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The Practice of Homework: A Critical Ethnography: The Story of Four Families

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The Practice of Homework: A Critical Ethnography

The Story of Four Families

by

Jacqueline Hubbard

Supervisor: Dr Barry Down

In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of

Bachelor of Education (Honours)

EDITH COWAN UNIVERSITY

South West Campus

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USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.
ABSTRACT

This thesis explores the homework experiences of four students and their families through the lens of critical inquiry. The stories of the participants are told through conversational interviews with students and their parents/caregivers, as well as their classroom teacher, in a bounded study. Drawing on these stories, the issue of homework is 'problematised', and analysed in light of issues such as institutional power and hegemony.

A critical review of the literature reveals a significant gap in the existing research on homework in relation to the inclusion of student and parent voices. The study addresses this silence by listening to the voices of parents and children from different families, and to how they understand, experience and respond to homework.

The study is an exploratory case study about the experience and value of homework, with a view to stimulating further critical research into a seemingly routine school practice.
DECLARATION

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

i. Incorporate without acknowledgement any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any institution of higher education;

ii. Contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text; or

iii. Contain any defamatory material.

Signed

Jacqueline Hubbard
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>A Bitter Pill: Homework as a Negative Experience</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>'Policing': Responsibility for Homework Completion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Stuff That Matters: The Importance and Priority of Homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>That's Just the Way It Is: Power and Choice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Contradictions: The (il)Logic of homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Silencing: Looking Through the Lens of Michelle Fine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>CONCLUSION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Implications and Suggestions for further research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REFERENCES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>APPENDICES</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Letter of Invitation to Participate: Homework Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Letter Of Consent To Participate In Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Letter of Invitation to Participate: School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Letter Of Consent To Participate: School Principal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Letter of Invitation to Participate: Classroom Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Letter Of Consent To Participate: Classroom Teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7.</td>
<td>Homework policy: WA department of education</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

vi
1. INTRODUCTION

My interest in the topic of homework and homework practices springs initially from my role as a parent and more recently, as a tutor and a student teacher. My own experiences of homework with both my own children and the children of others have often been fraught with frustration and anguish. My financial, social and familial circumstances have not remained static throughout my children's school years, and I noticed that homework was often problematic, and more so at some times than it was at others. As I progressed further into the Bachelor of Education course, I reflected upon my own schooling experiences and the homework practices of the various teachers that I have encountered as a parent, a tutor and a student teacher. In addition, I experienced my own difficulties with assignments and readings required by the course, caused not by the work itself, but by problems such as geographical location, economics, family pressures, lack of my own 'study space' and conflicting commitments. To use Macedo's term, (1995) my 'epistemological curiosity' was aroused, giving rise to questions such as: Who decides that homework is important? Why is homework more important than children's families and other interests? What are teachers thinking when they assign homework? And, the question that came back to me repeatedly; how do other families feel about and cope with homework - how does it interact with their unique situations? My own suspicion was, and is, that homework practices, however well intentioned, have the potential to impact negatively on students and their families.
The Research Question

The development of my research question stemmed from an interest in social justice and critical teaching, and the application of these notions to the practice of homework. This interest was initially aroused through reading the work of educators such as Paulo Freire (1970), and developed further as I read work by many researchers and educators, including Hinchey (1996; 1998), Bourdieu (1976; 1997), Connell (1982), Apple (1999), Shor (1978), and others.

The overarching question posed by this study is:

How do parents and children from different families understand, experience and respond to homework? And more specifically ...

➢ In what ways does homework intrude upon the lives of students and their families?

➢ Who decides what kind of after-school activity is important and why?

The thesis explores these questions using a critical ethnographic approach. This chapter presents a critical review of the literature, followed by an outline of the current homework policy of the Department of Education of Western Australia, explains the significance of the study, and discusses the limitations and problems associated with it. In the chapters to follow, the philosophical and theoretical perspective through which I approach this study is outlined, as are the methodology and methods employed, and ethical issues involved. The participants' stories are presented in Chapter 4, then analysed and discussed in the context of the research questions. Finally, the thesis concludes with some reflective thoughts, along with a discussion of the implications of the study and suggestions for further research.
A Critical Review of the Literature

The area of homework is one that appears to be sparsely researched. Indeed, researchers have decried the lack of empirical evidence on the subject of homework (Qongsma, 1985; Hinchey, 1996). In addition, the research that exists has at times produced conflicting results. A review of the literature has also revealed a heavy leaning toward quantitative data (Cooper, 1989; Balli, Wedman & Demo, 1997; Epstein, 1986). There are few studies that give voice to the stakeholders, and those that do often apply a highly structured interview or questionnaire approach. This points to a need for further research using qualitative data, and more particularly, studies that give voice to both students and their families.

