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How do Family Members Perceive, Understand and Explain the Experience of Homework? : A Case Study of Four Families

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How do family members perceive, understand and explain the experience of homework?

A case study of four families

Cathryn Voak

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of

Bachelor of Education (Honours)

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

Date: November 1999

Abstract

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine family member perceptions and experiences of homework. More broadly, it seeks to illuminate the nature and social function of homework practices in families and in so doing, highlights the complex relationship between schools and family life. The study involved four families and their experiences of homework. The families were selected on the basis that the parents came from a range of socio-economic backgrounds which may impact upon their children's attitudes and experiences of homework and schooling.

The approach adopted to investigate this phenomenon is that of case study. Specifically, this case study uses the unstructured interview to collect data to enable the interviewer to develop a conversation using a set of relatively open-ended questions. These conversations were audiotaped, then transcribed for analysis and interpretation. The interviews focused on participant's understandings and expectations in relation to homework. The intensity of the interaction between interviewer and participant provided an opportunity for the participant to openly relate their homework experiences. The interviewees were asked to 'tell their story' in relation to their homework experiences.

This case study adds to the existing literature by exploring family member perceptions of the family-school relationship as it relates to homework. It portrays the experiences of these families and how they make sense of

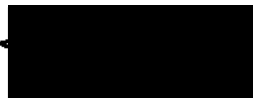
homework practices. It provides an insight into the lives of the four families and how they understand the nature and function of homework practices.

Declaration

I certify that this thesis does not, to the best of my knowledge and belief:

- incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;
- contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or
- contain any defamatory material.

Cathryn Voak



Dated: 15 March 2000

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Cathryn Voak

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Chapter One

Introduction

The purpose of this study is to understand the nature of the complex relationship between schools, family life and homework.

As a parent my first experience of homework began, when my seven-year-old daughter came home towards the end of fourth term with homework that consisted of incomplete work from school. Experience from being a parent helper in the classroom revealed that Alisha was one of the last in putting pencil to paper. In some regards, she is a bit of a perfectionist, in that the first sentence of her story needs to have an impact on the reader. Thus, while waiting for the right sentence to be created from '*within*', time lapses and the result is, that the story has to be completed at home.

Alisha usually wrote at least two to three pages in creative writing and was known for her '*wonderful*' stories. The homework issue on this particular afternoon was about to impact on the whole family and we were powerless in trying to resolve the situation. The title of the story was *My Best Friend*, which posed a problem because Alisha firmly believed she did not have a best friend, so how could she write about one. Alisha was new to this school at the beginning of the year and her best friend was Clare, who was also new to the school and sat beside her in class. They were the best of friends and visited

each other after school and on some weekends. Unfortunately, Clare returned to Queensland at the end of term three, which left Alisha without a best friend.

There were four questions to be answered that would provide the framework for the story and we couldn't get past the first one, which was; to describe your best friend. Alisha was so upset that she couldn't stop crying even though coaxing and providing alternative suggestions, like writing about any friend she played with during the day, was to no avail, to which Alisha replied:

"I didn't play with anyone today", and after more uncontrollable sobbing, uttered, "I don't have any friends".

I wasn't sure this was true, but finding another best friend had not transpired as yet, which was obviously very important to Alisha. Alisha finally revealed that the teacher had told her that the story had to be finished or she would be placed on lunchtime detention. In addition, Alisha read a prescribed book on a daily basis (which she enjoyed); practised spelling from a list of words; and completed a math sheet, which alone would take her the allocated homework time of twenty to thirty minutes, outlined in the homework policy for the lower primary school. That night was horrendous as the whole family was disrupted from their usual routine and were making every effort to sooth and reassure Alisha.

In the day of a seven-year-old, friends came and went. That is, there are one set of friends on a particular day and they are great buddies, the next day it may all change. The next morning, Alisha arose with puffy eyes and

commenced crying again at the thought of lunchtime detention for not completing her homework.

I have always questioned the value and benefits of homework for children in primary school and this one episode reinforced my concerns. Alisha's homework was inappropriate at that particular time in her life and the responsibility of completing homework was distressing to her and the family. The family was placed in a position where they were bound to reinforce the homework policy because the consequences of detention were so terrifying for the child. The question for me was whether as a parent I should allow my children to enjoy and engage in their interests in their own time or should I support the schools' homework policy?

After this experience I commenced a journey questioning other parents to see if their children were having problems with homework. Over the past two years, discussion with parents from different educational backgrounds revealed that homework had become a problem in their family. When the opportunity arose to undertake some research on the topic, I became very interested in exploring the homework experiences of parents and children.

The Plan

The chapters to follow explore the research question – *How do families perceive, understand and explain the experience of homework?*

Chapter one sets the scene by outlining the purpose of the study, to describe a personal homework experience that resulted in this research project, and my effort to understand the nature of the complex relationship between schools, family life and homework. The significance of the study is also examined with an ensuing research question that attempts to explain homework experiences. Terms relevant to this study are defined - Family; Homework; School; Homework Policy; and Learning - to provide a set of common understandings about key concepts used in this study.

Chapter two reviews the literature and gives a description of the research on the academic benefits of homework and considers the question of, who benefits?

Chapter three describes the reasons for adopting the case study methodology, its strengths and limitations. A description of the participants from the Australind area is given as well as the method of collecting data and how it is analysed.

Chapter four explores four key themes emerging from this study, homework is boring; obeying the rules; parental aspiration and involvement; and the relevance of homework. Analysis of this chapter is provided from the willingness of these four families to contribute and discuss their homework experiences honestly and openly during the interview.

The final chapter considers homework in relation to school practices, implications for home-school relations and future research.

The Significance of the Study

Homework can be a controversial issue depending on how much homework impacts on the family. Some teachers argue the academic value of homework and some parents are critical of schools that lack a compulsory homework policy. There are parents who believe that homework is not worth the conflict and disruptive impact on family life and there are those parents who believe that homework benefits their children. Historically, results arising from research on homework are divided between the academic benefits to the child and homework having no benefit at all. Homework advocates claim that it develops independent learning skills and accelerates knowledge acquisition, while critics of homework argue that it imposes on children's leisure time and denies children extra curricular activities within the community. Literature reviews done over the past 60 years report conflicting results and according to Jongsma (1985, p. 703) there is no evidence that homework produces better academic achievement as "the topic is characterised more by emotional arguments and tradition than by empirical evidence".

