drive ‘in the dark and in the traffic’ (Ella, Interview 2) to get to her home before 7am so that she could leave for work at 7:30am. They stayed overnight and cared for the children on Tuesday. Her mother-in-law would then do the childcare for her third working day. Ella explained that in addition to saving her money, this arrangement gave her the freedom to work late, without worrying about the wellbeing of her children.
Unlike Maria and Ella, Francesca’s parents do not provide day-to-day childcare assistance. However, she spoke of how her mother supported her in other practical ways. She said:

I know that I have been very lucky… my mum has been amazing coaching me through kind of everything… I have been very privileged in having someone to practise every interview I have ever done with. From my uni interview to my assistant head interview, she was there to practise and give me feedback. That was useful (Francesca, Interview 2).

Francesca was confident that with the continued support of her mother, she would be able to progress further in her career. At the time of the interviews, three of the participants were not able to access regular practical support from family and friends. However, they were able to use the services of nannies and nurseries for childcare. Prior to her husband assuming the childcare responsibilities, Verity employed a nanny (see Section 6.2.2, Verity: The world is your oyster!), and both Chloe and Maria’s children were cared for at the local nurseries. The childcare arrangement that Sharon had with her mother in-law had become unworkable. As presented in Section 6.3.3, Sharon commented on how this situation impacted negatively on her ability to focus on her work. Her experience indicated the importance of social ties through friendships and acquaintances, and how the availability or absence of goodwill can affect one’s career prospects (Claridge, 2004; Bryce, 2020). It is also significant that although Chloe, Sharon and Francesca did not have practical support from their networks in the form of childcare, their ability to access the services of nannies and nurseries indicate that they had financial resources at their disposal. Access to financial resources is considered an element of practical resources. On
the other hand, as will be discussed later in this section, there is a certain degree of financial burden attached to childcare costs. In this sense, these three participants could be considered at a disadvantage.

Chloe had moved away from her family and her husband’s family to take up a job appointment. Her experiences of moving away from home resonate with those of the recently arrived Polish migrants studied by Ryan et al (2008). For these migrants, Ryan suggests that the inability to access social networks could result in an increase in the time taken to become integrated in the local community, reducing the opportunities for social and economic progress (Ryan et al, 2008). Although ‘career-driven and bloody-minded’ (Interview 1), Chloe was acutely aware of the lack of practical and emotional support for her career progression. When these experiences are layered with her gendered experiences discussed in Section 7.2.1, this suggests why Chloe felt as though she was disadvantaged by her current situation and by her gender.

The discussion of the research findings above shows that participants who had regular practical and emotional support from family and friends were able to commit more time and have a more positive mindset towards their work, and for Francesca and Natalie, this contributed directly to their career progression. However, Sharon and Chloe, who did not have access to supportive social networks, experienced challenges which were heightened when experienced in conjunction with gendered restrictions. This suggests that when these experiences overlap with those influenced by gendered expectations in the home and in the workplace, the goal of career progression towards headship becomes more distant.
Parenthood and emotional and practical support

The third area of overlap for consideration is that of parenthood and emotional and practical support. The experiences discussed above point to a connection between a lack of practical and emotional support and the accessibility of financial resources. At some point in their journeys, all the participants had to use the services of the local nurseries or that of nannies. As a result, all seven participants spoke of the expenses of childcare and how they budgeted to absorb this cost. However, those who had regular help from parents and in-laws, for example, Ella, Maria and Natalie, were able to reduce some of the cost both in time and in money, and this placed them at an advantage, in general, when compared to the others who had to pay for full childcare.

Furthermore, the participants from middle and working-class backgrounds, particularly Sharon, Verity and Chloe, spoke of how their mothers’ and grandmothers’ experiences, emotional support and guidance influenced their decision-making in connection to finances and becoming a mother. For example, Verity drew on her mother’s lectures on the importance of having a well-paid career before starting a family. Sharon also waited until she was earning enough before she became a mother because she did not want her son to see her struggling financially as she saw her parents doing (See Section 6.2.2, Sharon: For the love of teaching).

The literature reviewed in Section 2.4 emphasised the relationship between parenthood and earnings as explored through constructs, such as the motherhood penalty and the fatherhood bonus (Hodges and Budig, 2010). While some consider teaching to be a well-paid profession (Whelan, 2019), all seven participants spoke of
the negative impact that having children had on their finances. In addition to having the potential to delay career prospects for mothers (Chhatwal, 2015; TUC, 2016), parenthood also signals increased expenses such as the cost of food, nappies, clothing, medical care and childcare. Although some participants found ways of minimising this impact, when the challenges associated with parenthood are experienced alongside a lack of practical and emotional support, their accounts suggest that the result often creates barriers to career progression.

Finally, summarising the intersectional analysis by considering the combined impact of all three constructs, gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support, highlights the extent to which the structural barriers to career progression can be intensified. School-leaders mothers face gendered discrimination at work ranging from negative day-to-day interactions to bias during the interview process. Some have also experienced a lack of school support during pregnancy and maternity leave. Adding to this, patriarchal discourses continue to consign the role of the mother in the family to that of caregiver and homemaker (Doherty, 2004; Chan, Ngai and Choi, 2016). The participants’ experiences and perceptions showed that they accept these responsibilities and that their families were structured by these norms. Despite finding resourceful ways of absorbing these responsibilities, such as accepting childcare help from others and working part-time, adhering to these expectations continues to limit their career progression. Likewise, the consideration of emotional and practical support emphasises the existing barriers. The participants who did not have access to a network of supportive family and friends, found that they struggled to achieve a healthy work-life balance. Moreover, those who chose to work part-time, to reduce the cost for childcare, such as Ella and Chloe, did so
knowing that working part-time would likely result in the restriction of their career progression.