The issue of voice is an important one in this research project. Freire (1972) speaks of 'the culture of silence', in which the very situation of those that are oppressed is unrecognised by the oppressed themselves, due to the nature of that oppression. Not only do they have no voice, they are also not conscious of the fact they have no voice (Freire, 1972; Crotty, 1998). Allowing students and parents to speak through conversational interviews gives them a voice and, through provocative questioning, may lead to conscientisation - that is, to awaken within them an increase in conscious awareness of the multi-dimensional nature of their situation and their potential power to effect change.

It is vital to me that the opinions and feelings of students and their families regarding homework are sought and told, so that they may be heard by other students, parents, educators and researchers. Student and parent voices should be heard not only to elucidate the issue of homework, but also to ensure that students see their own voices as valid and important, and that educators and policy-makers begin to take them seriously.
Michelle Fine emphasises this well when she speaks about silencing in schools. She attacks silencing “at the level of policies which obscure systemic problems behind a rhetoric of ‘excellence’ and ‘progress’, a curriculum bereft of the lived experiences of students themselves, a pedagogy organised around control and not conversation”, noting that through our teaching policies and practices, “we teach children to betray their own voices” (Fine, 1987, p. 173). Students’ and families’ lived experiences are important. They should be heard.

In addition, the literature review revealed that studies to date have focused on issues such as whether or not homework practices benefit students (academically or otherwise), the influence of parental involvement on homework, and whether some types of homework are more beneficial than others and why (Hinchey, 1996; Cooper, 1989; Clark, 1993; & Wiesenthal, Cooper, Greenblatt & Marcus, 1997). The emphasis in the literature upon the influence of parental involvement also led to findings that the educational level of parents influenced both homework and academic results generally in a more significant way than parental involvement itself (Balli, Wedman & Demo, 1997; Dornbusch, 1986). Other writers dispute this. Clark (cited in Balli, Wedman & Demo, 1997) found that the influence of parental educational level was superseded by parental ‘press’ – that is, some parents ‘press’ their children more than others for academic success.

In all of these discussions, homework practice as a social justice issue does not appear to be widely addressed. Pat Hinchey (1996; 1998) is one researcher who has specifically addressed homework from a critical theory standpoint, with the inclusion of student voices in the research, and a call for teachers to think critically about how and why they assign homework. Again, however, the emphasis is placed upon the types of homework practices, rather than consideration of the cultural politics of homework as a whole.
Hinchey argues that "overnight assignments may not be the ideal norm and that all assignments ought to be thoughtfully designed and clearly valued by the teacher" (Hinchey, 1996, p. 246). The issue of the possible perpetuation of social inequality is not directly mentioned, even though she states, "many students have far longer days than we imagine", and that commuting can "extend an average school day for many students to 9 or 12 hours ... many have chores waiting at home or on the farm" (p. 244). Even so, she raises the questions, "who decides what kind of out-of-school student habits and child-parent interaction should be promoted? And why should the school be doing such promotion?" These questions point to the issues of power and hegemony, as echoed by Hinchey in her text *Finding Freedom in the Classroom*. She argues that there is a lack of critical thinking in teachers' homework practices: "Everyone knows that teachers give homework and students do it. That's just the way it is". In regard to teachers' unquestioning acceptance and continuation of such practices, Hinchey contends: "the results of acting on someone else's plan, contributing to someone else's purposes and goals, can be much more insidious than [inherited habits]" (Hinchey, 1998, p. 9).

The idea of homework as an agent of power (whether conscious or not) may also be understood in the light of Bourdieu's (1997) notion of cultural capital, and Freire's (1972) understanding of the culture of silence. As there appears to be a gap in the homework research on these ideas, and my interest lies strongly in this area, I want to examine homework as a cultural practice to see how it impacts on children and their families.

My focus in this study is on the possibility that the practice of homework itself is of an oppressive nature, regardless of the type or structure of that homework. If it is indeed a practice that is oppressive to students and their families, why assign it at all? If we did not
assign homework, who would lose and in what way? The notion of cultural capital is recognised as an important factor that contributes to the way in which families approach and deal with homework. However, it was not my intention to examine the effects of cultural capital on the homework experiences of families in great depth. Rather, the research has focused upon if and how homework intrudes upon family life, and who decides what kinds of after-school activities are important.

**Homework Policy**

The Western Australian Department of Education (DoE) has a brief document within its Regulatory Framework that outlines its policy regarding homework (see Appendix Seven). The policy outlined is ambiguous and at times contradictory in its wording, effectively leaving decisions regarding homework to individual schools and teachers. While the formulation and implementation of a school-wide approach to homework is the responsibility of the principal, the document does give some procedures and guidelines for schools to follow. It states that homework must “only be used to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes; ... where appropriate, [be] developed in collaboration with students; and be disassociated from any form of punishing students or means of securing discipline”. It also states that “Preparation of students for the time commitment of homework anticipated in years to come is not, in itself, a reasonable basis for setting homework” (Department of Education, 2001). It proclaims that “Homework can be a means of furthering school-home relationships and can assist in keeping parents informed about the student’s learning program and progress”. It is also clear in its advice that any homework policy must respond to individual needs and be supportive of the student, and yet recommends that “homework should be phased in gradually and consistently ... and
be consistently applied, monitored and assessed" (ibid.). The effective date of the DoE homework document is 30 April 2001, and it is due for review on 30 April 2004.