My interest is not to prove or disprove the evidence on the academic benefits of homework but to examine how four particular families perceive and experience homework as an educational practice. The current literature available on homework has few, if any, case studies of the lived experiences of children and parents.

The Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this case study is to explore the perceptions and experiences of homework within four families.

Research Question

How do families perceive, understand and explain the experience of homework?

The research objectives of the study are:

- ❖ To examine the experience of homework for children and parents from four different families;
- ❖ To identify the issues and themes common to their homework experiences;
- ❖ To explain these experiences in relation to the literature on homework and the social function of schooling;
- ❖ To identify some possible future research directions.

Definitions of Terms

Family

The Australian Council of Social Service's definition of *family* as cited in Sargent (1983, p.106) states that "a family consists of one or two parents (not necessarily the biological parents of the children), and one or more dependent children."

Homework

Cooper (1989, p. 86) defines homework as "tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non-school hours." This definition includes the following types of tasks:

- * Informal homework - activities such as shopping, discussions, word or number games;
- * Formal homework - children practise and revise work or skills;
- * Finishing work commenced in class;
- * Extension or creative homework;
- * Projects and private study.

School

Foster (1987, p. 78) describes the school as a form of *bureaucracy* where:

a necessary division of labour, a hierarchy of positions with recognised roles and statuses, institutionalised patterns of decision-making and communication, defined limits on individual members' freedom to initiate arbitrary moves, routines for members to join and leave the system and for behaviour within the system.

Homework Policy

Schooling in Western Australia is compulsory for Primary-aged students and Secondary-aged students up to the age of fifteen years. The Homework policy

states that homework is not compulsory therefore, homework is at the discretion of the class teacher and/or the individual school.

Learning

A definition of learning is given by Shuell, cited in Barry and King (1993, p. 16) as "an enduring change in behaviour, or in the capacity to behave in a given fashion, which results from practice or other forms of experience." Learning can be divided into three major categories, which can be a combination of some, or all of them. They are:

1. *Cognitive learning*, which is primarily concerned with mental or intellectual processes:
2. *Psychomotor learning*, which is the development of bodily movements; and
3. *Affective learning*, which is the development of personal and social skills.

Chapter Two

Review of Literature

What are the benefits?

Research into the effectiveness of homework in improving academic achievement is inconclusive. While some studies indicate that such improvement does result, an equal number showed no demonstrable relationship between homework and improved academic achievement. (Doyle and Barber, 1981)

Yet people feel strongly about homework and it soon becomes a contentious issue within families. Homework appears to fall in that grey area where families often question the academic benefits of homework after several attempts of bribery and/or punishment fails to foster a positive attitude to homework.

If homework is not completed at home and the teacher insists that homework is completed either during the morning recess or a sacrificed lunch hour, the question arises; what exactly is homework meant to achieve? McDermott, Goldman and Varenne's (1984, p.395) American survey of 58 superintendents, 90 principals, 94 teachers, 1,480 parents, and 2,692 children, found that while there was agreement about the value of homework, there was disagreement about why it was valuable. They found that:

The parents considered homework valuable because it either helped their children do better on exams and get promoted to the next grade, or it prepared them for high school. Teachers, on the other hand, viewed homework as valuable for its long-range capability to develop organizational skills and to make children more aware of their local resources.

Another important aspect of homework revealed by literature suggests that homework represents a range of tasks, in which parents often felt inadequate in trying to assist their child, which lead to the parent feeling inferior in the school/parent partnership in the education of the child.

McDermott et al., (1984, p.392) have summarised the debates surrounding the advantages and disadvantages of homework in the following table:

<i>Advantages of homework</i>	<i>Disadvantages of homework</i>
It furthers learning and achievement through reinforcement, practice, application, and enrichment of what is learned in school. It also allows for the completion of unfinished work.	There is no evidence that homework fosters achievement. The assignments are often meaningless tasks since they are not geared to the individual needs of children.
It relates school learning to problems in the home, community and nation. It encourages a sense of civic responsibility and an appreciation of community.	It interferes with important family and community participation. It cuts into time that children should have for pursuing leisure, playing, contributing to home life, and pursuing community activities.
It fosters a close relationship between the home and the school. It acquaints parents with their children's schoolwork.	Parents may confuse the child or be unqualified to help with the work. This can cause tension and stress for both parent and child, which may result in disruptions of family life.
It develops independent work and study habits in the child. It fosters discipline, responsibility, and initiative.	Not all homes have conditions that are conducive for study. Some parents end up doing the assignments for their children.
It fosters an appreciation for school and learning.	It makes students less enthusiastic about school and learning tasks.

There are numerous articles and books published to assist parents with advice on helping primary school children with homework (eg., Zammit, 1997) and many studies of academic achievement resulting from homework, although these studies are inconclusive. Some have supported the benefits of homework (eg., Cooper, 1989a; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984; Holmes & Croll, 1989) and others have shown that homework is not worthwhile academically (eg., Cooper, 1989a, 1989b; Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Jongsma, 1985). According to Cooper (1989a, p.88) a synthesis of the research shows:

For elementary school students, the effect of homework on achievement is negligible. The optimum amount of homework also varies with grade level. For elementary students, no amount of homework - large or small - affects achievement. I found no clear pattern indicating that homework is more effective in some subjects than in others.

Who benefits?

A number of studies argue homework is beneficial from Year Seven onwards, as this provides the necessary study routine required for academic success. Given that homework may not benefit the child academically before Year Seven, issues arise as to the social and recreational activities the child may be excluded from and possible conflict among family members arising from the type of homework set. Wildman cited in Cooper (1989, p.85) states that "whenever homework crowds out social experience, outdoor recreation, and

creative activities, and whenever it usurps time devoted to sleep, it is not meeting the basic needs of children and adolescents."

These sorts of arguments become even more complex when we consider the impact of the cultural practices of different classes of children. For example, parents who may not be well educated, may not be able to transfer their knowledge and understanding in assisting their child adequately in the completion of their homework. Lareau (1987, p.714) states that "working-class parents share a desire for their children's educational success in first and second grade, social location leads them to construct different pathways for realising that success." There may be a discrepancy between educational expectations of families and the educational outcomes of the school.