**Figure 5: The impact of the intersecting of inequalities**

In this section, SRQ3 was answered by exploring how the intersection of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical resources present in the stories of the participants. An intersectional analysis of their experiences and perceptions indicates that the overlapping of the inequalities generates multiple barriers to the career progression of school-leader mothers. This is illustrated in Figure 5. As the layers of inequality overlap, one on top of the other, the ‘goal of headship’ becomes more and more obscure. When all three layers overlap at the centre of the diagram, the ‘goal of
headship’ has all but disappeared, providing a visualisation of the result of the intersecting of inequalities.

### 7.5 Chapter conclusion

This chapter offered an analysis and discussion of the motherhood and career progression experiences and perceptions of the research participants. Relevant literature, including Giddens a la carte (den Fond et al., 2012) and the Rubik cube effect of intersectionality (Crenshaw, 1991; Romero, 2018), were drawn on to analyse the findings and address the research questions.

The varied motherhood and career progression experiences shed light on how school-leader mothers organised their lives to facilitate their progression towards headship. How the participants experienced and fulfilled their roles within their schools was found to be significantly shaped by the existing culture and structure of their schools. Their reports revealed that the level of support of the school culture and school structure shaped the values and expectations that the schools demonstrated and determined the extent to which teachers are supported in their roles.

The impact of the career barriers was further highlighted through an intersectional analysis of the compounding of inequalities as experienced through the constructs of gender, parenthood and emotional and practical support. The participants’ narratives revealed that they faced discrimination and challenges when they encountered individual factors in isolation. However, the challenges to their career progression
escalated when the factors overlapped. When all three factors were present, the goal of headship became obscured.

Despite the persistence of the career barriers they experienced (see Section 6.3), of significance was the finding that some participants were proactive and demonstrated agency and innovativeness in accessing and creating opportunities that furthered their careers. These teachers worked, individually and collectively, by engaging in maternity CPD and networking and by developing policies and training opportunities that supported the career progression of other teachers who are mothers.
Chapter 8 Conclusion

This chapter begins with a summary of the findings of the MRQ and their implications for the professional context. An overview of the findings of each SRQ is considered in Section 8.2. The remaining sections of this chapter reflect on the limitations and possibilities of the research by focusing on dissemination, future research, the research design and the general implications of the findings.

8.1 Main research question: findings and application

This section summaries the findings in relation to the MRQ and then proposes how they can contribute to three areas of concern in the school leadership and management of secondary schools in England and Wales. These concerns are centred around: the underrepresentation of women in headship positions, recruitment and retention issues and teacher wellbeing and mental health. (Section 1.2 discussed these three areas of concern.)

The MRQ is: What are the motherhood and career progression experiences of middle leaders and senior leaders who are aspiring towards headship in secondary schools in England and Wales?

Firstly, the findings of this research point to various barriers to headship that are linked to the experiences of secondary school-leader mothers. Though diverse, in general, the research participants’ narratives indicated a relationship between the rate of career progression and the extent of support of the school culture and structure. While not encountered by all the participants, gendered discrimination was
still widespread and appeared to escalate in connection to pregnancy, maternity leave and the care of young children. However, the participants’ experiences extended beyond gendered leadership to show the importance of a relational type of leadership. While some of their stories related stereotypical gender specific behaviours from the participants’ headteachers and line managers, both male and female, others related behaviours that ran counter to the stereotypical gender expectations. For example, instead of being unfeeling and unsupportive, two male headteachers were reported to be caring and sympathetic, thus demonstrating relational leadership rather than gendered leadership.

The three participants who reported sustained career progression were those who were proactive, benefited from emotional and practical support and worked in supportive schools. Such settings facilitated a supportive ethos that minimised the barriers to career progression experienced by the participants. The support of the school culture was evident through day-to-day interactions, such as during the job interview and appointment process, planning and preparation for maternity leave, allowing time off to attend activities at their children’s schools and to care for their children when they are not well. Some schools further reinforced these ways of working through clear policies and procedures, such as the project taken on by one participant. Conversely, the experiences of the participants who worked in less supportive schools can shed light on the factors underpinning the statistics as to why the number of female teachers at the headship level is not proportional to the number of female teachers in the profession (DFE, 2020, 2021).
Secondly, the findings of this research also document the numerous challenges encountered by the participants and how these challenges were compounded as they intersect and layer one on top of the other. One of the main concerns, reported by the participants, was finding enough time to take care of their childcare and household responsibilities and at the same time undertake their professional responsibilities, including pursuing their career goals. Although the participants were skilled at managing their time and accessing support from various sources, those whose careers were not progressing felt as though they were being left behind. For these participants, the challenges accumulated resulting in a trade-off between being a mother and progressing to headship (Chhatwal, 2015). The stagnation of her career progression caused one participant to question whether having children had resulted in her career suicide. These findings might help to explain the factors behind the statistics discussed in Section 2.3.3, which showed that among those leaving the profession each year is a significant percentage of female teachers of child-bearing age, who do not return to teaching (Simons et al, 2016).

