



From Uncertainty to Enacted Agency: A Mother's Developing Agency in Supporting Mathematics Learning at Home

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When Queensland schools moved to learning@home in 2020 and 2021, parents took on sustained responsibility for their children's mathematics learning. Research has characterised how parents engaged (e.g., Murphy et al., 2023), but not how parents' capacity to act developed. This instrumental case study, from a larger doctoral project with 15 Brisbane parents, examines how a mother, Belinda (pseudonym), developed agency in supporting her Year 1 son, the eldest of her three children, in mathematics learning at home. At the time, she was on maternity leave, her husband worked away, and her mother was staying with the family. Her 45-minute semi-structured interview, prompted by her own home learning artefacts, was analysed with Edwards' (2010) relational agency as a lens. Three phases emerged inductively from qualitatively distinct shifts in her self-positioning, suggesting one possible trajectory.

Through this lens, the problem was supporting mathematics learning at home. In Phase 1, constrained agency, Belinda measured herself against a professional standard she felt she could not meet ("I'm not a teacher"). Although relational supports were available, she had not yet recognised the challenge as one that could be worked on through what others could contribute. In Phase 2, emerging agency, she acted despite uncertainty, recognising the motives and resources others brought: her mother sustained the conditions under which learning could continue, a teacher friend provided curriculum-aligned materials, and she sought the classroom teacher's confirmation that her methods aligned with school approaches. In Phase 3, enacted agency, overhearing her son spontaneously explain odd and even numbers to his father, she concluded "he got it" and shifted from seeking external verification to trusting her own judgement of his learning.

What developed through Belinda's experience was her capacity to recognise the resources and motives others could contribute to the problem. This study responds to Murphy et al.'s (2023) call to develop their typology: monitors, facilitators and enhancers may describe not only co-existing patterns across a sample but phases a single parent moves through. The relational network surrounding a parent may matter as much as the mathematical knowledge they bring. Recognition cannot substitute for absent resources, but schools may need not only to supply them but to cultivate relational conditions where parents recognise them.

References

- Edwards, A. (2010). Relational agency: Working with other practitioners. In *Being an expert professional practitioner: The relational turn in expertise* (pp. 61–79). Springer. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-90-481-3969-9_4
- Murphy, S., Danaia, L., Tinkler, J., & Collins, F. (2023). Parents' experiences of mathematics learning at home during the COVID-19 pandemic: A typology of parental engagement in mathematics education. *Educational Studies in Mathematics*. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10649-023-10224-1>

For more information, please refer to the following paper presented at the 48th Annual Conference of MERGA in July 2026.
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