Cultural theorists such as Bourdieu cited in Lareau (1987 p. 704) claim "that the cultural experiences in the home facilitate children's adjustment to school and academic achievement, thereby transforming cultural resources into cultural capital." If there is a mismatch between family and school culture, children are educationally disadvantaged from the beginning impeding family-school relationships.

The whole education system, according to Connell et al. (1982)

... operates to ensure that inequalities fundamental to capitalist production – in particular those based on class and sex – are constantly being reproduced. Social stratification in Australia does exist despite the

provision of 'free, secular and compulsory' schooling, but essentially because of it.

From this perspective, the education system supports the class structure, thus reinforcing the status quo of society.

Parents normally expect their children to have some sort of homework. The motive is often to ensure that their children have a better education than the parents have experienced. Unfortunately, many parents are unable to assist their children with their homework, because of their own educational background or time. This is often detrimental to family member relationships because the school imposes homework expectations, which include parental assistance without regard to educational background and/or situation. Children from a low socio-economic family are often disadvantaged, because the school has middle income expectations and practices which do not always link the child's home experiences to learning experiences at school. Bourdieu puts this well when he argues:

The sharing of a common culture, whether this involves verbal patterns or artistic experience and objects of admiration, is probably one of the surest foundations of the deep underlying fellow-feeling that unites the members of the governing classes, despite differences of occupation and economic circumstances.

(Bourdieu, 1976, p.197)

Educated people owe their culture partly to the school and through the education of the individual this in turn can create a cultural rift within the community depending on the culture transmitted by the school. Therefore, the school in part, may dictate the outcome, patterns of language and thought of the child's future career; associations with similar individuals that have had the same schooling and experiences; and how that individual functions within the community. This provides a form of class division through the process of schooling, even though our education system aims to provide students with equal educational opportunities.

Other writers focus on the links between school practices and the production of future workers and citizens. For instance, Bowles and Gintis (1976, p.131) argue that school practices help to integrate young people into the economic system through a 'correspondence' between the school's social relations and those of production. According to them, schools reproduce the social relationships of the workplace in a number of ways:

First, by producing the technical and cognitive skills required. Second, by helping to legitimate economic inequality. Third, by producing rewards and labelling personal characteristics and finally, schools reinforce stratified consciousness.

When knowledge is transferred so are values, and according to Corrigan cited in Sargent (1994, p. 240) state schooling attempts to influence the values and lives of working class children by:

- Inhibiting revolutionaries by providing facts about life and living conditions;
- Shaping behaviour by instilling a moralistic code;
- Developing social skills and discipline; and
- Informing students of the power hierarchy that operates in systems within our society.

This information is said to ensure that the working class remain at the bottom of the social hierarchy with a sense of accepting the lower paid or labouring type employment, that goes with it.

Therefore, teaching the required skills for the workforce becomes a key focus of schools. What happens when children do not achieve the educational outcomes or develop the required skills for the workforce at school? Should the school be enforcing homework on these students when it is obvious that the school is not achieving education outcomes for these students? Thus, the education system allows children to fail a system that doesn't meet their needs and streams them into subjects that have some practical application for future employment. This becomes educationally limiting for the child, instead of providing an individual program that caters for the child's strengths and interests. Thus, schools are only providing the knowledge, skills and understandings that meet a demand for limited employment areas. By giving homework, the school imposes practices which deny children the time to pursue their own interests and needs at home.

Chapter Three

Case Study Methodology

Rationale

This chapter examines the rationale for selecting case study methodology for this study and gives an account of the participants involved. It considers the procedure for collecting data from each member of the family as well as ethical considerations. The procedure for data analysis is outlined as are the limitations of the study.

An interpretive research paradigm has been selected as the methodology as opposed to the positivist research paradigm because people's perceptions of a concept are similar but not necessary the same. It is this variance on reality that makes us all individuals, thus the researcher takes into account their own beliefs and values and recognises that by asking questions they may change the situation which they are studying. Therefore, data collected by interpretive researchers using transcripts of conversations, is as Bassey (1999, p.43) states "usually richer, in a language sense, than positivist data and, perhaps because of this quality, the methodology of the interpretive researchers is described as *qualitative*."

Miriam cited in Hitchcock and Hughes (1989, p.321) says a case study:

is used to develop conceptual categories or to illustrate, support or challenge existing assumptions which were held before the start of data collection. The method of analysis is essentially inductive and characterised by complexity, depth and theoretical orientation.

Through the development of conceptual categories, case studies allow an interpretation of evidence in terms of general statements. The data collected in this study are in the form of transcripts of conversations, which provides a richer interpretation, in a language sense, than the positivist paradigm would have provided.

The positivist research paradigm is rejected by the interpretive researchers because as Bassey (1999, p.43) claims "the descriptions of human actions are based on social meanings, people living together interpret the meanings of each other and these meanings change through social intercourse." The interpretive researcher recognises that their purpose is to describe and interpret the phenomena. In this way a qualitative educational case study allows the researcher to:

- explore interesting aspects of an educational activity;
- conduct the research within its natural context and within an ethic of respect for persons;
- gather sufficient data to explore significant features of the case;
- create plausible interpretations of what is found;
- test for the trustworthiness of these interpretations;
- construct a worthwhile argument;

- relate the argument or story to any relevant research in the literature;
- convey convincingly to an audience this argument;
- provide an audit trail by which other researchers may validate or challenge the findings.

(Bassey, 1999)

Participants

This case study involves four families. The families were selected on the basis that the parents from each of these families have a range of occupational backgrounds. All these families are residing in Australind, the largest town in Harvey Shire, located near the coast, with a population of approximately nine thousand people.

Family A consists of two parents, Alex and Jane and their two children aged eleven and eight. The father is a secondary school teacher and the mother is an administrator at an environmental workplace, both possessing university degrees. They value education, are continually developing professionally and are competitive in nature. A female child aged eight has been selected for this case study and enjoys reading, spelling and story writing. Sarah is in Year Three and has homework regularly from Monday to Thursday and enjoys school. She is involved in regular swimming training once per week, gymnastics twice per week and a piano lesson once per week in which daily practise is required.