At the time of this research, the school did not have a specific homework policy in place. Due to changes in the Regulatory Framework and DoE policies as a whole, particularly in regard to duty of care issues, the school policy file was under review by the principal and staff, with a view to creating and rewriting many school policies. The school-wide policy on homework was yet to be developed.

Significance of the Study

The initial review of the literature outlined in the previous section highlighted the current controversy surrounding the issue of homework and the need for further research, especially from a socially critical perspective. In addition, my own diverse personal experiences of homework as a parent, a tutor, and as a student teacher, as well as the abundance of 'homework horror stories' related to me by others over many years, led me to believe that there was a clear need for research into homework that attempts to specifically address it as an oppressive practice.

The moment that work is sent home, the situation becomes unequal. The range of individual family situations and histories in any one community (and even within one classroom) is diverse. Having lived in a small rural town for nine years, I have come to see examples of this diversity first hand. As I spent some of that time working at the local primary school, which was attended by my children, assumptions and judgements made by teachers in regard to students' families led me to question the thinking behind teacher actions. Though I could not have named it at the time, what I was expecting to see, but
often did not, was teaching practices informed by critical thinking: praxis leading to conscientisation, as Freire might describe it (Crotty, 1998; Freire, 1970; 1999).

The idea that the inequality that exists within social systems is reproduced by practices informed by hegemony (the dominant politics and ideology of society) has been described by Bourdieu (1997) in his notion of cultural capital, one of three forms of capital, which is further categorised into embodied, objectified and institutionalised forms (see Definition of Terms). Through a ‘Bourdieuian’ perspective, all three of these forms of capital have an influence on students’ interaction with homework, and therefore are significant in the controversy surrounding the homework debate (Reay, 1998). Connell (1982; 1993) has researched and written extensively around educational inequality and how it is produced, and advocates an approach that considers social classes as a whole when examining educational practices. Connell, Ashenden, Kessler and Dowsett (1982) point out that classes are neither abstract nor static; rather, they are dynamic, “real-life groupings, which ... are constantly under construction” (p. 33). In examining approaches to educational research based upon Bourdieu’s idea of cultural capital, they note the dangers inherent in seeing classes as homogenous groups of people, from which blanket assumptions can be made. They state that, “classes are always complex and internally divided groupings, composed into a class by a dialectic between their own activity and its circumstances” (p. 189). This view of classes is consistent with my own experience, and I therefore approached the research process and analysis with this caution clearly in mind.

It is my intention that this study will add to the existing body of knowledge regarding homework by focusing attention upon the voices of four students and their families, and that it will inspire others to undertake similar research, with the expectation that both it
and any further studies will inform educational practice and focus attention upon the unspoken, often unrecognised power relations underlying everyday teaching practices.

Limitations and Problems

This study is limited in its scope due to the relatively short time frame and participant size that is feasible for an Honours project. However, the intention of the research is nonetheless to elucidate the experiences and feelings of the students, parents and teachers involved in the study. For parents and students, this may be achieved through both the act of telling their stories via conversational interviews, through the reading of the transcripts, and the sharing of those stories to a wider audience via the completed research document. For teachers, this may be achieved through hearing the voices of students and their families in the context of research that questions the status quo, and encourages them to do the same.

Although the study was intended to be a bounded one, that is to say all participants attended the same school, year level and class, every one of the participants, students and caregivers, wished to share their experiences not only in relation to that particular class, but also on a more general basis. While this was not the initial intention of the study, I felt that it was important to allow the conversations to take this direction, rather than for me to 'refocus' them, as it appeared to be very important to the participants to share in this way. I believe that by allowing this flow of conversation to occur, I have gained a very rich picture of the effects of homework not only upon the participant families but more widely. In many instances, participants raised issues that I may not have otherwise discussed. The resultant conversations were perhaps not what I had anticipated in the sense that they did not focus solely on the year seven students' homework experiences,
however they are consistent with the nature of the conversational interviewing style (Burgess, 1988), and with the spirit of critical ethnography (Carspecken, 1996). The participants and their needs were and are paramount.

