Received: 9 January 2024 | Accepted: 14 June 2024

DOI: 10.1002/berj.4046

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

BERJ BERA

Crossing the line? Exploring situated, interactional negotiations of parental involvement in primary homework in England and Italy

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Abstract

Primary school homework is a common practice internationally, historically viewed as an independent child activity, but more recently recognised as a family accomplishment. Parental involvement in homework has been principally discussed in relation to general and fixed typologies, with parent behaviours categorised into pre-defined 'types'. This paper challenges that framing by theorising homework as an interactional event. It illustrates that parental involvement is not simply determined by parents' involvement 'type'; rather, as an interactional exercise, homework is negotiated in-the-moment by parent and child, in linguistic, embodied and material ways. Based on a corpus of 74 video-recorded homework sessions collected in England and Italy, and adopting discourse analysis, the article reveals that parents display their understanding of what counts as 'appropriate involvement' and, at the same time, locally negotiate this with their children, often adapting their involvement practices to meet children's explicit or implicit requests. We present this phenomenon as a 'flexible line of involvement' which can shift during each interaction, according to local negotiations embedded within the homework encounter. This shapes the unfolding event, as the parent's moment-by-moment responses to their child may result in them 'crossing the line'. By demonstrating the locally negotiated fluidity of parental involvement, this article highlights the

complexity of parent–child primary homework, moving beyond common assumptions that homework is either a lone child's activity, a task solely shaped by schools, or the result of fixed types of parental involvement.

KEYWORDS
negotiation, parent involvement, parent–child interaction, primary homework, video recordings

Key insights

What is the main issue that the paper addresses?

The paper challenges established typologies of parental involvement in primary homework, by analysing instances of parent–child homework as interactional phenomena. It sheds light on the situated ways in which parents and children multimodally display, enact and locally negotiate their assumptions concerning parental involvement, through language, embodiments and material artefacts.

What are the main insights that the paper provides?

Parental homework involvement is an interactional exercise, negotiated flexibly in-the-moment by parents who must balance their own view of homework autonomy/support with their child's implicit and explicit indications and requests. We conceptualise this as a 'flexible line of involvement' that shifts according to local negotiations embedded within the homework encounter.

INTRODUCTION

Homework is a long-established and common practice in many educational systems internationally, and in some countries its use extends to the primary school sector. Assumed to be accomplished by children alone, for decades this activity was taken for granted and largely overlooked by teachers, parents and educational researchers alike. However, in recent years, homework has drawn increasing attention, becoming a key topic in both educational research and public debates. This is, in part, because of the increased responsibilisation of parents (Brooks & Hodkinson, 2022; Fargion, 2023). In many Western, neoliberal societies, broad conceptualisations of parental responsibility now move beyond obligations towards a child's physical wellbeing to include accountability for their educational outcomes, thus reflecting and supporting the neoliberal ideal of individualised, competitive school systems (see Torrance, 2017). This social discourse increasingly anticipates direct, practical involvement with a child's schooling. Such responsibilisation has led to a change in homework's 'participation framework' (Goffman, 1974), transforming it from a child's duty into a *family accomplishment*, involving not only children but also, and on a daily basis, their parents (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015). Consistent with contemporary models of 'good parenting' as 'involved parenting' (Faircloth, 2014; Ochs & Kremer-Sadlik, 2013; Vincent, 2017),

expectations that parents participate in their children's schooling, and particularly with homework, have increased (Kremer-Sadlik & Gutiérrez, 2013). Both families and schools associate parental homework support with later academic success (Calarco et al., 2022; Clark, 2020; Levin et al., 1997; Moon & Ivins, 2004; Wyness, 2020), and this presumed connection is often reinforced by government policy (see Department for Children Schools and Families, 2010a & 2010b; Hallam & Rogers, 2018; Ofsted, 2018). Indeed, parents sometimes believe schools and teachers invite and value their direct involvement in their child's education (Green et al., 2007; Walker et al., 2004), although such invitations, being often based on classed and raced assumptions about 'appropriate' family engagement, marginalise some parents (Baxter & Kilderry, 2022; Calarco, 2020; Lareau, 2003; Smith, 2022; Strømme & Helland, 2020). Recent pandemic school closures which required family support for home-based learning (see Darragh & Franke, 2021; Delès, 2021; Zhang et al., 2023) also reignited the parental role in schooling as a 'hot topic', turning the spotlight on homework as a parent–child activity.

Despite its recent high profile, there is little detailed understanding of homework as a parent–child interactional encounter. Indeed, there is a widely held assumption, by society, governments, and researchers, that homework is a largely school-directed and controlled activity (Farrell & Danby, 2015). Consequently, research often focuses on parents' indirect homework support (e.g. general oversight, emotional support or communication with teachers), not their situated, active involvement (Ariës & Cabus, 2015). Furthermore, the literature which does consider parent–child homework categorises parental practices into broad and general typologies of involvement, overlooking the situated unfolding of homework interactions and therefore failing to account for the ways in which parents' involvement practices are shaped by local contingencies, such as children's conduct. This paper challenges both the conception of homework as a school-controlled activity and established typologies of homework support, by adopting a micro and situated perspective to investigate parent–child homework interactions. Based on a corpus of 74 video-recorded homework sessions from England and Italy, and adopting discourse analysis, the paper analyses instances of parental involvement in homework as interactional phenomena. The analysis shows that parental involvement is not simply determined by parents' involvement 'type'; rather, it is an interactional exercise, negotiated in-the-moment by parents who must balance their own 'view' of homework as either an autonomous or supported exercise, with the situated and localised requirements of task and child, resulting in a complex positioning and repositioning of the 'line' between homework autonomy and homework support. In this way, the study demonstrates the centrality, nuance, fluidity and complexity of parents' homework involvement, thereby promoting educators' awareness of the parental role in shaping this apparently school-directed practice.