Family B consists of two parents, Kyle and Christine and their three children aged fourteen, twelve and eleven. The father is a mechanic and works offshore, the mother is a social worker and has a university degree. The mother values education and continually develops professionally and is realistic of her children's potential to achieve. The eleven-year-old male child has been selected for this case study and enjoys sport at school. Travis is in Year Six and has regular homework as well as football training and an interest in Motor Cross riding on a vacant block located near his home. The family has a menagerie of animals in which the whole family cares for these pets.

Family C consists of two parents, Harold and Jenny and their three children aged eleven, ten and seven. The father works as a meat slicer at the local meatworks and the mother is a house manager, who also volunteers part of her time to school activities. Both parents encourage their children to pursue their interests and value education. The eleven-year-old female child has been selected for this case study and she enjoys music, art and science. Tracy is in Year Six and has regular homework as well as swimming a few afternoons a week along with her other brother and sister at the Recreational Centre.

Family D consists of two parents, Carl and Anne and their three children aged sixteen, fourteen and eleven. The father works in maintenance at a local mining company and the mother works as a clerical officer at an office equipment and service shop. Both parents value education and encourage their children to pursue their interests. The eleven-year-old male has been selected for this case study and enjoys maths and sport at school. Robert is in Year Six and has

regular homework as well as football training during the week. He also has an interest in motorbike riding where he practises riding around the family's two and a half acre residential block.

Data Collection

All the participants were contacted by the researcher at home and asked to participate in a study on homework experiences. Prior to the interviews, consent was obtained from each family member pertaining to the research question and their cooperation in providing information relevant to their homework experiences. The consent letter informed participants that they would be audiotaped and that this information would be destroyed once the transcripts had been written. Permission to do this was sought and obtained from the participants. All the participants were assured that pseudonym names would be used and that information provided remain confidential. Participants had the right to withdraw at any stage during the research.

They were informed that the study would involve an interview of selected family members together within their own homes. Each interview was scheduled at the family's convenience and took no longer than one hour's duration, including the informal preamble of how the interview would be structured.

All the interviews were conducted within the family's home on separate occasions around the kitchen table and the average length of the interviews was kept within the hour, which was conducted by the researcher.

The purpose in selecting the unstructured interview method is because it closely resembles a conversation with the interviewer requesting the interviewees to 'tell their story' regarding homework experiences. Therefore, the information is given freely by the interviewees without leading questions and bias being inadvertently introduced by the interviewer. As Brown and Dowling (1998, p. 73) explain "the prime concern of the interviewer might be to explore the world from the perspective of the interviewee and to construct an understanding of how the interviewee makes sense of their experiences".

The focus of the interview was to explore the homework experiences of each member of the family in the study, including aspirations and expectations between home and school. The relationship between interviewer and participant provided an opportunity for the participant to openly relate their homework experiences. This type of interview allowed the interviewer to become familiar with the family context and provide an interpretation that is closely linked to what has been actually described by the interviewees.

The interview started with an open type question aimed at the children in the study, which asked them what they thought about homework. The following questions initiated the interview after an explanation was given to the family of the interview process.

When I say the word 'homework', what do you think about?

The interview proceeded more as a conversation, which depended on the child's response and which explored the child's understanding of their homework experiences. Initially, the children were interviewed first in order to avoid parental influence on what the children wanted to say. This part of the interview was difficult in that the children supplied very short answers and didn't elaborate. The children's responses to the questions at the beginning of the interview showed that they replied to what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear. When the conversation was repeated with a similar question later in the interview, the children responded with a different answer. Although it was not my intention to ask questions, I felt it was easier for the children to respond to initially, until they became more relaxed with the situation and thought more carefully about their responses. Prompt and follow-up questions included:

Is homework important to you?

How much and what type of homework do you get?

When do you do your homework?

How and where do you do your homework?

Are incentives offered to do your homework?

Do you have assistance with your homework?

What happens at home if you don't do your homework?

What happens at school if you don't do your homework?

Parents openly discussed homework problems, types of homework, school relationships with the family, and their homework experiences, which has occurred over the past few years. During the interview children used body

language or interjected when they thought something was unfairly said regarding homework. All participants had the opportunity to discuss or elaborate on what was being said during the interview.

Data Analysis

Burns (1990, p.338) explains that the purpose of analysing data is "to find meaning in the data, and this is done by systematically arranging and presenting the information." The information is then coded by classifying the data into themes, issues, topics, and concepts. Burns (1990, p.339) suggests that "each interview is analysed for themes/topics" and as the research narrows and becomes more defined, findings may relate to previous research and theory. Mirriam cited in Hitchcock and Hughes (1989, p.321) states "the method of analysis is essentially inductive and characterised by complexity, depth and theoretical orientation."

Direct quotes were taken from the interviews to illustrate the dominant themes of the study. By isolating the particular themes in the study a range of similarities and differences among families with particular experiences was clearly presented. Illustrative quotes were used to provide examples in the participant's own words of their experiences. In so doing it must be acknowledged that all identifying characteristics of the participants were changed in order to protect their identity.

The recorded information was then transcribed onto my personal computer where the information was printed out for analysis. The data was coded by grouping similar themes and issues that arise from each interviewee's responses. The analysis and interpretation of the data resulted in findings that were common or isolated to particular families and/or family members. Thus, themes and issues transcribed from the interviews was categorised into themes or issues common to all the families interviewed and interpreted to reflect how each family member makes sense of homework. These findings link to the theoretical issues identified in the literature.

Limitations

It could be argued that interviewing only four families would not provide a satisfactory basis from which to generalise, however, the advantages of a qualitative case study outweigh other methods. Stake (1994, p. 238) states "damage occurs when the commitment to generalise or create theory runs so strong that the researcher's attention is drawn away from features important for understanding the case itself."

This case study does not seek to assess or measure the relationship between homework and academic success as much of the literature has inconclusively attempted to do. Rather, it attempts to portray how each particular member of the family makes sense of homework by describing their experiences

Chapter Four

Analysis and discussion

Introduction

In this chapter an analysis of the data collated from the family interviews is presented. The chapter is organised around the four key themes emerging from the data – homework is boring; obeying the rules; parental aspirations and involvement; and the relevance of homework.

Qualitative analysis was chosen as the method of analysis because the research is concerned primarily with exploring family homework experiences. Case quotations taken from the transcripts of the interviews is the main method used for presentation of the results.