I believe that should I have omitted these issues that were so important for the parents to discuss, that they were so passionate about, I would not have been doing the participants justice, nor would I have been keeping my promise to 'share their stories, regardless of how they fitted with my ideas'. Although the divergence of the conversations from the topic of homework experiences for 'that student in that class' is included here as a problem, I found that important issues were raised that needed to be expressed and discussed as part of the homework debate. Children indeed are not 'islands', but individuals that are part of an interactive, dynamic family environment in which members impact upon each other. I have only viewed this as a problem in relation to the bounded nature of the study. The data that resulted provided rich and valuable descriptions of participant experiences.

Initially it was my intention to speak separately with students and caregivers. However, it was the preference of all parents to conduct conversations simultaneously with their children. I respected that wish, and found that all data generated was rich and illuminating. However, should I conduct such a study again, I believe it would be valuable to include an additional conversation with students without parents present - perhaps as a group. Due to the nature and richness of the conversations, there was potential for many more issues to be examined, and in much greater depth, than was possible given the scope and time frame of this study. This is a subject that I will discuss further in Chapter 6.
Participants in this study were chosen in a manner that was intended to include a range of families and experiences (as outlined in Chapter 3). However, the relatively small sample size (four families) meant that the respondents reflected the majority of the sample population in the fact that in every home, English was the first language of all family members, and that all families were 'Anglo-Australian' (that is, of European descent). In addition, even though one family was a 'blended' family (Karen and Nathan), and Karen had spent time as a single parent, all families in this study had two caregivers (heterosexual male and female) at home. In this regard, they were members of the dominant culture. The voices of those less dominant ethnic groups, and non-nuclear or 'non-traditional' families within our society are therefore not heard in this particular study. It would be valuable if further studies were to be conducted, particularly those that are larger in size and scope, to include the voices of students and caregivers from a much broader range of ethnic, cultural and socio-economic background.

Definition of Terms

This section defines the key terms used in the study, such as home, family, homework, resources, class, cultural capital and habitus, in order to clarify to the reader my own understanding of these terms, thus reducing the possibility of misinterpretation of what I take them to mean.

Homework

For the purposes of this study, the term will refer to any task set by the teacher for the student to complete outside of school hours, particularly when there are repercussions of any form for student non-compliance in this regard.
Home and family

The place (or places) and people with whom the student normally resides during out-of-school hours. For some students, this can include more than one dwelling and extended and/or blended families and either multiple or single caregivers. Each student's home and family is a unique blend of values, practices, traditions, resources and capital. In fact, the idea that homes and families do not necessarily 'fit' a societal expectation of 'the norm' within a culture or a community, but are in fact individually diverse and unique, is central to this study. The words 'parent' and 'caregiver' will be used interchangeably in this paper.

Resources

In this paper, the term resources will refer to such things as books, computer hardware and software, desks/study space, and so on - those 'concrete' items that enhance a student's ability to 'do schoolwork' in the home environment, as well as referring to available time and the capital, in all its forms, available to the family.

Class

Class, in this document, is a type of social stratification that delineates socio-economic groups and their status. In modern Western society, the existence of distinct classes in the traditional sense is contested. Rather than a 'classless' society, I see differences in terms of economics, status and power as having a great influence upon social standing, though the lines between groups are perhaps much more blurred than they once were. Cultural capital contributes to these differences, and is briefly described below.
Cultural Capital

According to Abercrombie, Hill and Turner (2000, p. 81), the central tenet of cultural capital is that “children of middle-class parents acquire from them ... endowments such as cultural and linguistic competence, and it is these competences that ensure their success in schools”. According to Bourdieu, “cultural experiences in the home facilitate children’s adjustment to school and academic achievement, thereby transforming cultural resources into what he calls cultural capital” (Lareau, 1987, p. 74). Drawing on Bourdieu, Saha (1997) describes three forms of cultural capital:

- **Embodied**: Dispositions or aptitudes, such as familiarity with educational institutions, language and routines.
- **Objectified**: Goods, such as books, and technology in the form of computers and Internet access.
- **Institutionalised**: Credentials and degrees.

Habitus

According to Lawson and Garrod (2001), Bourdieu uses the term *habitus* to describe “the distinctive sets of meanings that each social class passes on through the generations and that shape the thought and actions of individual class members ... the cultural context into which individuals are socialised” (p. 106).
2. THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVE

The epistemology, or theory of knowledge, with which I identify (and therefore with which I have approached the topic) is that of constructionism, or more specifically, social constructionism. According to Crotty (1998, p. 58), “social constructionism emphasises the hold our culture has on us: it shapes the way in which we see things (even the way in which we feel things!) and gives us a quite definite view of the world”. Crotty points out a dichotomy within constructionist research, describing the contrast between the symbolic interactionist and the critical theorist. Crotty notes that, “the world of the critical theorist is a battleground of hegemonic interests. In this world, there are striking disparities in the distribution of power ... a world torn apart by dynamics of oppression, manipulation and coercion” (1998, p. 63). Noting that social constructionism is “at once realist and relativist”, Crotty states that, as social constructionists, we see our understandings as “historically and culturally effected interpretations rather than eternal truths ... at different times and in different places, there have been and are very divergent interpretations of the same phenomena”, and that therefore, “we need to recognise that different people may well inhabit quite different worlds. Their different worlds constitute for them diverse ways of knowing, distinguishable sets of meanings, separate realities” (p. 63-4).