CHALLENGING TYPOLOGIES: HOMEWORK INVOLVEMENT AS NEGOTIATED INTERACTION

Parental involvement typologies and their limitations

Influenced by research in both sociology and developmental psychology (see Baumrind's well-known 1967 study on 'parenting styles'), the literature on parental involvement in schooling, and more specifically their involvement in primary homework, has long been dedicated to categorising parent behaviours into 'types'. In an early work on the topic, Grolnick and Ryan (1989) classified parental school-related behaviours into three basic dimensions (autonomy support, direct involvement and structural provisions), finding that autonomy support positively predicted children's self-regulation and competence. McNamara et al. (2000)

characterised parents' involvement strategies as encouragement, praise, surveillance, criticism and bribery. Focusing specifically on homework in Grades 2–12, Harris Cooper et al. (2000) defined a model which categorised parents' behaviours into autonomy support, direct involvement, distraction elimination and interference. While autonomy support was associated with students' higher test scores, better class grades and more homework completed, direct involvement was associated with lower test scores and poorer class grades. Reviewing previous studies, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) divided parental homework support types according to the development of homework structures, the intention to teach, and the promotion of learning strategies, stressing how such types of involvement may relate to students' attitudes about homework and perceptions of personal competence. Overall, research has distinguished two broad types of parental homework assistance: control versus support (Grolnick & Pomerantz, 2009; Pomerantz et al., 2007). While the former has shown mostly detrimental effects, the latter is typically associated with positive educational outcomes (Dumont et al., 2014; Silinskas et al., 2013; Silinskas & Kikas, 2019). Most recently, parental homework involvement has been defined in relation to types of help-giving, and categorised as dependent help-giving, autonomy help-giving, or avoiding help-giving (Grinshtain & Harpaz, 2021), supported again by the view that parental involvement focused on academic performance is less beneficial than developing children's homework autonomy (Sayers et al., 2023).

Categorisation by broad typologies of parental involvement, both generally and in relation to homework specifically, is therefore a distinct thread in the literature. However, typologies and categorisations have well-established limits. Weber (1949), whose work underpins the idea of typologies, warned of the need to be wary of the degree to which such constructs 'approximate[] to or diverge[] from reality' (p. 90). More recent scholars agree that typologies are 'socially constructed abstractions' rooted in the assumptions of those who devise them (see e.g. Torr, 2008, p. 160). Torr (2008) argues for the reframing of typologies as 'means' not 'ends'. In other words, viewing the categorisations, or individuals within them, as definitive and fixed is problematic. Yet, in many papers, typologies are still presented as idealised, neatly ordered, stable classifications. In the homework literature specifically, parental involvement is often presented as a fixed and 'monolithic' phenomenon, as though each parent's practices are stable over time and across different homework situations. Furthermore, studies relying on categorisation tend to convey a conception of involvement as uniquely dependent on parents' attitudes, overlooking the complexity and fluidity of the phenomenon they seek to explain. The methodologies adopted (mostly questionnaires, surveys and interviews) overlook the influence of situational features (e.g. homework quantity, task complexity, children's characteristics and agency, and parents' views about their involvement and role; see Corno, 1996; Green et al., 2007; Wingard & Forsberg, 2009). This obscures the moment-by-moment practices whereby parents and children negotiate involvement through situated social interaction.

The inflexibility of typologies for understanding society has been particularly critiqued by feminist writers. Maynard (1995) outlines several problems with categorising behaviours or individuals, such as: narrowing the focus towards stereotypes; ignoring differences within a category; ethnocentricity focused on white or Western norms; and exclusion of practices or people outside chosen definitions. Ultimately, typologies risk producing 'sterile' theory in which 'pre-given labels' are simplistically applied (Maynard, 1995, p. 267). Stanley and Wise (2003) also expose the regulatory function of typologies when theorists present one category as more valid than another, thus organising individuals into 'goodies' and 'baddies' (p. 49). We recognise this critique in the literature on parental homework involvement, because the categorisation of 'autonomy support' behaviours and 'controlling' behaviours often presents the latter as 'deficient' or 'less effective'. This paints some parental behaviours as a risk to the child's future, rather than recognising the advantages of parental flexibility.

Beyond typologies: researching homework interaction

In contrast with the considerable research on parent-involvement typologies, some studies theorise and analyse homework in a more fluid way which recognises the social dynamism of family interactions, therefore avoiding both the inherently reductive nature of typologies and the dangers of stereotyped views. The more nuanced understanding of parental involvement in primary homework in such papers hints that it may be more accurately understood as a reflective interaction. Baranovich et al.'s (2019) small-scale, observational study of the individual strategies parents exhibit during homework interactions with 6-year-olds showed that parents could be responsive to circumstance, such as speeding up when time was limited. This study also indicates children's potential for shaping homework interactions: when one child resisted the mother's attempt to delegate responsibility, the parent could not reduce assistance.

The child's role in shaping the trajectories of parents' involvement in primary homework is particularly shown by studies adopting discourse analysis. Among these, Goodwin (2007) has pioneered the illustration of parents' responsiveness to children's verbal and bodily conduct. By analysing a father–daughter homework 'battle', Goodwin demonstrates how the parent adjusts, moment-by-moment, his level and style of involvement to the child's engagement and focus, as displayed through her talk and bodily configuration. Similarly, Wingard and Forsberg (2009) show that parental homework involvement is motivated by complex factors, including a child's need for help, and is locally negotiated through parent–child exchanges. Forsberg (2007) further suggests that parental homework involvement is interactionally achieved, with parents and children discursively positioning themselves and one another in relation to the cultural concepts of involvement and autonomy. Offering rare attention to interactional dimensions, these studies point towards the situated and cooperatively achieved nature of parental involvement in homework, challenging the idea that parent–child homework interactions can be simplistically categorised or defined by strict typologies.

In line with these works, and challenging longstanding conceptualisations of parental homework involvement into pre-defined 'types', the present study will show that the situated interaction around a homework exercise is significant in revealing how and why individual parents make particular choices over the support or autonomy of their child's learning. Parents' homework involvement appears both individualised and potentially fluid. As each interaction unfolds, the parent flexes the line of their involvement, shaping the homework encounter.

Theorising homework as an interactional achievement

In this study, homework is conceived and analysed as a *family interactive achievement*, i.e. an activity jointly accomplished by parents and children through the fluidity of social interaction. Particular relevance is therefore attributed to language and embodied dimensions in interaction. Consistent with a phenomenological approach, language-in-interaction is viewed not merely as a means to exchange information, but as a way of experiencing the world (Duranti, 2009, 2015; Ochs, 2012). Positing that language 'is implicated in moment-to-moment thinking, feeling, and being in the world' (Ochs, 2012, p. 144), we examine parent–child homework interactions as sites where participants cooperatively make sense of their experiences, display their assumptions, enact specific identities and roles, and ultimately co-construct their social world. By analysing spontaneous parent–child interactions during and about homework, this study traces and describes participants' meaning-making practices, shedding light on the situated ways in which parents and children display, enact and negotiate their fluid and ever-developing assumptions concerning parental involvement.

EDUCATIONAL CONTEXT: HOMEWORK IN ENGLAND AND ITALY

Despite minor differences in the age ranges of primary education, England and Italy have similar homework contexts: both countries lack legislation or explicit guidelines on the topic, yet homework still constitutes a dominant practice.