Furthermore, the research findings suggest that family-friendly schools ensured that school-leader mothers did not miss out on CPD opportunities. Hodges and Budig (2010) report that employers often hold the view that motherhood signals a change in priority for women’s career aspirations. This results in employers being reluctant to employ, promote or train women with young children. However, as brought out in the narratives of the participants, family-friendly schools value the contribution of these teachers and ensure that they are not excluded from access to CPD opportunities, such as leadership training. In recent years, some improvements have been
instituted to support the career progression of women. The implementation of women only NPQHs is one such example (Ambitions Institute, 2019).

In addition, the findings show that some participants were resourceful and proactive in furthering their careers through CPD provision. Along with accessing formal training and development, where possible, of note was how some participants used their maternity leave time to gain leadership and management skills, by working towards qualifications and accreditations, strengthening their subject knowledge and presenting at conferences. Additionally, some participants developed and instituted policies and CPD programmes geared towards supporting other female teachers who are mothers with their career progression journeys. By creating and implementing these programmes, the participants not only demonstrated solidarity by assisting others but also helped to build their career profiles and gained practice in leading and managing people and procedures, which are vital skills needed for school leadership. The experiences of the participants emphasised the significant role of schools in supporting school-leader mothers in achieving a good work-life balance and in accessing CPD. Therefore, it can be inferred that positive actions such as these could contribute by attracting more women to the teaching profession and by reducing the number that leave the classroom each year (Education Support Partnership, 2019, 2020).

Thirdly, the participants’ stories also revealed that some felt pressured from all sides, from school, home and within themselves, resulting in a lack of self-confidence to continue pursuing their career goals (see Section 7.2.2.) Even though schools are encouraged to foster a mental health friendly culture, mental health continues to be a
taboo subject for teachers, with an increasing proportion of teachers not feeling they could discuss their concerns with their line managers (Education Support Partnership, 2019). The participants’ experiences bring to the fore the connection between wellbeing and mental health and career progression.

A further area of contribution that this study offers is that of a nuanced and in-depth understanding of the complex interconnections between the professional and personal lives of the participants. The research design, including its ethical considerations, ensured the groundwork for establishing strong rapport and trust during the data connection phases of the research. I would argue that this resulted in the production of rich deep narratives that offer a window into the personal lives of the participants, making visible the links between their personal and public lives.

This new insight is significant because although there is a growing body of research on female school leaders, the focus is often on their public, professional lives. This includes research on leadership perspectives and experiences (Coleman, 2007; Fuller, 2017; Moorosi, Fuller and Reilly, 2018); and career progression, leadership preparation and development (McKillop and Moorosi, 2017; Bush, 2018; Irvine and Brundrett, 2019; Ritchie, 2020). However, there appears to be lack of attention given to the private, personal lives of secondary school-leader mothers and how this sphere interconnects with their public and professional lives. The diagram in Figure 6 illustrates this area of contribution.
This aspect of the research findings stresses the importance of agency. This was demonstrated through the participants’ perceptions of their experiences and the choices that they made to balance the pressures of motherhood and their school leadership responsibilities. Although receiving limited attention in the literature, a consideration of the role of agency in the lived experiences of the participants is significant as it explains the importance of decision-making to career progression.

In addition to making explicit the career progression barriers encountered by school-leader mothers, the findings of this research draw attention to their resourcefulness and agency. Although there may be limited access to CPD opportunities in some schools, the findings show how some more proactive participants created CPD opportunities, whether through developing programmes that support other female teachers or by accessing CPD training while on maternity leave. This exercise of
agency was further seen in the ways in which the participants interacted with the culture and structure of their schools to facilitate their career progression. The teacher agency- culture/structure matrix in Figure 3 builds on Smith’s (2011b) work and could be a useful device in analysing these dimensions and could be tested in further studies. Overall, this consideration points to the relevance of a deeper understanding of the extent to which the personal lives and agency of school-leader mothers impact the career decision-making process that shapes their professional lives.

8.2 Sub-research questions: summary of findings

This section provides a summary overview of the main findings of the research in relation to each sub-research question.

8.2.1 SRQ1: Gendered experiences

What is the perceived impact of motherhood on the career progression of middle and senior secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?

The findings of this research show that gendered discrimination, connected to the period of pregnancy and maternity leave, was experienced in varying degrees by most participants. These negative encounters were sometimes initiated by female line managers and headteachers. In contrast, two male headteachers, by being sensitive and supportive, were found to counter the stereotypical expectations as put forward in much of the literature. This points to an important contribution of this
study: it challenges existing stereotyped gendered leadership styles, and indicates the need to acknowledge more complex, not necessarily gender-specific relational aspects of leadership. The findings also point to some participants experiencing a lack of support at work during the time of pregnancy and maternity leave and when caring for their young children which contributed to the degeneration of their physical, mental and emotional health. Mental health and wellbeing could then be further deteriorated by feelings of guilt and lack of self-worth. This could then be brought to a crisis point if the participants were also coping with private challenges, such as miscarriages, stillbirths and fertility issues. Overall, motherhood was found to present unique challenges which had the potential to impact significantly on career progression.

Gidden’s duality of structure (Giddens, 1984) was applied to establish the interconnections between the professional and the personal lives of the participants and this new understanding marks another significant contribution of this research to what we already know about female school leadership. It was found that although the participants worked hard at compartmentalising their lives, experiences that originated in the private sphere did have an impact on how they perceived and engaged with their career progression. The current literature tenses to address these two spheres as separate and distinct; however, this contribution points to the need to recognise the interconnectivity that exists between the personal and the professional lives of school-leader mothers.
8.2.2 SRQ2: Structure and culture

To what extent is the career progression of middle and senior school leaders who are mothers perceived to be supported by the culture and the structure of their schools?