The theoretical perspective, or paradigm, that underpins my thinking as well as my research actions, and informs the methodology I have used, is that of critical theory/critical inquiry (Smyth, Hattam & Shacklock, 1997; Crotty, 1998). I believe that this is where my own ideology lies.
Kincheloe and McLaren (cited in Crotty, 1998, p. 157-58) list the following as the basic assumptions of critical theorists:

- all thought is fundamentally mediated by power relations that are social in nature and historically constituted;

- facts can never be isolated from the domain of values or removed from ideological inscription;

- the relationship between concept and object, and between signifier and signified, is never stable and is often mediated by the social relations of capitalist production and consumption;

- language is central to the formation of subjectivity, that is, both conscious and unconscious awareness;

- certain groups in any society are privileged over others, constituting an oppression that is most forceful when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable;

- oppression has many faces, and concern for only one form of oppression at the expense of others can be counterproductive because of the connections between them;

- mainstream research practices are generally implicated, albeit often unwittingly, in the reproduction of systems, class, race and gender oppression.

Carspecken (1996) points out that Kincheloe and McLaren's list includes points that pertain to both the principles and the values of critical researchers.
Hinchey (1998, p. 17) describes critical theory as "a way to ask questions about power". The power of hegemony (the dominant politics and ideology of society) to impose ideas upon society and shape 'what is true' directly influences not only educational practices themselves, but also the views and acceptance of those practices by parents and students. My own central organising ideas in this study draw on Freire's idea of "education as the practice of freedom - as opposed to the practice of domination" (1970, p. 62), Bourdieu's (1976) concepts of cultural capital and habitus, and Lisa Delpit's (1995) understanding of cultural conflict and silencing in education. I shall provide a brief explanation of these ideas in the sections to follow.

Freire: Education as the Practice of Freedom

Paulo Freire, who was dedicated to improving the education of the oppressed, maintains that factors such as the 'culture of silence' contribute to oppression. He argues that education should be a practice of freedom, rather than one of domination. Education should, according to Freire, be shared between the teacher and the student (Freire, 1970; 1999). Freire looks to a methodology in which we "place the oppressed in a consciously critical confrontation with their problems" (Crotty, 1998, p. 156), what he terms 'problematisation'.

Elements of Freire's work and writings have been criticised, such as the use of the term 'oppressed', but many researchers/educators, such as bell hooks (1994), believe that the value of and meaning behind his work overshadow such criticism. She emphasises that the writings of Freire enabled her to frame and voice the struggle and oppression that she had felt and experienced deeply, yet could not enunciate. The challenges posed by Freire brought about in hooks a process of critical thinking that was transformative, and led her
to see oppression in a 'non-traditional' sense. Oppression names not only those suffering grave injustices at the hands of despotic dictators, but also the less obvious, day to day, taken-for-granted practices enacted by those with some form of 'power' or 'privilege' over others. Like bell hooks, those people abiding by and conforming to such practices do not consciously question their situation until they begin to think critically about it, placing the politics of their situation in a global context. For Freire, such elucidation is the first step, which can then lead to praxis. As hooks describes it, "that historical moment when one begins to think critically about the self and identity in relation to one's political circumstance .... Freire has had to remind readers that he never spoke of conscientization as an end in itself, but always as it is joined by meaningful praxis" (1994, p. 47).

Aspects of Freire's work have been criticised from the feminist perspective. To address this criticism, hooks uses the metaphor of 'life-giving water'. She likens those most in need of liberatory pedagogy to people dying of thirst. She states that it is only those who are privileged that can afford to reject water for the sake of some minor impurities, while those in need of it can recognise such impurities, yet still make use of the life-giving properties of the water. This metaphor itself illustrates the difference that arises when seeing an action from a global perspective.

**Bourdieu: The Notion of Cultural Capital**

As outlined in the previous section, Bourdieu saw cultural capital as a key element in the reproduction of social and educational inequality. Saha (1997), commenting on the way in which cultural capital works upon families, states that, "nearly all families care about their children's school success, but their knowledge of the system and their ability to work it to the advantage of their children varies, generally by social class but also within classes"
Reay describes Bourdieu's research as "a useful starting point" (1998, p. 56) when examining the home-school relationship. She notes that

For Bourdieu, the family is the site of social reproduction .... However, his concept of habitus permits an analysis of social inequality which is not simply dependent on fixed notions of economic and social location .... At the centre of the concept is the interplay not only between past and present but also between the individual and the forces acting upon them. (p. 59)

Like Freire, Bourdieu urges us to question situations and practices that we view as 'natural', advocating the problematisation of such situations. Bourdieu suggests too that those who are marginalised or the subjects of domination are complicit in maintaining that marginalisation or domination through their acceptance of the status quo (Reay, 1998; Bourdieu, 1976; 1997). Reay suggests that, as well as assisting to unmask "the intricate dynamics of power .... Bourdieu helps us to keep key issues of social justice in the frame" (1998, p. 71).