In the UK, educational systems and practices vary between the home nations because responsibility for education is devolved to each national government. In England, where this study's data was collected, homework is not statutory in primary schools. Historically, governments have offered guidance on the frequency and length of homework at primary level, and Ofsted, the organisation that monitors the quality of education, has previously promoted its use (Ofsted, 2018: withdrawn 2019). However, government guidance was abolished in 2012 and the existing documentation used by Ofsted inspectors no longer references homework (Ofsted, 2023). Currently, therefore, individual head teachers develop their school's policy and approach to primary homework. However, as an established educational instrument for several decades, primary homework remains an almost universal practice (Medwell & Wray, 2019).

Similar to England, Italy has no established homework laws, policies or guidelines at the national level. Consistent with school autonomy, decisions concerning homework are taken by head teachers and teachers. Notwithstanding the lack of legislation, homework repeatedly enters political discourses, with Ministers of Education often taking positions against homework (Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Pavesi, 2018). Such political incursions nourish the public debate on homework's suitability, with an increasing number of researchers and experts recommending its reduction or abolition (Parodi, 2016, 2018; Tonucci, 2003). Despite this debate, homework remains a largely taken-for-granted practice.

The responsibilisation discourse, which situates homework involvement within good parenting, is relevant in both contexts. Fargion (2023) highlights that Italian teachers expect parental adherence to practices associated with neoliberal responsibilisation, including intensive involvement and educational support, and are critical when parents do not adopt this approach. Similarly, in England, teachers direct parents towards high levels of participation, simultaneously criticising them for disinterest or the 'wrong kind' of involvement (Goodall, 2018, 2021). Alongside this, ideological shifts towards a functional view of education (principally to gain qualifications; Goodall, 2021) and global assessment measures like the Programme for International Student Assessment, create pressure to replicate pedagogical practices like homework, which are associated with academically high-achieving nations (OECD, 2023). This paper's focus countries are therefore contexts where parental involvement in homework is expected.

DATA AND METHODOLOGY

The data used in this study came from two corpora of ethnographic, participant-recorded videos of homework sessions collected in England and Italy between 2018 and 2020. Both datasets centre on primary-aged children, with participants recruited through social media and the researchers' networks.[i] The first dataset came from an in-depth study of eight English mothers with primary-aged children, which includes 12 videos of parent-supported homework, totalling three and a half hours of footage. Participants were from both middle- and working-class backgrounds. There was less variety in the group's ethnicity, as all were white. The wider project includes 16 interviews with the mother-participants. The second corpus was collected in 19 family residences in northern Italy and consists of 62 video-recorded homework sessions totalling 40 h of footage. All families were middle-class and

Italian apart from three migrant families. These data belong to a larger project investigating children's socialisation during ordinary family activities (e.g. homework, mealtime, bedtime). Although this study did not target mothers' involvement specifically, in most videos a mother was homework helper.[ii]

We acknowledge the challenges of sample bias and participant reactivity inherent in the research design. Firstly, we were unable to access parents from marginalised contexts, such as 'uninvolved' or vulnerable families. Our participants visibly shared the educational model of 'involved parenting', including being actively engaged with homework. However, this aligns with the high responsibilisation context already discussed. Secondly, to minimise the potential impact of the researcher in the private home space, in both studies video-recording was self-administered by the parents in compliance with the researchers' broad requests. To reduce participant reactivity to the filming process, strategies were devised to make this as unobtrusive as possible, including: avoiding researcher presence; asking participants to self-record and self-select the data submitted; enabling the use of participants' own video-recording devices (mobile or laptop; England) and allowing participants time to become familiar with the camera and video-recording process (Italy). The English mothers were asked to film 20–30 min of homework, over one or multiple sessions. The Italian parents were asked to video-record two complete homework sessions. In both studies, the camera was placed in front of the child to capture their talk, facial expressions, embodiments, use of objects and the parent, if they remained present.

Given that children were captured in the videos, a careful ethical approach was taken. Recognising the power dynamic in research and debate over children's capacity to give meaningful consent (see Alderson & Morrow, 2004), we adopted the common research practice of trusting parents to act as 'ethical gatekeepers' (Böök & Mykkänen, 2014). Each explained the nature, requirements and potential risks of the research to their child, at which point the child could decline involvement. While parents gave formal consent for their child's participation, the Italian children gave verbal agreement and the English children also signed a child-appropriate agreement form. All participants could withdraw at any time.

Video data was transcribed for analysis and dissemination.[iii] To preserve anonymity, participants' names are fictionalised and other identifying information has been removed. In analysing the excerpts, we used discourse analysis (Schiffrin et al., 2005; Wetherell et al., 2001), which provides a uniquely suitable means of investigating the abstract, general and even fuzzy notion of parental involvement as an interactional achievement, i.e. something that participants do in and through the unfolding of interaction. Particular analytic attention has been paid to parents' ways of being involved, which are considered as situated enactments of their understanding, and active construction, of involvement.

Data analysis proceeded inductively. After repeated observation and cross-cultural comparison of the data, we noticed that parents in both corpora displayed a variety of ways of being involved in homework. Among these, we identified a core aspect, which was cross-culturally common: the inherently local, moment-by-moment and interaction-based nature of parental involvement in the homework activity. That is, the ways in which parents became involved, as well as the conception of 'involvement' they displayed and enacted, typically changed in the unfolding of homework encounters in response to the child's actions. In doing homework with their children, parents conducted different, even 'inconsistent', ways of being involved, for example shifting from leaving the child alone to completing the assigned exercises with them. The level and practices of parental involvement varied as a result of parent–child negotiations embedded within the homework encounter. The analysis focuses precisely on such negotiations of parental involvement, investigating how parents' involvement practices change—or not—in the unfolding of interactive sequences and, particularly, in response to children's actions such as requests for help or claims of knowledge and autonomy. In this way, the analysis illustrates that parent involvement, far from fitting into

fixed, pre-defined categories, constitutes an often flexible, locally achieved product of social interaction. The excerpts in the analysis section illustrate these findings. They are selected to demonstrate the diverse flexibility of the parent–child involvement negotiations, and to explicate our conceptualisation of the 'line of involvement'.

ANALYSIS

Being emblematic instances of parent–child involvement negotiations, the examples in this section illustrate the situated, linguistic and embodied ways in which parents display their understanding of what counts as 'parental involvement' and, at the same time, evidence how they locally negotiate this with their children. The analysis is thus framed around the conceptualisation of an '(in)flexible line' which shapes the involvement parents enact; it reveals that parents begin by actively displaying the line of their homework involvement according to conceptualisations of appropriate autonomy and support. However, as the interaction develops, parents engage in reflective and responsive negotiations with their children, in so doing, potentially shifting and crossing the line of involvement they previously set.

The analysis is divided into two sections. The first discusses a series of excerpts where the involvement line shifts flexibly in the unfolding exchange, as parents become more, or less, involved in response to their child's requests for help or claims of autonomy. In contrast, the second section presents one of the few cases in our data where the mother does not flex her involvement practices, instead resisting the child's appeal for adaptation.