The findings that addressed SRQ2 point to the key role of agency and school culture and structure in the career progression experiences of the participants. As agents, school-leader mothers may be described, in broad terms, as reactive or proactive. Based on the participants’ accounts, it can be inferred that a reactive response may not always be a choice but could result from the presence of career barriers. Alternatively, more proactive teachers were found to use and create opportunities to further their careers. The participants’ narratives also highlighted the importance of supportive school cultures and flexible school structures in facilitating career progression. Considering these factors led to the development of an agency-culture/structure matrix that can be used to show the combined impact of the relationship between teacher agency and school culture and structure on career progression. An analysis drawing on the matrix might suggest that on one hand a proactive teacher working in a supportive school would be likely to make significant progress towards headship. On the other hand, a reactive teacher in an unsupportive school would be likely to make little or no progress towards headship. The matrix might perhaps be tested in further studies to see if it has the potential for analysing the career progression experiences of individual teachers and school cultures and structures. The matrix is another way that this research seeks to add to the existing body of knowledge on motherhood, career progression and school leadership.
A further contribution that this research offers to our understanding of motherhood and career progression is the evidence of maternity CPD. This is intriguing as it provides an alternative way in which school-leader mothers may choose to use their maternity leave. Overall, the literature presents the time of pregnancy and maternity leave as a pause in career development, often as part of the barriers that hinder women’s career progression (Chhatwal, 2015; TUC, 2016). However, the findings of this research show that some participants reconfigured this previously perceived pause in career development into time used to reflect on their career progression and engage in CPD activities that contributed to their leadership experiences and leadership skills development. In addition, the evidence of maternity CPD taking place supports the view that women’s career progression is different from that of men (Smith, 2011b; Brimrose et al, 2014).

8.2.3 SRQ3: Intersectionality

*What is the perceived combined impact of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support on the career progression of secondary school leaders who are aspiring towards headship?*

An intersectional analysis of the participants’ narratives was conducted using the constructs of gender, parenthood, and emotional and practical support. This analysis supported the conclusion that these factors do cumulatively impact the career progression of school-leader mothers. On its own, each inequality has limited influence on career progression. For example, one participant felt she faced discrimination by not being promoted because she was a mother. The same participant also experienced discrimination because she was a woman. When these
aspects of inequality combine, however, the effect is amplified. Consequently, the participant faced discrimination firstly because she was a mother and secondly because she was a woman. This significantly decreased her likelihood of being promoted. As each inequality adds another layer of challenges to the path of the career progression journey of school-leader mothers, the barriers are added layer by layer. Eventually the wall blocking their path becomes so thick that it is near impossible to break through. The intersectional analysis provided an additional perspective of the participants’ experiences that emphasised the negative impact of motherhood on career progression.

8.3 Possibilities, reflections and limitations

This section offers a reflective epilogue on the limitations and possibilities of this research. It begins by reviewing the different platforms accessed to discuss the research materials with other doctoral researchers, academics, teachers and school leaders. The focus then shifts to the possibilities for further research and the chapter concludes with reflections on the research design, findings and implications.

8.3.1 Dissemination

From its conception, I actively sought opportunities to speak to others, formally and informally, about my research. Further to creating an awareness of the career progression challenges faced by school-leader mothers, dissemination also provided platforms to refine my research design and the interpretation of my findings based on the feedback received.
In addition to the ongoing discussions in the online seminars and forums, The Open University through its Residential Weekends and Students' Work in Progress (WiP) Seminars provided a safe environment for reflection and constructive feedback on improving various aspects of my research. For example, questions and comments following my presentation at the Year 2 Residential Weekend in October 2018 guided me to re-examine my research design and formulate a more robust rationale for choosing the life history narrative approach instead of alternative approaches such as case studies or ethnography. Likewise, discussions at the WELS WiP seminar in November 2019 caused me to reflect on the findings around maternity CPD. This led to further reading and conceptualisation resulting in the realisation that maternity CPD was not only a means employed to support individual teachers’ career progression but is also significant in providing new understandings on how we previously perceived maternity leave.

Presenting at national and international conferences, such as the WomenEd Annual Unconference in February 2020, the UKEdChat Online Conference in July 2020 and the IPDA International Virtual Conference in November 2020 provided platforms to promote public awareness of my topic. As I set out in the research rationale in Section 1.2, I have a personal connection to this topic. Like the participants who shared their stories, I too am a middle leader wrestling with the opportunities and challenges of motherhood and career progression. My passion for this topic fuels my desire to speak to others about our experiences and work collaboratively to seek out ways of minimising barriers. Conferences provide the avenue for such conversations and networking. Quite often, discussions continue beyond the formal presentation, extending into times of social interaction and social media. These informal chats may
form the starting points for potential collaboration leading to further exploration of findings and areas of future research.

In my experience, speaking to others about my research promotes reflection and reflexivity. This has contributed to improvement in the research design and interpretation of the findings. Furthermore, dissemination supports increased familiarity with its rationale, design and findings, and increased confidence in its relevance.

I plan to continue sharing my research findings by organising opportunities to speak with teachers and other educational professionals. This may include leading CPD sessions for the teachers that are a part of the academies trust that I work for and also discussing the relevance of my research findings with the SLTs and boards of governors of the trust. I also plan to reach wider audiences by submitting articles to journals such as ‘Educational Management Administration and Leadership’, ‘Leadership’, Organization’ and ‘Management in Education’. Furthermore, I intend to present my research findings at conferences organised by the Open University, BELMAS, WomenEd, UKEdChat, IPDA and ResearchED.