Lisa Delpit: Other People's Children

Lisa Delpit, in her book Other People's Children, speaks of the roles of power and pedagogy in silencing parents and their children. She challenges the practices of educators who make pedagogical and administrative decisions on behalf of students and their families, seeing them in her research as "battling over what was good for these 'other people's children', while excluding from the conversation those with the most to gain or lose by its outcome" (Delpit, 1995, p. 6). I identify strongly with Delpit's idea that we, as educators, make decisions and carry out policies that impact upon the lives of children that are not our own, that do not share our personal histories nor necessarily our values. The
resonance of Delpit's research findings and philosophies impacts strongly upon my approach to this research and to education generally.

Delpit advocates the identification of and giving voice to alternative worldviews through ethnographic perspectives. She believes that "it is the responsibility of the dominant group members to attempt to hear the other side of the issue; and after hearing, to speak in a modified voice that does not exclude [the minority]" (1995, p. 20). She identifies issues of power and accompanying codes and rules, which impact upon educational success. Her particular experience and passion is focused upon being an African-American educator, and upon the education of non-white children, however, her insightful advice holds merit and is applicable to all educators and educational institutions. She explains that, "when I speak, therefore, of the culture of power, I don't speak of how I wish things to be but of how they are. I further believe that to act as if power does not exist is to ensure that the power status quo remains the same" (p. 39).
3. METHODOLOGY

The methodology that I chose for the research falls into the category of critical ethnography, described by Crotty (1998, p. 12) as "a methodology that serves to unmask hegemony and address oppressive forces". In light of Crotty's description, this methodology is consistent with the theoretical tradition of critical inquiry, as well as being consistent with my research question and with my ideology. In attempting to understand and explain critical ethnography as a methodology, I was confronted with texts that were often, as I complained to my supervisor, 'like wading through mud'. Carspecken (1996) encapsulates my frustration and frames my thoughts far more eloquently when he laments that:

What is unfortunate is not that some writings on critical methodology are densely composed, but that virtually all writings in the field are composed this way. This has made work in the critical tradition basically inaccessible to a large number of people. (p. 4)

With this in mind, my explanation of critical ethnography and how it relates to this research project are certainly not intended to be in any way definitive, but merely a way of presenting this methodology that renders it easier to understand to both the readers of this work and to myself! Carspecken again summarises succinctly for me when he states, "we criticalists have both witnessed and directly experienced forms of oppression. We do not like them. We want to change them" (1996, p. 8).

The importance of a theoretical focus in making meaning from research data is central to the critical ethnographer. Critical ethnography itself, however, cannot be simply defined (Quantz, 1992). Quantz's preference is to "place it within a discourse", describing the
researcher's "attempts to represent the 'culture', the 'consciousness', or the 'lived experiences' of people living in asymmetrical power relations" (1992, p. 448), and that such research projects are often "arrived at through unique personal histories" (ibid. p. 450). That is certainly true of this research project.

Critical ethnographers, according to Kincheloe and McLaren (2000), "have made significant contributions to our understanding of the ways in which power is entailed in culture, leading to practices of domination and exploitation that have become naturalized in everyday social life" (p. 302). They point out that, "hegemony works through both silences and repetition in naturalizing the dominant world-view. There also may exist oppositional ideologies among subaltern groups ... that break free of hegemony" (p. 303).

The objective of this study is to combat silence on the issue of homework by giving usually silenced stakeholders (students and caregivers) a voice that will reach the dominant voices and decision-makers on homework issues (educational organizations, researchers and educators). In addition, and in keeping with an emancipatory approach to research, those same usually silenced stakeholders will be presented with an opportunity to view their own voices and experiences as valid and vitally important to pedagogy and the educational decision-making process.

I have not at any time approached the participants in this study, and nor should anyone who reads it, as victims. Rather, the emancipatory aspect of this study aims to lead the participants to examine the system of which they are a part, thereby questioning the status quo, rather than accepting "the way it is" (Hinchey, 1998, p. 9). According to Anderson (1989, p. 249), "critical ethnographers seek research accounts sensitive to the dialectical relationship between the social structure constraints on human actors and the relative
autonomy of human agency ... the overriding goal of critical ethnography is to free individuals from sources of domination and repression".