Flexible lines: negotiating, shifting, and crossing the line of involvement

In the first example (Table 1), the level and practices of parental involvement shift flexibly throughout the exchange. Taken from the opening of a homework interaction, this exchange occurs between 9-year-old Emma and her mother, Sian. This mother describes herself as without responsibility for homework, and apparently intends for her child to work independently, although she has located the activity in the family kitchen, within the domain where she will be simultaneously baking with another child, suggesting that she expects to at least maintain an overseeing eye. Emma, described as academically capable, is tasked with a grammar exercise. As the video begins, parent and child are laughing, giving the impression that the homework process is light-hearted and stress free.

Initially, Sian gives both verbal and non-verbal indications that she will not be involved in the homework and that Emma will work autonomously. This is partly achieved by an attempt to physically position herself out-of-shot of the camera. Although sitting with Emma at the table where the homework takes place when the video commences, Sian leaves almost immediately, highlighting with her body her intention not to be involved, thereby creating a boundary to her participation. Line 1's authoritative and purposeful expression 'right', reinforced by the book slapping, indicates that the homework must begin. This is followed with a direction to 'get on with what you're doing' (line 2). The independence anticipated is emphasised by physically turning away from the table as though she will leave Emma alone. However, Sian then immediately seeks confirmation that the child can work independently, by turning back towards her and leaning in to ask what the task is (line 3), looking at it (line 4) and verbally confirming that Emma knows what to do (lines 6–7). Having received assurance that Emma understands the exercise, Sian then follows through with her framing of homework as an autonomous activity by leaving the table with a confirmatory nod (line 8). This interaction suggests that while Sian has an established view of homework as an

TABLE 1 Example 1—'It depends'.

Line	Speaker	Speech and action
1	Sian	Right *((slaps book))*
2		Get on with what you're doing *((turns away and goes to leave the table))*
3		*((turns back towards Emma and leans in))* what are ya doing?
4		*((Looks at the page in the open workbook))*
5	Emma	Using connectives *((looking at open schoolbook))*
6	Sian	Ok can you do that?
7	Emma	*((looks at Sian))* Yeh
8	Sian	*((Nods at Emma))* All right then *((Gets up to leave))*
9	Emma	It depends *((laughs))*
10	Sian	*((laughs and continues to leave table))* Well see how you go
11		*((Sian is now absent from view))*
12		(11.0)[a] *((Emma focuses on the book and appears to be reading; she holds the pen in her hand))*
13	Emma	Need your help *((moving head around then looks up towards Sian))*
14	Sian	*((laughs))* that didn't last long did it
15	Emma	No *((pulls humorous face and looks at camera))*
16	Sian	What do you need help with? *((sits back down at table and leans in to see book))*

[a]Arabic numbers in round brackets indicate seconds of silence.

independent task and is efficient and clear about this expectation, she also appreciates that this stance can only be maintained if the child understands the task and can work without support.

In line 9, Emma momentarily casts doubt about her ability to be independent with the phrase 'it depends'. Shared laughter (lines 9 and 10) suggests a mutual understanding that planned autonomy may sometimes be variable. However, Sian continues to leave the table, with a confirmatory 'well see how you go' (line 10), reinforcing homework's framing as an independent task. By line 11, with Sian completely out-of-shot, expectations of autonomy have been established, through both verbal and physical actions. In-person actions synchronise with the parent's stated view of homework, and establish the limit to her involvement.

However, after 11 s of apparently autonomous activity, in line 13 Emma shifts the framing of the homework, by appealing directly for assistance. 'Need your help' she declares explicitly, and looks directly at Sian for a response. Despite her stated position and the line already drawn, Sian makes no attempt to reinforce the expectation of homework independence. Responding light-heartedly with laughter and a joking 'that didn't last long' (line 14), Sian adapts expectations immediately, by returning to the table, sitting down, and asking 'what do you need help with?' (line 16). It is clear from this interaction that intended expectations set at the outset are fluid and negotiable. The precise involvement develops as the activity unfolds and this parent willingly reframes expectations according to her child's needs. In this way, the child is given a degree of agency in influencing how the activity progresses and the amount of assistance she receives. Indeed, the activity then continues as a shared exercise for 11 min, with both mother and daughter working together to identify the required answers, before Sian again exits the scene, leaving Emma to continue alone.

This example establishes the complexity of parental responses to homework, as this mother takes a fluid approach to the line she initially draws between autonomy and assistance. As the interaction unfolds, the line shifts flexibly, according both to the child's

requests, and the parent's willingness to adjust her expectations, increasing or decreasing her support as needed.

The next excerpt (Tables 2a and 2b) offers a further example of the way parents' involvement line is locally negotiated, with the child's requests deeply influencing the extent of the mother's involvement. In this case, the mother is not physically present during exercise completion: she relies on a material artefact (a walkie-talkie) to assist the child without being beside her. Before the passage begins, the child has read the instructions, according to which she must match written words to their corresponding pictures, using a different colour for each connecting line. After checking Vale's understanding of the instructions, Federica prepares to leave her alone (Table 2a).

In this passage, Federica enacts and conveys her understanding of homework as an activity to be carried out autonomously, without her physical presence, and with little, at-a-distance help. After reading the assignment instructions with Vale and making sure she understands them (not transcribed), Federica announces she will leave her alone (line 1). Her embodied conduct in the meantime is important: while announcing she will go to make the beds, Federica sets up the walkie-talkie (line 1), thus providing Vale with a link to her. Later, during the unfolding interaction, the walkie-talkie allows Vale to maintain contact with her mother and ask for help. Using this material artefact, Federica successfully leaves Vale alone, granting her a degree of space and autonomy in doing the homework. Simultaneously, she remains available, able to offer support—although at a distance. After ensuring the link has been established (lines 2–10), Federica closes the interaction, announcing 'see you later', leaving the room, and shutting the door (line 11). Vale ratifies the closing of the interaction and assumes the role of 'autonomous student' by reciprocating the mother's farewell (line 12). Homework is thus cooperatively constructed as the *child's* activity. The only possible remaining maternal involvement is through a walkie-talkie.

However, as in example 1, the child's autonomy is limited. In the following 46 s, Vale prepares the crayons needed for the exercise and silently reads the instructions multiple times

TABLE 2A Example 2—'I'm going in the other room'.

Line	Speaker	Speech and action
1	Federica	So let's tune in. I'm going in the other room (2.3)[a] to make the beds *((sets up a walkie-talkie))*
2		*((walkie-talkie beeps))*
3	Vale	Is this one mine?
4	Federica	*((places walkie-talkie on the table in front of Vale))*
5		Yes
6	Vale	*((takes the walkie-talkie))*
7	Federica	Let's tune in *((setting another walkie-talkie))*
8		*((walkie-talkie beeps))*
9		Okay? On line three.
10	Vale	I'm three *((looking at the walkie-talkie in her hands))*
11	Federica	Okay. See you later *((leaving the room with a walkie-talkie and closing the door))*
12	Vale	See you later *((placing walkie-talkie on the table))*

[a]Arabic numbers in round brackets indicate seconds of silence.