8.3.2 Possibilities for further research

While the present study has provided new insights into how we understand the career progression journey of school-leader mother, the findings raised several other questions of interest that would be worth investigating. Presented below are three possibilities for further research.
1) A longitudinal study revisiting the participants of the current research to reexamine their career progression journeys and their motherhood experiences. This study could examine the extent to which barriers to career progression as evident in school cultures and structures, and the participants’ perceptions of and response to these barriers, change over time.
Possible research question: How have motherhood and school leadership barriers impact on career progression over time?

2) A comparative study looking at the experiences of both male and female senior-leader parents progressing to headship. This would be worthwhile due to the ongoing changes in societal expectations around household and childcare responsibilities, gender equality and diversity in school leadership. This research has brought to the fore the unique challenges faced by school-leader mothers. However, the proposed study would go one step further in providing a baseline for comparisons between the parenthood experiences of male and female school leaders. This proposed study would provide an opportunity for testing the agency-culture/structure matrix developed in Section 7.3.2 (see Figure 3).
Possible research question: What are the similarities and differences in the career progression experiences of male and female senior leaders who are parents?

3) A comparative study looking at the career progression and motherhood experiences of school leaders across both higher-income and lower-income countries. This study could be beneficial to further explore how national and international cultures, access to resources and other factors influence the career
progression of teachers who are mothers. Similar to the second proposed study, this study would also provide an appropriate platform for testing the agency-culture/structure matrix.

Possible research questions: 1) What are the similarities and differences in the career progression and motherhood experiences of senior leaders in high-income and low-income countries? 2) What are the factors that impact the career progression of school-leader mothers living in low-income countries?

8.3.3 Reflecting on the research design

This section offers a brief reflection on some aspects of the research design focusing on their impact on the quality of data generated and the research findings.

Firstly, all the interview data was collected by online interviewing. When the data were collected in 2018-2019, online interviewing was considered by many a secondary choice to face-to-face interviewing. Yet, I included online interviews as a part of the research design because of its convenience in terms of time, place and cost (see Section 4.6.4). However, the covid-19 pandemic that started in 2020 forced a complete rethink of how researchers conduct interviews and, by extension, how they structure their lives regarding the necessity of physical proximity and the use of the internet to facilitate communication. Social distancing measures, self-isolation and lockdown procedures for most countries worldwide, removed the possibility of face-to-face participant interviewing and all other close-contact data collection methods. This resulted in the acceptance and validation of methods such as one-to-one interviewing, facilitation of focus groups and case study observations via Skype, MS Teams, Zoom, WhatsApp, Facetime and other videoconferencing applications.
Secondly, the use of Skype complemented the design of the data collection phases in developing rapport with the participants and by extension generating rich, deep data and thick descriptions (Merriam and Tisdell, 2016). The participants appeared comfortable and relaxed in their own surroundings. This was in line with the ethos of the research to be supportive of working mothers.

Finally, there is a need to reflect on the demographic of the sample and how this impacted the interpretations that can be drawn from the findings. Although the research does not argue for generalisability (Bhattacharya, 2017), it is prudent to discuss any limitation that the data may pose. To illustrate, considering the demographics of the sample, all the participants identify as heterosexuals and had their children while married. Two were divorced, with one having remarried and with two further children from her second marriage. Another participant was in a new relationship and was expecting a baby. There were no single mothers or lesbian mothers in the sample. Another aspect of diversity that needs mentioning is race and ethnicity. All but one of the participants were white English/Welsh women. Only one participant was a second-generation Black Caribbean woman. These categorisations show that the sample is limited, that is, it does not represent the experiences of all mothers who are aspiring to school headship. As a result, the findings cannot be applied to all school-leader mothers.

I would like to close this subsection with an update for some participants. I am pleased to report that since the data collection, Verity interviewed successfully and was appointed as deputy headteacher in her current school and started in
September 2020. Maria has secured an assistant headteacher position, in a different school, and took up the post in April 2021. Natalie has been appointed as the principal of a newly built secondary school, to be open in September 2022. Finally, since the third interviews, both Chloe and Sharon each have become mothers to their second baby.

8.3.4 Reflecting on the findings and implications

In this final section of the thesis, I reflect on the possible implications of the findings.

The research’s ontology, epistemology and methodology are such that the research design does not follow a positivist perspective in arguing for generalisability. It is understood that the findings of a small-scale study of seven teachers cannot represent the experiences of all school-leader mothers. The aim was not to produce an overall picture of motherhood and career progression in England and Wales, but instead to closely examine the intricate details of the participants’ lived experiences by generating data that is rich, credible and authentic. Ensuring this element of trustworthiness in the data was a vital criterium for this interpretative study (Hammersley, 2008). The focus was on the participants’ motherhood and career progression experiences and perceptions through different life stages by charting their life histories.

Arriving at this understanding, provides the background in which to situate the research findings and to explore possible implications. At present, there is considerable debate on the need to improve the prospects of female school leaders,
how this may be accomplished and its long term impact on the overall education system (Fuller, 2017; Education Support Partnership, 2019, 2021; Adams, 2020; DFE, 2020). It is hoped that the findings of this research have the potential to add to these conversations by providing new insights into the career motivations and decisions of secondary school-leader mothers. Furthermore, the findings offer examples of formal and informal approaches in schools which work well in minimising barriers and sustaining career progression. Conversely, this study shows examples of types of interactions that promote discrimination and erode wellbeing and mental health.