Homework is boring

Given it's boring and a struggle why do it? In this study, the reasons seem to be to support the teacher and school, develop a work ethic and foster a sense of time. It seems these motives clash with the child's family as increasing outside interests and the family's social life impinge on homework time. The roles of parents are to provide the basic necessities for their children, which includes an education. As Kellaghan, Sloane, Alvarez and Bloom (1993, p.18) state parents:

Provide aspects of development that are closely related to the work of the school and to children's school learning, such as the development of language, self-concepts, interpersonal skills, values, and motivation to engage in the formal learning tasks of the school.

This study shows that the homework children received, did not motivate the children to engage in school related activities at home, regardless of the incentives that were offered. All the children stated that homework was boring and that schoolwork should be done at school. During the interview when children were asked why homework was boring, they either shrugged their shoulders; said they didn't know; or stated that it's mostly unfinished work. When questioned regarding unfinished work, the children expressed the view that school was for schoolwork and they did not like completing boring tasks. Is this a form of resistance against authority as Connell et al. cited in Hatton (1996,p. 45) argues or is it simply defining the home boundaries in which children believe that schoolwork should not exist? For the children in this study, it appears it is simply a matter of wanting to do other activities, which are not related to schoolwork, when they arrive home. As Robert clearly states there are no influencing factors, not even peer pressure. He just thinks homework is boring.

Carl: Is that why you don't like homework, because your friends don't like it?

Robert: No, it just gets boring.

It seems that parents disregard this point of view and encourage their children to persist and complete their homework regardless. Placed in this situation the children in this study tended to *drag out* the homework or not do it at all, perhaps in the hope that the parent will give in. In Jenny's case, when her son/daughter *drags out* the homework episode, she expresses feelings of frustration as she is placed in a no-win situation because the school dictates the consequences for incomplete homework. As Jenny describes the scare tactics that teachers and schools use to ensure that homework is completed, she is torn between her ability to motivate her son/daughter and their ability to recognise that they are responsible for their own learning.

Jenny: And the teachers tell you that once you've done an hour of homework you should stop them. But if they've already scared the child into the fact that they go into 'time out' if their homework is not finished, that child battle on for three hours, if it takes them three hours. But then a lot of the time the teacher says, well why is it taking so long, they shouldn't be taking that long! But if you add up the time that they are not paying attention to their homework, but they're still sitting there, even though they're not doing it, they're still sitting there in their room, while they still might be looking into space or whatever they're doing. But it's still not being focussed outside or enjoying their time, they class that as, I've been sitting here all that time doing my homework.

This is an example where the parent and the school do not communicate effectively, because there is a homework policy and generally there is no exception to the rule. The schools, in which Tracy and Sarah attend, have recommended times for completing homework for each year level. The problem, which may or may not be brought to the attention of the teacher or school, is that a considerable amount of time is spent consistently over and beyond the time allocated to homework. In Jenny's case, when she did approach the teacher, she simply reinforced the policy, that the child should only be spending the allocated time on homework. Therefore, Jenny either accepts that her child is slower than the rest of her peers, or she regimentally ensures that her child does the allocated time, regardless if they finish or not. This involves the parent continually having to communicate to the teacher to avoid her child being punished.

Obeying the rules

A key finding in this study is that homework serves to foster compliance and this is directly linked to a range of rewards and punishment. Children arrive home, have their afternoon tea and sometime during the afternoon do their homework with or without parental assistance. If the child is older, then homework may extend to time after the evening meal or in the morning before school. All of the children in this study completed their homework during the stated times, but compliance of homework became an issue for the boys in particular. Girls, however, while disliking homework, always completed their homework except on a few rare occasions. All of the children in this study had

teachers that enforced either a classroom or school homework policy, which punished children if their homework was not completed.

As noted earlier by Bowles & Gintis (1976), schools are places where children learn to follow directions, become task orientated and learn to become competent workers. If the purpose of homework is a continuation of work or skills taught at school, whose responsibility is it to ensure that the homework is completed?

Schools are particular kinds of environments that are structured in such a way to promote student learning. Many schools positively promote and openly invite parents to be involved in their child's learning through various activities within the classroom and the school. Woolfolk (1995, p.402) describes classrooms as:

Multidimensional, and they are crowded with people, tasks, and time pressures. Many individuals, all with differing goals, preferences, and abilities, must share resources, accomplish various tasks, use and reuse materials without losing them, move in and out of the room, keep track of what is happening, and so on.

This description of a very busy place reinforces the notion that obeying rules is the key to managing an efficient classroom. Ultimately it is the teacher that enforces the rules in the classroom and it becomes the children's responsibility to obey these rules. In the home environment, should there be an expectation that children are responsible for completing their homework, or does the

responsibility lie with the parents? If the responsibility is ultimately the parents then homework may become a problem especially if it clashes with the family's interests or social life. Below is an account of how one parent questions whose responsibility it is for completion of homework, while also recognising her own role as a responsible parent.

Christine: If I didn't think that at the end of the day that it was mine or the parents responsibility for making sure homework was getting done, I could probably handle it. But the reality of it is, I would assume it's up to the parents to make sure that the homework is being done, and I just find it's a responsibility that I don't think I should be taking on. But it's hard to know how we make the kids take the responsibility for it.

When asked, should you just assume it is your responsibility, one parent responded?

Christine: When nothing else works, yes, and its not getting done, of course not. But they always say it's up to the kids to make sure it's done, but the bottom line is that the kids don't take responsibility for it and I do have a responsibility as a parent, to make sure they are meeting those sort of expectations at school.

Therefore, the school becomes the central learning place that provides the necessary knowledge, understandings and skills that develops children into a prospective worker of the future. Sargent (1994, p.250) suggests that "minimalist education results from an ideology which equates society with the labour market, and regards schooling as an instrument of industry rather than good in itself."

The hectic and busy lifestyles of many parents cannot accommodate formal education at home so the formal education is then dictated by the school through its curriculum and teaching. The question arises as to how the school meets student's interests and needs and at the same time, prepares them for the workforce. It is evident from the transcripts that these parents lead very busy lives and because of this, the purpose of education creates a different focus and direction.