TABLE 2B Example 2 continued—'I'm going in the other room'.

Line	Speaker	Speech and action
13	Vale	Mum but should I colour the words, or should I—or should I connect? *((on the walkie-talkie))*
14		(3.6)[a]
15	Federica	Well read again the instructions. The first word tells you what you have to do.
16		(49.0)[a] *((Vale stares at the notebook and reads the instructions multiple times. Then she takes the walkie-talkie and asks for help again))*
17	Vale	I understood you must connect but must you also colour that sheet? *((on the walkie-talkie))*
18		(4.0)[a]
19	Vale	Of the same colour you have connected it?
20		(1.5)[a]
21	Federica	It's written you must (connect)[b], you are not required to do it *((in annoyed tone))*
22		Certainly it is very beautiful if you colour it. But you are not required to.
23		There it's written you must connect by using different colours.
24		Over and out.
25	Vale	Thank you mum *((on the walkie-talkie))*
26		*((places walkie-talkie on the table))*
27		(4.5)[a]
28	Vale	*((takes walkie-talkie again))*
29		Over and out.
30		*((places walkie-talkie on the table, then she begins the exercise))*

[a]Arabic numbers in round brackets indicate seconds of silence.

[b]Words in round brackets indicate uncertainty in the transcribed word(s).

(not transcribed). Appearing to be stuck, she does not begin the exercise. Finally, she grabs the walkie-talkie and seeks her mother's help (Table 2b).

In line 13, Vale starts talking on the walkie-talkie, asking for Federica's help. By using this artefact rather than calling the mother into the room, the child acts in accordance with the tacitly shared idea of homework autonomy, with the mother supporting *at a distance*, if at all. Summoning her mother on the walkie-talkie ('Mum'), Vale asks an 'either–or question' proposing two alternative ways of completing the exercises (i.e. colouring the words or connecting them to the pictures, line 13). This question demonstrates that she has not understood the instructions. Federica rapidly picks up the walkie-talkie and replies (line 15), thus finding a way to support the child and be present, from a distance. The walkie-talkie is thus cooperatively used as a link between mother and child, allowing the parent to find a balance between presence, involvement, support on one side, and absence and promotion of autonomy on the other. Essentially, it manifests the particular line the mother has defined. Yet, the entanglement between presence and absence is even more complex in this exchange, as there is a further dimension of 'absence' in the mother's reply. Indeed, Federica does not answer the 'either–or question'. Rather than directly solving the child's problem by selecting one of the alternatives, she scaffolds her answer, giving Vale directions for finding the solution (line 15). She attempts to empower the child, by providing the means to solve

the problem autonomously. The idea that homework should be done independently, with little parental help, is thus reinforced. Unlike the mother in example 1, Frederica displays, and then reinforces, a line that she does not want to cross. She responds to her child's needs, in the moment of the interaction, whilst maintaining her view of 'appropriate' homework involvement.

Following Federica's suggestion, Vale reads the instructions attentively (line 16). However, this appears insufficient to solve her doubt: she again calls Federica on the walkie-talkie. Demonstrating that she has complied with Federica's directive (i.e. read the instructions; note that she says 'I understood', line 17) Vale poses another question, asking whether she should do an additional activity beyond that indicated in the instructions (i.e. colour the sheet, lines 17–19). Thus, Vale treats Federica's scaffolding (line 15) as insufficient, making further help necessary.

In response (lines 21–23), Federica refers to the exercise instructions ('it's written'), implying that Vale could, and should, have retrieved the information autonomously. Finally, she directly answers the question by pointing out the *optional* character of the colouring ('you are not required to do it', line 21; repeated line 22). With this intervention, Federica crosses the line of involvement she had previously drawn, going beyond scaffolding by explicitly telling the child what is written and, therefore, what she must do. That Federica considers this answer as a crossing of her 'involvement line' is inferred by her annoyed tone and the way she rapidly and categorically ends her explanation. Through the final, prosodically marked 'over and out' (line 24), she closes the interaction and re-establishes her line, conveying she will not provide further help. Vale finally assumes the autonomous student role projected by her mother: she ends the conversation ('over and out', line 29) and begins completing the exercise alone.

Similar to example 1, this exchange demonstrates how parents' conceptions of involvement are both displayed and simultaneously negotiated in the unfolding of ordinary homework interactions. Throughout the excerpt, the mother demonstrates her orientation to homework as an activity the child should do alone, with little or no help. However, by skilfully exploiting the material affordances provided by the mother (i.e. the walkie-talkie), the child maintains contact and repeatedly asks for support. Despite her initial reluctance, the mother finally provides substantial help by giving an explicit and direct solution to the child's doubts. As in our analysis of example 1, this mother responds to her child's requests for help. Nevertheless, while she does increase involvement in response to the child's appeals, the mother never crosses the line into 'physical presence', maintaining interaction only through the device.

As the excerpts so far show, the extent to which parents participate in homework, the ways in which they help their children with assignments, and the forms of involvement they enact, do not simply depend on their 'involvement type' or on pre-established ideas concerning appropriate (or inappropriate) homework assistance. Rather, parents' participation is the result of local, moment-by-moment interactions with their children, which crucially shape parents' trajectories of involvement. The next example (Table 3) further illustrates this point; however, unlike previous excerpts, in this case the child (Virginia) seeks *less* involvement from the parent (Serena). By resisting her mother's involvement, Virginia asserts her homework autonomy, claiming knowledge and the right to decide. Prior to this exchange, Virginia has been completing maths exercises alone, before calling her mother to check them. The excerpt begins when Serena problematises one of Virginia's calculations.

The excerpt is opened by Serena's request for an explanation, which problematises the way Virginia has completed the calculation (line 1). By highlighting an error and asking for an explanation, Serena demonstrates her conceptualisation of her homework role: she is responsible for correcting mistakes. The format of the request treats the child as

TABLE 3 Example 3—'Teacher Marco told me that'.

Line	Speaker	Speech and action
1	Serena	Why did you turn it into six?
2		(3.0)[a] *((Virginia stares at the calculation))*
3	Virginia	Then you have to do four times nine
4		(0.9)[a]
5	Serena	No
6	Virginia	Yes
7	Serena	The calculation is [[b]fifty times nine *((pointing to the calculation in the maths notebook))*; Figure 1]
8	Virginia	[[b]teacher Marco told me that *((pushing Serena's hand away from the maths notebook))*; Figure 2]
9	Serena	*((laughing softly))* Ok. If teacher Marco told you that, it remains like this and
10		tomorrow teacher Marco will correct it

[a]Arabic numbers in round brackets indicate seconds of silence.