In conclusion, it is my desire that the insights presented have the potential to offer new ways of thinking about how the role of agency, school culture and structure and the interconnection between the professional and personal lives impact on the career progression of school-leader mothers.
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Appendices

Appendix 1 – The Open University’s HREC approval letter

Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC)

From Dr Duncan Banks
The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee

Email duncan.banks@open.ac.uk
Extension (6) 59198

To Simone Facey Holst, FELS


HREC ref HREC/2018/2759/Holst
Date application submitted: 27/01/18
Date of HREC response: 29/01/18

Memorandum

This memorandum is to confirm that the research protocol for the above-named research project, as submitted for ethics review, has been given a favourable opinion by the Open University Human Research Ethics Committee.

Please note the following:

1. You are responsible for notifying the HREC immediately of any information received by you, or of which you become aware which would cast doubt on, or alter, any information contained in the original application, or a later amendment which would raise questions about the safety and/or continued conduct of the research.

2. It is essential that any proposed amendments to the research are sent to the HREC for review, so they can be recorded and where required, a favourable opinion given prior to any changes being implemented (except only in cases of emergency when the welfare of the participant or researcher is or may be affected).

3. Please include your HREC reference number in any documents or correspondence. It is essential that it is included in any publicity related to your research, e.g. when seeking participants or advertising your research so it is clear that it has been reviewed by HREC and adheres to OU ethics review processes.

4. You are authorised to present this memorandum to outside bodies such as NHS Research Ethics Committees in support of any application for future research clearance. Also, where there is an external ethics review, a copy of the application and outcome should be sent to the HREC.

5. OU research ethics review procedures are fully compliant with the majority of grant awarding bodies and where they exist, their frameworks for research ethics.

6. At the end of your project, you are required to assess your research for ethics related issues and/or major changes. Where these have occurred you will need to provide the Committee with a HREC final report to reflect how these were dealt with using the final report template on the research ethics website - http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/human-research/full-review-process-and-proforma#final_report

Best regards

Dr Duncan Banks
The Open University Human Research Ethics Committee

www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/ November 2017
Information Leaflet (Q&A) about:

Negotiating the challenges and opportunities of motherhood and secondary school leadership in England: a life history study

What is the aim of this research?
The purpose of this study is to understand the experiences of secondary school leaders who are mothers of young children. The study will focus particularly on how school leaders who are mothers organise their lives to cope with the challenges of motherhood and school leadership, their perceptions of how the existing structure of secondary schools supports or hinders the progression of teachers who are mothers to school leadership and what can be done to improve the existing structures.

Who is conducting the research and who is it for?
I am undertaking this research as a part of a Doctorate in Education degree with The Open University. My research is in the area of Educational Leadership and Management. I intend that the research will provide greater understanding of the lives of mothers who are educational leaders, thus contributing to the body of evidence supporting a review of policy and practice in this area.

Why am I being invited to participate in this research?
You have been identified yourself as a female secondary school leader with young children who has an interest in this subject matter. For this reason, I would like to invite you to participate in my research.

If I take part in this research, what will be involved?
The study will involve 3 interview conversations spread out across this school year, approximately 1 interview each term. Each interview will take approximately 1 hour and would be conducted using Skype, at a date and time convenient to you. The interviews will be recorded so that they can be transcribed and analysed. I would also like to access your professional profiles from the internet to supplement your demographic data.

What will the interviews be like?
The interviews will be semi-structured and of a conversation style. In preparing for the interviews, I will ask you to write down a timeline of your life and career. The focus of each interview will be as follows:

- Interview 1 – Motherhood, work and educational leadership: the early years
- Interview 2 – Maternity leave, returning to work and career progression
- Interview 3 – Work-life balance and looking to the future

To supplement the data of the first interview, please bring 3 or 4 items that you feel have significance to your story. For the third interview, please compile a weekly photo-journal (1 photograph each week) across the 2 months leading up to the interview. You will be encouraged to use these items in your narrative.

Before I begin analysing the interview data, the transcripts will be sent to you for checking and removal of anything that you are not happy with.
What will we be talking about?
I will be asking you to share your feelings/interpretations/understandings of:

- motherhood, work and educational leadership
- maternity leave and returning to work
- balancing your responsibilities and time management
- your school structure and school culture
- impact of motherhood, gender and access to financial resources on your career

Is it confidential?
Your participation will be treated in strict confidence in accordance with the Data Protection Act. No personal information will be passed to anyone outside the research team. Your identity and the identity of your school will be kept confidential. At the end of my study, I will write a thesis including details of the research and the findings, but no individual will be identifiable in published results of the research.

What happens now?
Over the next few days, I will contact you by email to confirm the date and time of the first interview and to provide any further information you would like about the research. Your participation is entirely voluntary.

What if I have other questions?
If you have any other questions about the study, I would be very happy to answer them. Please contact me at simone.facey-holst@open.ac.uk.
Details for an alternative contact if you have any concerns about the way the research project is being conducted:

Dr. Alison Buckler (lead supervisor)
Fellow Researcher
Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

alison.buckler@open.ac.uk
Appendix 3 – Consent form

Faculty of Education Studies and Wellbeing

Consent form for persons participating in a research project

Negotiating the challenges of motherhood and secondary school leadership in England: a life history study

Name of participant:

Name of researcher: Simone Facey Holst

1. I consent to participate in this project, the details of which have been explained to me, and I have been provided with a written statement in plain language to keep.