If knowledge and experiences are constructed, then the teaching of values may alienate a child from a disadvantaged background within the school community. The conflict of interest for the child in determining which values are important is confusing and may further disrupt family and school relations. Connell et al. cited in Sargent (1994, p. 247) argues that the idea of equality of opportunity "allows individuals to be promoted away from the class of their parents and peers (which may not be beneficial), but fails to alter conditions for the majority of the working class."

In rewarding children, motivation, can be either *intrinsic* or *extrinsic*. Woolfolk (1995, p. 331) defines *motivation* as "an internal state that arouses, directs, and maintains behaviour." Thus, it was interesting to note that rewards for completing homework were not given by the teacher, rather it was some form of negative punishment.

Sarah: Um... because then we might get our names on the board and if we get it on twice um...we'll um...get 'time out'.

Tracy: You usually go to 'time out' in my class.

Robert's homework usually consisted of *unfinished work* from school that day.

Robert: I really do usually finish it in class but sometimes there is so much of it. I get bored of doing it.

Whereas, Travis gets a homework sheet for the week that needs to be handed in on Monday morning. When asked why he doesn't pace himself by doing a little each night he replies:

Travis: We are meant to do it all, but everyone does it on Sunday.

Both Robert and Travis stated that when homework came to mind, they thought it was boring and that it took them away from other activities that they'd rather be doing.

Travis: You have to sit down and write and think and you could be doing better things.

Robert: I make sure I don't do it until after tea or before I go to bed.

The consequences of not doing their homework really didn't bother them. It was parent and teacher reaction along with enforcement of punishment that ensured that the homework was done. In Travis's case the parents offered rewards to the boys in the family as an incentive to complete various sections of their homework. The girl in this particular family had no problems completing her homework and adopted a study routine that ensured her homework was not problematic.

Christine: It was two dollars with the times tables and five dollars for a whole book. So we tried some bribery and then we tried grounding. If they didn't bring their homework when they're supposed to, then they would get grounded for each day that they forgot their homework.

Yet there is cultural evidence (Bourdieu, 1976) that educational support from the home environment, affects the academic success of children at school as Kellaghan (1993, p.18) states:

For a variety of reasons, homes vary in the extent to which they foster knowledge, skills, and dispositions that support school learning. When the

characteristics developed at home do not support school learning, it seems reasonable to conclude that the resultant discontinuity experienced by the children when they go to school affect their scholastic performance.

In Travis's case, it appeared that academically he was not affected by his homework situation, except that his neglect of homework was noted on his report.

At school, teachers maintain their management of students by keeping the students engaged in productive learning activities, with a view to motivating the students and preventing problems. Woolfolk (1995, p. 416) gives examples of the teacher "stimulating curiosity, relating lessons to student's interests, encouraging cooperative learning, establishing learning goals instead of performance goals, and having positive expectations." However, a student interest at school may not be a students' interest at home. Therefore, the parents are confronted with the problem of trying to duplicate some of these strategies to motivate their children to complete their homework in a totally different environment. Obviously, there are material incentives given to children for completion of homework by parents, but in Travis's case this shows that it is not enough, and the type of homework has a huge impact on him. In Robert's case, when he didn't complete his homework or even attempt to do it at home, the teacher punished him by ensuring homework was completed during Robert's recess and lunch times. So what is the child's thinking behind this non-compliance of homework, or at best, leaving it to the last minute? It is evident

that the parents assist and sometimes do the child's homework for them, because there isn't enough time for children to complete it by themselves.

Christine: You mean the percentages that we got wrong. That you got wrong I mean. (laughs)

So what happens when the parents have organised a busy weekend schedule and Sunday night they suddenly feel guilty, because the child is tired and has limited time to complete their homework? The parents in this research ended up assisting or completing part of the homework perhaps out of guilt, or to prevent repercussions. Parental knowledge and understanding of the consequences of completing the set homework, ensured that the parents used motivational strategies in the form of assistance so that the child partially contributed to finishing their homework.

Carl: We ended up building a little boat out of polystyrene with a little sail and everything and put it in the pool and it went fine.

Anne: I made one first to show him that it can go without having anything expensive and then he had to get the stuff and cut one out himself and remake it the way he wanted it. But first we had to convince him that you can make a boat that costs nothing out of recycled stuff and it would still sail across the water and it did, didn't it? It really scooted

across the swimming pool. But it took a while and tears and everything for him to realise that he didn't have to have what he thought he had to have in mind.

The boys in this study indicated that project type homework interested them but homework was still left to the last night for completion. It is interesting to note among the boys that whatever incentive and/or interest in projects existed , it was insufficient to maintain a positive attitude over the length of time the project took. If they were interested in the project, it was still left to the last moment or they wanted commercially made products to be a part of their project as Robert's father explained:

Carl: The teachers tell them they want this, this, this, this and especially on the last one which was a boat. And he came home and wanted a little motor that was run by electricity or battery and all this sort of stuff which was going to end up costing forty or fifty dollars. And we talked him into a polystyrene thing but he didn't want that, because the other kids wanted an electric motor and so it's peer pressure.

Therefore, the homework or project turns into a competition between peers as to who can present the best project regardless of monetary cost to the family. In this case, the teacher had specified the use of recyclable materials for the project, which was clarified during a parent/teacher interview.

Anne: But the teacher she sort of made it quite clear that they weren't to go out and buy things, that it wasn't going to cost the family, that's it's all recyclable stuff and it's the way the kids interpret it to what they want. One kid has only got to come with something different and all the kids think that's what they have to have, or that they want to be up with the other person.

The following conversation between mother and child shows the responsibility for the completion of homework falls on the parents, therefore the control over homework becomes the parents' and the children lose ownership of their homework.

Christine: If nothing else, to be honest the only useful purpose I see that it serves, is that it's going to set him in good stead when he goes to high school and he needs to take the responsibility himself. The problem is I'm taking on too much responsibility for trying to um...well it's true

Christine: You don't take the responsibility yourself to do your homework, so it's left up to me to make sure you're doing it and it just turns into a....

Travis: Well you think I'm going to be happy doing my homework?

Christine: No I don't. No one says you should be and I think that most kids share the same thing. Well if you don't learn to do your homework now, when you get to high school mate, you're going to be absolutely...

Travis: I don't care.

Christine: You say you don't care.

Travis: Yeah I don't, I hate it.