[b]An open square bracket indicates the moment when overlapping talk begins.

a competent subject, accountable for her homework-related choices. Homework is thus interactively conveyed as an activity that pertains primarily to the child, yet is subject to parental oversight and correction. In explaining the procedure she followed (line 3), Virginia rejects the parent's correction, presenting her calculation as rational and positioning herself as a competent pupil who knows how the task must be done. However, the mother challenges this claim ('no', line 5), explaining why the procedure is wrong ('the calculation is fifty times nine', line 7). This insistence on correcting the child's mistake further demonstrates Serena's orientation to her role as homework supervisor, responsible for checking the work and eliminating mistakes. Note that, while talking, she points to the calculation in the maths notebook (line 7, Figure 1). By correcting the calculation and touching the notebook, Serena enacts her conception of homework as a shared activity, in which she has rights and responsibilities. As with Sian and Federica in examples 1 and 2, homework involvement is thus achieved not merely through talk, but also through embodiments and the use of artefacts.

However, the child's conception of her mother's role in homework appears different. Vis-à-vis Serena's insistence on the correction, Virginia mobilises her first-hand knowledge of school experiences. By evoking the teacher's words ('teacher Marco told me that', line 8), talking over Serena's explanation, and concurrently pushing her mother's hand away from the homework (Figure 2), Virginia multimodally constructs homework (particularly the calculation) as her exclusive territory of knowledge and decision-making, rejecting Serena's involvement. Despite further underlining the error in the calculation through an ironic comment ('tomorrow teacher Marco will correct it', line 10), Serena abandons the correction (lines 9–10) and takes a step back. She does not insist on amending the work, despite the previous framing of her role, rather she permits Virginia's claims of knowledge and autonomy over homework, readjusting her involvement to accommodate the child's stance. Similar to examples 1 and 2, the mother flexes her line of involvement in response to the child's actions. After initially displaying an understanding of her role as 'homework supervisor', the mother then resets her line of involvement by adapting to the child's claim of knowledge and autonomy. Once again, the levels and practices of parental involvement emerge as the product of interactive negotiation and local calibration, resulting from Serena's understanding of

FIGURE 1 Serena points to the calculation in the maths notebook.

homework as a shared activity—at least in the moment of correction—and from Virginia's conception of it as her own individual accomplishment.

(In)flexible lines: maintaining parental conceptions

In the excerpts so far, the lines of 'involvement' were actively established, verbally, bodily and even materially, before shifting during the unfolding interaction, as mothers adapted their level and practices of involvement to the child's claims, indications and requests. Whether this generated more involvement (examples 1–2) or less (example 3), children's appeals met some form of parental adaptation, through a local, moment-by-moment, and individualised re-definition of involvement. In example 4 (Table 4), parent and child also hold contrasting ideas about where the line for parental support lies. However, in this case the mother remains immovable, maintaining her line of involvement despite the child's requests. The entire interaction unfolds as an attempt by both parties to persuade the other to their viewpoint.

Six-year-old Corey is struggling to answer reading comprehension questions about *The Lion and the Mouse* fable. His mother, Helen, is physically very 'present' in the homework, sitting beside him throughout, coaxing him to read the passage and answer the written questions. By this point, 13 min into the interaction, puzzled by the questions, Corey has made several verbal digressions. Helen has mostly relied on repetition of the question as her main strategy. However, because Corey requires more support to access meaning from the text than Helen is willing to give, in the focus passage his attempts to garner assistance become more extreme, as he tries to persuade her to write the answers for him. Meanwhile, Helen resists these attempts to negotiate more support, maintaining her conceptualisation that

FIGURE 2 Virginia pushes Serena's hand away from the maths notebook.

the homework is Corey's responsibility which he must complete without further assistance. Helen creates a line around homework which she will not cross, despite her son's repeated attempts to convince her. In refusing to cross the line and resisting the flexible involvement seen in earlier examples, Helen and Corey operate unilaterally, unable to negotiate interactively in accomplishment of the task because they each hold different framings of parental involvement. Unconventionally, we discuss their actions separately, to highlight the inflexibility and failed negotiation in this interaction.

In line 1, Helen's jokey suggestion that 'your teacher is gonna love it' conveys the inappropriateness of Corey's diversionary narrative about hunters killing the lion (not transcribed). Helen also laughs (line 2), an expression she repeats three times in this exchange (lines 7, 12, 22). Laughter suggests a light-heartedness which contrasts the growing annoyance exhibited in other lines, such as the warning tone (line 14) and increasing firmness (lines 16, 18 and 20). The humour–frustration juxtaposition suggests that Helen is struggling to manage the encounter, indicating that navigating homework interactions is not always straightforward for parents, even when they hold a clear view of what homework *should* be like. Corey's confusion, and attempts to solicit more help than Helen is willing to give, challenge her, and she consequently wavers between finding his resistance humorous and problematic.

In line 5, Helen repositions a material artefact (a pen) closer to Corey, in a non-verbal instruction to cease prevaricating and begin work. In line 10, she leaves a pause after her statement, expecting Corey to follow her demands, and in line 22, she reinforces spoken words ('I can't write like that') with a dismissive shake of the head to show she will not carry out Corey's plan. As with the other mothers, Helen multimodally displays—and maintains—the boundary to her involvement.

TABLE 4 Example 4—'It's cheating'.

Line	Speaker	Speech and action
1	Helen	Ok so shall we write that as an answer I'm sure your teacher is gonna love it
2		*((slight laugh))*
3	Corey	Why? Why—you *((jabbing at sheet with his finger))* can write it out
4		*((sits down in chair))* I don't know how to
5	Helen	I'm not writing your homework *((repositions pen on table closer to Corey))*
6	Corey	*((slumps back in chair))* I can't
7	Helen	*((laughing))* Miss Brown will know my handwriting
8	Corey	*((looks sideways at Helen))* How d'you know that?
9	Helen	Cos she knows yours
10		(3.0)[a]
11	Corey	Why can't you just write *((leaning forward, pointing at sheet))* er like mine?
12	Helen	Cos I can't *((laughs))* write like you
13	Corey	*((picks up pen and goes to write on corner of sheet))* Look
14	Helen	No *((warning voice))* Corey
15	Corey	Look just—*((writing on corner of sheet))*
16	Helen	*((slightly firmer))* Corey
17	Corey	Look
18	Helen	*((sharply))* Corey
19	Corey	*((focused))* this is how my writing is
20	Helen	*((slightly exasperated))* I know!
21	Corey	*((points at his writing with the end of the pen))* Write like that
22	Helen	*((slight laugh and shake of head))* I can't write like that
23	Corey	That's just—
24	Helen	Cos it's cheating Corey

[a]Arabic numbers in round brackets indicate seconds of silence.