The critical ethnographer is faced with a difficulty in regard to research validity (Anderson, 1989; Kincheloe & McLaren, 2000; Lather, 1986a & 1986b). In regard to openly ideological research, Lather (1986a) maintains that we need not apologise for such methodology. However, methods that ensure credibility need to be employed. Lather suggests that in addition to triangulation (use of different data sources; search for counter-patterns), face validity (member checks - going back to the subject) and construct validity (pertains to self-reflexivity in regard to a priori theory, subject's ways of thinking, the researcher's involvement), the category of catalytic validity be included. Catalytic validity is particularly important to critically ethnographic methodology, as it "refers to the degree to which the research process reorients, refocusses and energises participants in what Freire (1973) terms 'conscientization', knowing reality in order to better transform it" (p. 67).

Lather (1986b) believes that in emancipatory, praxis-oriented research, it is vital for the 'researched' to be included as much as possible. True respect for those researched is paramount to Lather, as it should be to all those who profess to be critical ethnographers. The need for a high level of reciprocity is urged, through shared negotiation of meaning with participants, through interactive, dialogic interviews, and through meaningful discussions of false consciousness. Not only going back but also 'giving back' to the participants to check and negotiate data goes toward a sharing of power with the researched. Lather states powerfully that:
For praxis to be possible, not only must theory illuminate the lived experience of progressive social groups; it must also be illuminated by their struggles. Theory adequate to the task of changing the world must be open-ended, non-dogmatic, informing, and grounded in the circumstances of everyday life; and moreover, it must be premised on a deep respect for the intellectual and political capacities of the dispossessed. (1986b, p. 262)

Quantz (1992) believes that, "any ethnography that claims to be 'critical' must be understood as an utterance in an ongoing 'critical' dialogue" (p. 450). My own view of this research project is that it springs from a blend of my own 'unique personal history' and my readings of past and current critical research, and is intended to add to the voices that have already spoken, with the goal of prompting others, be they students, parents or teachers, to add their voices to the existing body of critically ethnographic work.

Research Methods/Data Collection

I was able to gain insight into the issues underpinning my research question by examining several student/family perspectives on homework. More specifically, I utilised conversations with participants as the prime source of data, employing guiding but open-ended questions, which allowed the elaboration and exploration of responses. In-depth semi-structured conversations with the participants were undertaken. These conversations provided a rich sample of data, from which I was able to draw valuable insights into the unique perspectives of each student and family. Burgess (1988) recognises the value of purposeful conversations to ethnographic research, proposing that such conversations, in comparison with a more sanitised and scripted interview, can help us toward a far deeper understanding of the lives of our research participants.
Context

Participants were drawn from the same community, school and class level. Conversations were conducted with four students and parents/caregivers at home, in regard to their beliefs, attitudes and feelings toward homework. This method was chosen to allow student and family voices to be heard, and to allow their perspectives to be acknowledged. Permission was gained from the school principal to speak with a year seven teacher and to draw participants from the school (see Appendices Three and Four). The school policy, as well as current education department policy regarding homework was also noted. Carried out in this manner, the study is a bounded one (Bassey, 1999); that is, it has a set place and time.

The data was drawn from a number of students in the upper primary grades, (who attended an established government primary school in a suburb in the Southwest region of Western Australia) along with their parents/caregivers. The school was undergoing many changes at the time of the study due to rapid growth in population and housing. The area contained a mix of old and new housing, and families with a wide range of socio-economic circumstances attended the school.

The teacher of a year seven class at the school was asked to participate in the study, (see Appendices Five and Six) and he agreed. Participants were then to be drawn from his class. He was asked to share his general attitudes and beliefs regarding homework, as well as his homework practices within that particular year, in a conversational interview. After much discussion regarding how participants might be chosen, it was decided that the teacher would provide a list of names and contact details for approximately ten students and caregivers. The students chosen by the teacher included what he considered to be a
mix of ability levels, socio-economic status (SES) and attitudes toward the completion of work. I then contacted four families from that list at random to explain my research and to invite them to participate. I expected that perhaps some would decline, in which case I would contact another name on the list until four participants had accepted. The first four families contacted all agreed to participate without hesitation. All of the parents were keen to share their homework thoughts and experiences. It may have been coincidental, but this eagerness to discuss the subject of homework certainly mirrors the informal feedback I have constantly received whenever I mention the issue of homework.

All parents/caregivers were invited to participate. It is interesting to note however, that in each case, it was the mother or female caregiver that actually participated with their child in the conversation. Only in the case of Sharon, Tony and Bianca did the father participate, and this occurred during the course of the interview. Tony had initially planned not to participate. In all other cases, the father or male caregiver was not present in the room, or not at home, at the time that the conversations took place.

After acceptance of the offer to be included in the research project, participants were presented with a letter of invitation to participate which contained information about the research (see Appendix One), and suitable times were arranged for conversations to take place. Letters of consent to participate were also presented to participants (see Appendix Two), which were signed and returned. Initial conversational interviews (approximately an hour long) were conducted over a period of several weeks, with further time allowed for feedback sessions with participants shortly after each session was transcribed.