The problem of ownership is important, as the children become less motivated once they lose ownership of their work. The children soon lose interest and the homework becomes something that they do in order to please their parents. Thus, students and parents may question the relevance and educational value of homework if their children complete it, as a matter of routine.

Parental aspiration and involvement

This study shows that parental aspiration and involvement play a key role in shaping their children's perceptions, values and behaviour towards homework. Parents in this study were often confused about their role in homework and how they should assist. Parental attitudes towards homework differed, depending on how their children coped with homework. These parental attitudes showed that even though they may not agree with homework, they still outwardly supported

the school's policy on homework. Does the parent's attitude influence the child's compliance to homework? The following situation clearly explains Christine's homework situation as a constant struggle to get the child to sit down and complete their homework, to an acceptable standard.

Christine: Last night is probably not untypical of the struggle we have with homework. He is made to bring it out, and he looks at it, does about two seconds of it and says I've done it. Of course he hasn't and he leaves it and says, I've got the weekend to do it. It's a huge issue in this house with homework, except for Louise.

Christine believes that as a parent, it is her responsibility regardless of whether she believes in homework or not, to ensure that if her children have homework, she must support the teacher or school homework policy.

Christine: I have said to the kids and it is a view that I probably shouldn't share with them, but I do have a problem with homework myself. I do think that most of the learning should be confined to school, because it does impinge on home time because we all have very busy active home lives. But having said that I also acknowledge that it is vital and crucial to helping them to develop study habits for further and future education and because it is an expectation and an integral part of learning in the

educational curriculum and an expectation I do support it fully. Despite my own personal views I do fully support the need for it and do whatever I need to do to try and encourage kids to establish a good working ethic and commitment to doing study outside of school.

Therefore, Christine doesn't allow her personal views on homework to influence her children and fully supports the notion that children have to develop a good work ethic and be responsible for their own learning regardless of whether it is at school or at home. Christine's expectations are revealed by her commitment to support the school and her acknowledgment that education is important even if homework is considered to be part of the overall learning process. In contrast, Anne believes that the child is still a child, and when they come home it should be their decision whether they undertake further study or some other activity that interests them.

Anne: Firstly, I don't believe in homework. Because I think school's, school and I think they should be able to fit everything into school because a lot of kids do have outside activities and parents work, and it is a big hassle. So I believe that they should be able to learn what they can in school.

Even though parents do not fully agree or believe that their children should have homework, there is that underlying belief that the teacher and school are the educational experts. Thus, if homework is sent home, parents assume that it is based on valid educational judgement on the part of the teacher, where the homework is a necessary requirement in educating the child.

Jane: Oh, I guess it gets the kids to reinforce perhaps what they have learnt during the day. It gets them into good work ethics. Sometimes I think they could get too much homework. I think that teachers should take into account that there is life after school, I'm sure that some teachers don't.

One parent suggests that the homework consists of extra activities in which their children practise or apply the knowledge and skills that are taught during the day. Jane assumes that the task is related to previous knowledge and skills taught that day, but expresses uncertainty as to the benefits of this particular requirement. Creating a *good work ethic*, assumes that as an adult we resume work when we come home, thus reflecting the work place ethic at home.

On the other hand, there are parents who feel that their children may have too much homework and instead of saying my children can't cope, they communicate to the teacher in other ways as Alex explains:

Alex: We say, that Jason has got a headache or something like that and he hasn't finished his homework. We covered for you Jason and we've fibbed in his book. I mean that we have those situations and I think that every parent sooner or later has that situation.

In this situation, the parent is forced to tell a 'fib' instead of confronting the teacher or school regarding the homework situation. As more and more children engage in interests outside of school, less time can be devoted to homework. In many cases children may be training for a variety of sports after school and no allowance is made for time to complete homework. It is then left up to the parent to persuade the child to balance their activities so that they can cope with homework and their sporting interests. The problem arises when children take on sport as a priority and neglect their homework. Therefore, the problem of boredom is ignored as the child uses other strategies such as sporting activities to legitimate time spent instead of completing their homework.

Some of the families in this study found it difficult to cope with the educational needs of their children because of their very busy and hectic lives. This is evident where both parents work, because there is a change from the traditional family management where the mother remained at home, to an involvement and a greater sharing of domestic activities by everyone. Kellaghan et al. (1993, p.74) found that "unfortunately, even with such sharing, it is often the case that parents do not have time to become fully involved in their children's

formal schooling (for example, in homework and parent-teacher meetings) or in more general informal learning situation in the home."

Christine: I do think that most of the learning should be confined to school, because it does impinge on home time, because we all have very busy active home lives.

If parents are fully employed, and leading busy lives and decide to leave the education of their children to the schools, then as Connell et al. suggest, their educational achievement may suffer. When children are already disadvantaged, differences between school and home experiences further complicate matters as the school practices inadvertently reinforce different values and attitudes than in the home.

Sargent (1994, p. 250) argues that the Carmichael Report as follows assumes that students should be taught the required skills for particular employment and the rest to be taught on the job.

The Carmichael Report of 1992 recommended a general strategy for reforming vocational education in line with changes in industry: ideally *all* students have opportunities to have their existing skills assessed and recognised so that they can receive appropriate training.

Therefore, those students who do not have the ability to link home experience and practices with school practices become disadvantaged and school failures. Thus, the interests and needs of the students change, to meet the requirements of the curriculum. It is apparent that all students do not have equal opportunities to start with, and the flow from schoolwork to homework magnifies this problem. Jenny struggles to make sense of supporting the homework policy, because she feels that when there is justification for not completing the homework due to family commitments, she is not supported by the teacher.

Jenny: We've got three children to run to different things. Time to fit it all in is very hard, and then when you have a teacher that says it doesn't matter if you write a note to school, your child is going to go on 'time out' no matter what. When that child does their homework 99% of the time, and 1% of the time you write a note and they still go in 'time out,' with no flexibility.

In effect, school practices are being reinforced in the home in the form of homework and very busy parents who fail to see the relevance of the homework, may abandon supporting homework practices through a feeling of frustration and limited flexibility with the education system.

The relevance of homework

For all participants in this study, the question of relevance was important. So what happens when the children in this study find that homework is not relevant or important to them?

Travis: Because you learn all that at school, that's what school is for, to learn at school not at home.