In resisting Corey's appeals, Helen uses short, instructive utterances which minimise her input, attempt to regain control of the activity, and aim to redirect Corey's wavering focus. In line 5 she states, 'I'm not writing your homework', in line 7 'Miss Brown will know my handwriting' and in line 12 'Cos I can't write like you'. Although Helen successfully avoids both long explanations and Corey's plea for her to take over the task, she finds herself having to justify her stance to Corey, who is adept at continuing to push his desire for her to write for him. By asking several why and how questions (lines 3, 8, 11) Corey prolongs the exchange, forcing Helen to continue engaging with his appeals for greater help. In this sense, Corey is active in trying to re-negotiate his mother's involvement, forcing her to respond to his continued requests, although failing to re-site the line or encourage his mother to cross it, in the way the other children achieve. In lines 1, 7 and 9, Helen invokes the idea of teacher authority. First, she implies that the teacher will disapprove of Corey's idea (line 1). Then she indicates the teacher will recognise that the work is not Corey's (lines 7 and 9). However, invoking teacher displeasure does not persuade Corey and his persistence eventually forces Helen to explicitly define his request as 'cheating' in a final rejection (line 24). Although the teacher is not named in line 24, connotations of dishonesty suggest that the school rules

would be fundamentally broken. By interrupting Corey, there is a sense that Helen views this final claim as undeniable, thus reaffirming her parental involvement line.

Much of Corey's verbal and non-verbal behaviour in this exchange is crafted to resist his mother's encouragement to work independently. Alongside his literal request for Helen to write the answer for him, Corey offers his own confusion as explanation for his need. In line 4, he states 'I don't know how to', which in line 6, he escalates into a more recalcitrant 'I can't'. Resistance and dejection are imparted by the accompanying change in his body language: physically altering his form to mirror his feelings, he 'slumps' in his chair. As well as demonstrating his emotions, the action of slumping also physically moves Corey away from the table, paper and pen which are needed for the task, unmistakably defining his position as resistant to participation. He is unwilling or unable to cooperate with Helen's expectations, and the two fall into a tense stand-off as they both attempt to define the accepted line of parental involvement.

Corey's intent to overturn Helen's stance largely occurs through pressing Helen with questions which require her to justify her decision, and by ignoring her clear rejection of his idea. Lines 11, 13, 15, 17, 19 and 21 are all attempts to persuade Helen to his viewpoint. Verbal utterances are accompanied by non-verbal actions as he physically demonstrates what he wants Helen to do. 'Why can't you just write like mine?' he appeals, pointing to his writing (line 11). He follows this, simply but persuasively, by repeating the word 'look' in lines 13, 15 and 17. These repetitions act simultaneously as evidence of what he wants, and as a way to desperately implore for maternal support. Corey accompanies this with literal demonstrations of his writing, in a visual performance of what he seeks (lines 13, 15, 17 and 19). Mirroring Helen's earlier attempt to use placement of the pen to coax him into action, Corey now usurps her expectations for the pen's purpose, using it instead to encourage Helen to cross her line, showing, in his view, how simple it would be to give him more literal support. Corey demonstrates single-mindedness, ignoring his mother's assertions until she introduces the notion of 'cheating'.

In this complex interaction, parent and child hold contrasting positions, one seeking to confirm, the other attempting to re-negotiate homework involvement practices. In the end, despite the child's efforts to extend parental involvement, this mother stands firm that homework should be independently completed, framing her role as supportive in presence, but not assistive in action. Having established a robust view of parental homework involvement, she eventually secures her position through inflexible lines of negotiation.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

Theorising homework as a family interactive achievement, and challenging conceptualisations of homework as a school-directed activity, this study adopted a discourse analysis approach to examine spontaneous parent–child homework interactions in England and Italy. In so doing, it highlights the cross-cultural phenomenon of parental involvement negotiations. Consistent with Western neoliberal conceptualisations of 'parents' educational responsibility', which characterise both locations, the studies' mothers engaged in local negotiations concerning their level of involvement in the homework encounter. This sheds light on the situated ways in which parents and children display, enact and negotiate their assumptions and practices concerning parental involvement.

Using a situated and micro perspective, the analysis moved beyond the fixed categories of involvement described in previous literature which largely focus on academic outcomes and school-framed views of parental involvement, to examine the moment-by-moment unfolding of parent–child homework interactions. This resulted in the recognition of both parents' ongoing decision-making and children's crucial role in shaping homework interactions, thereby

establishing the part that situated dimensions play in the enactment of parental involvement. The analysis unveiled the range of linguistic, embodied, and material investments contributing to parent–child homework interactions, from the use of embodiments and material artefacts to define, encourage, or resist autonomy (examples 1–4), the scaffolding of support through language and materiality (example 2), the invocation of the teacher as a guard against inappropriate actions (example 3 and 4) and the management of physical presence and absence as a tool to independence (example 1 and 2). Indeed, this paper shows that presence does not necessarily equate to involvement. The most resolutely present parent (Helen; example 4) simultaneously restricts her involvement, whereas Frederica (example 2) offers support even when she is largely absent from the homework location.

We argue that parents' interactional homework involvement is negotiated across an invisible 'line' which marks the difference between assisted versus autonomous homework. Through this line, parents establish, using verbalisations, embodiments and material dimensions, the degree of assistance they are willing to give, and the point beyond which they will not participate. The line rests on, and indeed reveals, underlying conceptualisations of 'involvement', shaping parents' approach to homework support accordingly. The four given examples of parent–child interaction demonstrate that, as homework proceeds, the line is often re-aligned moment-by-moment, flexing in accordance with the person-to-person, situated interactions that occur, in which both parent and child are active participants. Our analysis shows that homework involvement is, most of the time, negotiated in the unfolding interaction, as parents respond to their child's initiative and demonstrate ongoing, adaptive, reflexive involvement. Children's requests, whether for more help (examples 1, 2 and 4) or more autonomy (example 3) are most frequently met by locally emerging parent adaptations. Parent practices, linked to both their underlying conceptualisations of involvement and their child's indications, may therefore include dimensions of autonomy, but can also involve forms of support, or the supervision of progress.

However, notwithstanding this generally fluid practice, evidence of children's agency in navigating support, and parents' mostly willing and reflective responses to this agency, the data also reveals that negotiations are not always successful. In example 4, the parent's predefined autonomy–support distinction, and confirmed framing of how homework *should* proceed, clash with the child's requests, resulting in interactive tension, and a child with limited opportunity to shape the progression of the homework, or level of support received. The line drawn is not crossed, risking the near-stalemate of the entire exercise. This example demonstrates that there are limits to parents' willingness to flex, adapt and negotiate. When a child seeks a level of involvement that stretches the parent's conceptualisation too far, would require significant blurring of the line, and is therefore too great a shift between autonomy and support, the parent resists or rebuffs the child's efforts at situated negotiation.