2. I understand that my participation will involve interviews and my professional internet profiles and I agree that the researcher may use the results as described in the plain language statement.

3. I acknowledge that:
   a. the possible effects of participating in this research have been explained to my satisfaction
   b. I have been informed that I am free to withdraw from the project without explanation or prejudice and to request the destruction of any data that have been gathered from me until it is anonymized at the point of transcription point on August 30, 2019. After this point data will have been processed and it will not be possible to withdraw any unprocessed data I have provided
   c. the project is for the purpose of research
   d. I have been informed that the confidentiality of the information I provide will be safeguarded subject to any legal requirements
   e. I have been informed that with my consent the data generated will be stored on the researcher’s personal computer and will be destroyed after 2 years
   f. I have been informed that anonymized research data may be made available to other members of the research community as a part of the researcher’s unpublished doctoral thesis
   g. If necessary, any data from me will be referred to by a pseudonym in any publications arising from the research
   h. I have been given contact details for a person whom I can contact if I have any concerns about the way in which this research project is being conducted
   i. I have been informed that a summary copy of the research findings will be forwarded to me, should I request this.
   j. the interview will be video-taped (Skyped)
I wish to receive a copy of the summary project report on research findings □ yes □ no (please tick)

Email or postal address to which a summary should be sent:

Participant signature: ___________________________ Date: ___________________________

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Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

simone.facey-holst@open.ac.uk

Details for an alternative contact if you have any concerns about the way the research project is being conducted:

Dr. Alison Buckler (lead supervisor)
Fellow Researcher
Faculty of Wellbeing, Education and Language Studies
The Open University
Walton Hall
Milton Keynes
MK7 6AA

alison.buckler@open.ac.uk

This research has been reviewed by, and received a favourable opinion, from the OU Human Research Ethics Committee - HREC reference number: HREC/2018/2759/Holst (http://www.open.ac.uk/research/ethics/).
## Appendix 4 – Interview schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>INTERVIEW 1</th>
<th>INTERVIEW 2</th>
<th>INTERVIEW 3</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Winter term</strong></td>
<td><strong>Spring term</strong></td>
<td><strong>Summer term</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Motherhood, work and educational leadership – the early years</td>
<td>Maternity leave, returning to work and career progression</td>
<td>Work-life balance and looking to the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Timeline</td>
<td>3 or 4 significant items</td>
<td>Weekly photo-journal</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Introduction to…**

**Interview 1**

Hi…

Thanks for arranging to chat with me today about motherhood and school leadership. This interview will focus on the early years – your experiences of gendered leadership and motherhood when you were growing up.

Please refer to your 3 items at any point of the interview where you see fit. Show them, talk about their significance to that chapter of your story.

So, to begin…

**Interview 3**

Hi…

It has been such a pleasure chatting with you about your experiences of motherhood and school leadership. For this final interview, we want to talk about your day-to-day experiences as a mother and a school leader. We also want to look to the future and talk about initiatives and how these could impact on the lives of school leaders who are mothers.

I can see you have your photographs. As with the items that we used back in Interview 1, please use your photographs at any point in the interview that you like.
Can you tell me a bit about yourself?
What was it like for you, in general, when you were growing up?
At that time, what were your ideas and experiences about working women?
Was this the norm?
Give examples
What impact do you think these had on your perception of yourself as a female and the options that were available to you?

Was access to financial resources an issue?
How did access to financial resources influence the career choices of your mother / aunties etc?

When you were in primary school, what were your experiences of school leadership?
… Secondary school?
… University?
How do you think your own experiences as a student, in primary/secondary school and university, influenced your perception of school leadership?
… of secondary school leadership?

What is your first memory of a woman in a leadership role?
What is your first memory of a woman in a school leadership role?

Could you please remind me, at what point in your career you decided to start a family?
Tell me about the thought process that you went through before you decided to start a family? What factors supported your decision? Did anything worry you?
Relate to me the conversation you had with your line manager/headteacher when you told them you were expecting a baby? How did you think they were going to respond? And how did this made you feel?
How did your colleagues respond to your expecting a baby?
Were there other colleagues/friends from other schools, etc who were expecting at the same time?

What initiatives (the little things and the big things) were in place at school to support you during your pregnancy? Maternity leave?
Please tell me about your contact with school during your maternity leave. KIT days?
How long did you take off / staggered return… etc

What was it like returning to work after maternity leave? How did your day-to-day routines change?
Did anything surprise you or not go to plan?
What support did you put in place at home / for childcare?

Please tell me about your childcare set up? … Before school and after school child

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How did your colleagues respond to your expecting a baby?
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Please tell me about your contact with school during your maternity leave. KIT days?
How long did you take off / staggered return… etc

What was it like returning to work after maternity leave? How did your day-to-day routines change?
Did anything surprise you or not go to plan?
What support did you put in place at home / for childcare?

Please tell me about your childcare set up? … Before school and after school child

Walk me through what a typical day in the life of (name) AHT and mother.
In your experience, how would you describe the effectiveness of the initiatives that are in place at your school now to support teachers (senior teachers/HTs) who are mothers?
Suppose you were asked to suggest initiatives to support senior teachers who are mothers, what would you suggest and why?
Considering the experiences that you just shared, how would you summarise your understanding of English secondary school culture towards mothers who are school leaders?
Looking back in hindsight at your experiences as a (senior teacher working towards headship) HT who is also a mum, if you could give some advice about career and motherhood to your younger self – before your children/NQT/when you were a student – which younger self would you choose, what would be the advice and why?