Obviously, Travis feels that school is the only place for learning and that it should not encroach on his time at home. Tracy doesn't see the relevance of homework and when asked, if what she did for homework helped her, she plainly said:

Tracy: Only when you know how to do it.

This suggests that the homework should either be a continuation of what had been learnt in class that day, or the child should have the necessary skills to be able to do their homework easily. Whereas, Jane feels that the homework that Sarah receives, is relevant to her year three level, and makes the following comment.

Jane: I think Sarah's is relevant. Fairly relatively easy for her, might not be for other kids of course but um... yeah I don't

think she's extended at all, maybe sometimes in maths she might be.

Some parents from the study suggested that the teacher made homework more difficult for their children, especially in the following scenario as told by Tracy's mother.

Jenny: It becomes hard sometimes yes. Especially when they read it after our kids have gone. They start reading it before the bus kids but they keep reading it until they all seem to read after the bus kids go. They all seem to read after the bus kids have gone. You just miss that chapter and try and get the gist of what has been read before and just miss that last ten minutes and try and pick up the next night, but if there's a question on it, you have no idea. I believe that they shouldn't put pressure on children by reading after so many children have gone or even if one child has gone because they go every day at that time. They shouldn't be allowed to do a book that they're going to do comprehension on it or write a story.

As children and parents question the relevance and educational value of homework, so children become more and more disinterested in homework and a lack of rationality is evident in these children. In answer to the question why children are given homework and the importance of homework Travis'

explanation emphasised that there was no logical reason why more schoolwork had to be done after school at home.

Travis: I don't know, there is no importance, because you learn it in class.

Christine: I don't honestly think the homework is representative or indicative of what they are learning. Some of the projects for example are really good because some of the things like international topics, which is character building and is good to be a part of, but the homework they bring back is sort of boring stuff that is dragged out of nowhere. They're certainly aren't an indication of what's happening at school, they are just torn out of a book and brought back to do. I don't really think it's suggestive of what's being taught at school. It's not in keeping in what they are learning.

Christine states that homework is given for the sake of giving homework, that it is more of a tradition and that some parents have this expectation of teachers, in which they are expected to supply homework regularly for their children.

When the homework is obviously not relevant and the parents are given the impression that homework is not *representative or indicative* of what is being learnt at school, parents may find it hard to justify to their children the relevance of homework. This study has shown that parents found homework was not

relevant and did not interest their children, which tends to support current research indicating that the academic benefits of homework is inconclusive (Doyle and Barber, 1981). Due to a lack of interest on the child's behalf in their homework, it can be surmised that significant learning may not be taking place.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This study is specifically concerned with family homework experiences and how in a changing society, these experiences have altered individual family member's perceptions and understandings of homework.

As discussed in chapter four, this study reveals four important themes informing family perceptions and experiences of homework. This chapter moves on to consider some of the implications of the findings in this study. In particular, to consider:

- homework in relation to school practices
- implications for home-school relations; and
- future research direction.

Homework in relation to school practices

The study on family homework experiences in the Australind area has implications in terms of school practices, because the children in this study found the homework generally boring. This study showed that formal education in the form of homework resulted in conflict within the families. Even though incentives were offered to the boys, they still preferred to complete their homework during school time as punishment, rather than in their own time.

At odds with the children's personal interests, the type of homework given was usually unfinished work or drill work. Schoolwork in the form of projects was considered interesting and beneficial by all participants in this study, because of the nature of the open-ended tasks which allowed for student interest, thus promoting independent learning and ownership of ideas. For the boys in this study, although they found projects more interesting than other types of homework, they left the completion of projects up to the last day before submission, thus requiring assistance from the parents due to limited planning and time. This form of aversion occurred for a number of reasons which included:

- the type of homework;
- social and family commitments;
- sporting and leisure interests;
- rationality, that schoolwork is for school.

The findings in this study revealed that homework serves to foster compliance through the threat of disciplinary action carried out at the school and that the girls were more compliant than boys, regardless of the consequences.

Therefore, if some children are resisting homework, formal learning is not occurring at home which supports Doyle and Barber's (1981) claim that there is "no demonstrable relationship between homework and improved academic achievement." This alters the precept of school practices with the regard to the academic value of homework.

Implications for home-school relations

The study revealed that parents believed their children's homework, was not representative or indicative of what was being learnt at school. Parents found it hard to justify to their children the relevance of homework, but expressed that it was the role as a parent to support the school homework policy.

Parents expect that schools will provide the essential knowledge, skills and understanding required to equip their children for the workforce. Unfinished schoolwork is provided as homework and it becomes the parents' responsibility to conduct formal education in a home environment, which may not match the school practices. Although the sample was limited to four families, conflict was evident within families as the parents sought to resolve homework problems. Bourdieu's (1976) notion of cultural capital to some degree was evident, as the children stated that *schoolwork was for school*. It is evident that there is often a mismatch in cultural practices.

Parents commented that although they didn't want the responsibility of homework, it became their responsibility as a parent to ensure homework was completed, which sometimes involved a parent partially completing the homework. Therefore, educational policy needs to be reassessed pertaining to the value of homework, as the purpose of homework is not what is evidently happening as intended by the teacher and school.

Future research

This exploratory study has produced some interesting issues and questions for further exploration. The boys in this study blatantly resisted homework, even though their parents offered rewards and punishment. The girls complied and did their homework even though they hated it and thought it was boring. This gender issue raises some interesting ideas on whether it is based on individual behaviour, family culture, child's age or other influences. Another issue of interest, is the ambivalence of the parents' attitudes towards homework in that they didn't agree with the type of homework the children brought home, but supported the homework policy. Are parents too busy in their partnership with the school to educate their children, or do they believe that the teachers are the experts and have signed over the educating of their children wholly to the education system?

The educational background of the parents is another area that can be explored, as one parent stated, "I do have a problem with homework, because I believe most of the learning should be confined to school". Parents influence children through their attitudes and behaviours and if the parent doesn't value homework or find the homework relevant as described in this study, then these impressions are relayed to the children. Employment status has changed where there is the ability to generate a high income without the requirement of higher education, thus giving parents the option to provide an improved lifestyle. It was evident in this study that parents had limited time available to assist their

children with homework, in which periodically homework created conflict within the family.

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