We speculate whether the reason for the line's variability, parent-to-parent, and why it is often re-negotiated, is because despite parental responsibilisation and implicit directions towards involvement (Green et al., 2007; Kremer-Sadlik & Fatigante, 2015; Walker et al., 2004; Wingard & Forsberg, 2007), there is little explicit agreement regarding the somewhat ambiguously defined notion of 'involvement' (Fox & Olsen, 2014). Were demarcation of the line made explicit, aligning practice with expectations might be easier. Instead, operating independently inside their family, each parent must devise and establish their own involvement line, which becomes flexible during homework interactions when circumstances hint that, for this child, or this activity, it is resting in the wrong place. Indeed, this explanation may account for the difficulties experienced in example 4. The ambiguity over appropriate involvement, left by the absence of clear expectations, may have led this mother to define, and then defend, a strict conceptualisation of her own. However, this is not to argue that the line of involvement should, or even can, be externally directed (by school or teacher) or permanently fixed, since we recognise the advantage inherent in parents' agile and reflective response to local and contextual factors such as the child's indications, homework type or task difficulty. Instead,

this paper recognises the challenges of situated negotiation and highlights that, sometimes, when the line of involvement becomes contested, family frustrations can result.

These findings have practical implications because they indicate the incompatibility between 'universal' primary homework and the parental responsibilisation discourse. With parents responsibilised for homework, the practice becomes inherently variable owing to the flexible, negotiated nature of parent–child interactions. Even where educators plan an equal or standard learning task for all, uniform completion is unlikely, because teacher regulation of homework is in tension with parents' active and adaptive involvement, as they construct and reconstruct homework according to situated interactions and specific contingencies. It is widely argued that differences in the extent and form of parental involvement impact children's academic futures, by perpetuating privileges and inequalities (Lareau, 1987, 2003, 2011; O'Keefe et al., 2023; Weininger & Lareau, 2003), an assumption also held by teachers (Calarco et al., 2022). Thus, the flexibility in homework interactions noted herein may negatively affect learning equity.

However, the unanticipated dimension of flexibility in parental homework involvement may also bring advantages. Our findings suggest that variations do not occur by chance, but that parents make nuanced, reflexive and responsive changes, according to their children's implicit and explicit requirements. As such, we caution against attempts to further standardise homework, instead recommending that teachers recognise and value parents' reflexive skills in supporting their own child's homework. A potential response to the 'flexible line of involvement' highlighted in this paper, that is sensitive to the negotiated variation in parental involvement, might therefore be to devise open-ended homework activities, which allow the process of in-the-moment, parent–child interaction to proceed unfettered by notions of 'right answers' and a 'correct approach'. This supports Corno and Xu's (2004) framing of homework as a 'process' not an 'output', and would provide an opportunity to develop dimensions such as problem-solving, learning engagement or perseverance. Open-ended tasks could alleviate some of the tensions that parents experience around where to 'set' their line of involvement, freeing them to be interactionally responsive to child, task and circumstance, especially if interactional flexibility is anticipated and valued by teachers. Designing homework that supports the flexibility of parent–child interactions would also meet some policymaker and educator claims that homework's main purpose is to encourage parental involvement (Medwell & Wray, 2019).

To conclude, this paper suggests that broad typologies and categorisations of parental homework involvement may be oversimplistic, since they lack the nuance to reflect either the varied homework experiences of individual parents or the localised and negotiated interactions of particular homework encounters, during which parents shift and flex their involvement in-the-moment and in response to children's actions. We posit a need for greater understanding of parental (in)flexibility around homework involvement, to appreciate both the reflective role that parents play in shaping this apparently school-directed practice, but also the potential for frustration when negotiations over involvement become stalled or irresolvable.

Directions for future research

Recognising the small-scale nature of this data, we advocate additional studies of parent–child homework exchanges, using a situated, interaction-based approach to explore further the linguistic, embodied, and material dimensions indicated herein. Homework's negotiated accomplishment should be investigated in various cultural settings: in racialised, classed, linguistic, migrant or otherwise marginalised families, often labelled as *un*involved or 'hard to reach' (Crozier & Davies, 2007), or where children have special educational needs. This would illuminate whether, and how, the meanings attributed to

parental involvement, and the concrete practices of negotiated involvement, change according to circumstance.

We end by suggesting that the paper's focus on the tension between autonomy and support, and how this is navigated, are at the very core, not just of homework, but of education more broadly. A constant paradox exists for parents, caregivers and educators, to be both present and absent, promote autonomy and provide assistance, build individuals who are self-reliant and yet collaborative, be there for children but encourage their independence. The case of primary homework, in which parents' involvement is both flexible and interactively negotiated, offers one example of how the educational autonomy–support paradox is navigated, possibly offering a route to understanding other, situated interactions.

FUNDING INFORMATION

The first author's research was supported by the Economic and Social Research Council (ES/J500100/1). The second author received no financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

To preserve individuals' privacy under national and European laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data, raw data (i.e. video recordings) are not publicly available.

ETHICS STATEMENT

Each study received ethical approval from the researcher's university ethics committee (University of Nottingham and University of Bologna). For both corpora, participants' consent was obtained according to national and European laws regulating the handling of personal and sensitive data. Consistent with national and European regulations, parents gave formal consent for their children's participation, although children's assent was also obtained (in writing in the English study; verbally in the Italian study). For the Italian corpus, informed consent for the publication of anonymised screenshots was also obtained.

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ENDNOTES

[i] No formal sampling strategy was adopted beyond ensuring that individuals had a primary-aged child. Both studies principally aimed to undertake an in-depth, micro-level exploration of parent–child homework interactions, without ascribing homework practices to demographic or other categories.

[ii] Mothers' greater labour for children's education is well established (David et al., 1993; Griffith & Smith, 2005; Reay, 1998). Although we use the generic term 'parental involvement' in this paper, our data reflects the gendered impression of homework support found elsewhere (see Hutchison, 2012; Lehner-Mear, 2021; Turtulla & Lopar, 2022).

[iii] We used orthographic transcription, enriched with specific symbols to indicate interactional features. This provided a compromise between readability and accurate representation of the interactional phenomena relevant to our analysis. Symbol meanings are provided in table notes.

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How to cite this article: Lehner-Mear, R. & Colla, V. (2024). Crossing the line? Exploring situated, interactional negotiations of parental involvement in primary homework in England and Italy. *British Educational Research Journal*, *00*, 1–23. https://doi.org/10.1002/berj.4046