If you have a magic wand (are the minister of schools) and you could
When you were in school – primary and secondary - what were your thoughts about what you would like to do when you grow up?

When did you first decide that you would like to have children? Why did you want to have children?

At that time - when you were in primary and secondary school and thinking of your future career, and when you decide you would like to have children – what were your thoughts around how you would balance your work and family life?

When did you decided that you wanted to become a headteacher and what were the factors that motivated you to make that decision?

Looking back at your experiences of motherhood and of leadership when you were growing up, how do you think this influenced the life choices that you have made?

care arrangements and how these fit into your routine?

Looking back over the time that you have been a mum and a school leader, what are your impressions on how becoming a parent impacted on your career progression?

In your opinion and experience, how would you describe the impact of access to financial resources on the day-to-day work life of a mother who is a school leader? How has this impacted on your career progression?

In light of what we have been talking about today, how your life and career have been impacted by becoming a mother, think back to when you just started out in your teaching career (teacher training, NQT), at that time what were your impressions of gender and school leadership? How have your impressions changed with the passing of time?

What advice would you give a teacher who is progressing towards headship but also wants to become a mother?

If you had a chance to do it all again – motherhood and career – what would you change? And why?

make any changes to the structure and culture of secondary schools in England, as they relate to motherhood and school leadership, what changes would you make and why?
Appendix 5 – Examples of early codes
Appendix 6 – Examples of emerging themes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nodes</th>
<th>Sources</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to financial resources</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artefacts</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building rapport generates deep rich data</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career and leadership aspirations inc when young</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emotionally tricky situations - miscarriages, IVF, others' experiences</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of discrimination during the interview process</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of school leadership</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experiences of working mothers</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of parents on life chances</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influence of teachers and other role models</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Memorable quotes</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motherhood aspirations when young</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of being limited as a female</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Perceptions of work life balance</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Structure and school culture</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wanting to make a difference</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Appendix 7 – Examples of subthemes

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subtheme</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>Total</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Maternity leave</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feeling judged</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not wanting to appear weak while pregnant</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>How women experience pregnancy and maternity leave</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KIT Days</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Initiatives put in place to support teachers who are mothers inc pregnancy and maternity leave</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Making the best use of maternity leave time to progress career</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career progression</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Career progression and pregnancy, maternity leave</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Factors hindering career progression</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Queen bees vs supportive women leaders</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>13</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Getting a hard time from other women leaders</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Appendix 8 – Examples of references

Reference 1 - 0.27% Coverage

So, I got flexible working at the moment, which is amazing. So, I haven’t actually been into school since Tuesday lunchtime.

Reference 2 - 0.89% Coverage

And then last week the midwife said she wanted me to either go on maternity leave or reduce my hours. So, my boss said, ‘That’s fine. Just teach year 11.’ So, I am literally just teaching year 11. I am in school to teach year 11. And I have got 2 year 11 classes. And then I am working from home for the rest of the time. I am kinna doing a combination of working and resting. That is what have been agreed.

Reference 1 - 0.91% Coverage

And so yeah, the combination of SPD and the undiagnosed of blood sugar level being all over the place, I really started to struggle. This was with (third son). I was head of department. I had people off left, right and centre. I was trying to cover them. And so, they didn’t put anything in place. And I asked for help. One of the things I was struggling with was that we have double lessons. And obviously being Science, you stand up on your feet for quite a lot of the time. One thing I was struggling with was being able to go for 100 minutes without going to the toilet.

Reference 2 - 1.62% Coverage

I was struggling with that and I ask if I could have one just be able to pop in ever so often and be able to relief me so that I could just go out to the toilet. And they were just rubbish with sorting that. And so, a couple of times I had to just ask for help. And I don’t ever ask anyone for help at any point unless it actually it is genuinely at the point where this is the last thing I need. Like it is the last resort. And so, I got to the point where my mobility got really bad and they were trying to sort me a lift so that I didn’t have to walk up the stairs, and all that kind of stuff. And they messed around with it and it just took ages. In the end, I just went to my doctor and said, I just can’t do the job. And my doctor signed me off when I was about 30 weeks pregnant. (Third son) was born at 37 weeks. So, they then had to cover me for 7 weeks. But there was no one to cover me. So, I was setting cover work and doing all sorts. And I was trying to run the department from home, mark controlled assessments.
Appendix 9 – Example of participant’s timeline

This timeline links the key milestones in Verity’s personal and professional life.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Professional</th>
<th>Time</th>
<th>Personal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>School No. 1</td>
<td>Year 2002 - 2008</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>State funded co-ed comprehensive</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role - NQT Teacher of English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoted to: KS3 Coordinator (2004) Literacy across the Curriculum Coordinator (2005) and then KS4 Coordinator/Deputy HOD by 2006</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School No. 2</td>
<td>Year 2009 - 2014</td>
<td>Married 2010 First child in 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Co-ed secondary academy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role - Head of English</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Master's degree in educational leadership and management</td>
<td>Part-time 2011-13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School No. 3</td>
<td>Year 2014 to 2010</td>
<td>Second child in 2016</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Co-ed secondary academy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role - Assistant Headteacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School No. 4</td>
<td>Year 2020</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(Co-ed secondary academy)</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role - Deputy headteacher</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3a: Verity's timeline profile