When organising the sessions, the convenience of the participants was paramount. The appointments for the conversational interviews were therefore set over a longer time
period than I had initially envisaged, however the times were those that were most convenient for the parents/caregivers and students, who were after all allowing the intrusion of a stranger into their lives. The sessions took place toward the end of the school year, as this allowed the students and parents to reflect on their year seven experiences during conversations. I was aware that the latter part of the school year is generally a busy time for schools and families, and that for most participants, the sessions were 'slotted in' to small gaps in very demanding schedules.

**Neutrality and Generalisation**

According to Stake (cited in Bassey, 1999, p. 30), “Issues are not simple and clean, but intricately wired to political, social, historical and especially personal contexts”. Our practices are never neutral; rather they are shaped and influenced by a myriad of forces, both overtly and implicitly (Freire, 1972; Connell et.al 1982; Hinchey, 1998; Apple, 1999; Shor, 1978). In the tradition of critical inquiry, I do not pretend to claim neutrality, but instead I make my positioning clear. Participants were made aware that I approached the research through the lens of my own experiences as both a teacher and a parent, and that within both of these roles, I had found homework to be problematic. However, I did not wish to lead the participants in any way, and therefore was very explicit about what I wanted to achieve through the research; that is, to obtain genuine responses from all stakeholders who were willing to challenge my own thinking by presenting their own unique perspectives.

I used questions and statements within conversations in order to genuinely engage the participants and elicit authentic responses regarding homework wherever possible and to further probe those responses. The approach worked well, which is illustrated by the fact
that in each session, it is the participants that do most of the talking. The initial open-ended prompts tended to draw full responses that served as springboards for further discussion. In addition, family members often talked ‘amongst themselves’ about their homework experiences and feelings.

Why Individual Stories?

Freire emphasises the importance of the critical comprehension of history in discourse, stating that, “as historical beings, we are not merely historical, but historically conditioned” (Macedo, 1995, p. 390). Detailed examinations of individual experiences can, as Stake (cited in Bassey, 1999 p. 30) points out, “help us to see the instance in a more historical light”. Although many criticisms have been levelled at such methods, including the difficulty of generalising from individual cases, I believe that there is great merit in what Helen Simons (1996) calls the holistic perspective that such studies can bring. I agree with her assertion that, “the tension between the study of the unique and the need to generalise is necessary to reveal both the unique and the universal and the unity of that understanding” (Simons, 1996, p. 237-8).

What is particularly valuable about presenting individual stories is that intensely detailed accounts can be obtained that can provide the reader with resonance and verisimilitude, accounts that may be termed ‘thick, rich descriptions’ (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000; Creswell & Miller, 2000). Thus, participant’s accounts of their experiences are seen through the lens of the reader as well as that of the researcher (Creswell & Miller, 2000).
Ethical Procedures

As qualitative research, and critically ethnographic research in particular, involves an intrusion into the lives of the participants, the consideration of ethical issues is of utmost importance. The maintenance of confidentiality and anonymity is of paramount importance. Pseudonyms have been used for all participants in this study, as well as for the school, and identifying details have been altered. Bell (1999) also advocates aiming for the principle of informed consent, and it was my intent to do so. I addressed this through extensive consultation with all participants before the data collection commenced. This consultation included an explanation of the nature and purpose of the research.

In order to fulfil the requirements of an ethics committee, and to “minimise the potential for harmful consequences” (Smyth, Hattam & Shacklock, 1997, p. 28), a code of practice was drafted, outlining an agreement to be made between the participants of the study and myself as researcher (see Appendices section for letters of invitation to participate and consent to participate). These letters included guidelines as to how the research was to be undertaken and how it was to be used.

Ethical considerations included Bassey’s (1999) ethical values of respect for democracy, respect for truth, and respect for persons, and, since these three values may occasionally clash, the additional value he cites, that of respect for educational research. The overriding value for me was and is, above all else, respect for the participants. Providing students and their parents with a voice in educational research remains the prime concern of this research project. I also recognised the need to be mindful of my own connection with the topic, and, as stated earlier, made my own biases and personal
position clear. I reflected carefully upon my own positioning while conducting interviews and analysing the data.

Interviews were audiotaped and participants given the opportunity to contact me in order to discuss or amend responses if they so chose. Participants also had the right to withdraw from the research project at any time during the research process. I provided an interactive conversational setting that was 'safe' for the participants, conducting the conversational interview sessions at times and venues that were most suitable to the participants. Participants were assured of anonymity and I emphasised my desire to hear their genuine personal accounts, regardless of my own or any other viewpoints, encouraging them to contribute candidly.

It was also my intention to minimise, as much as it was possible, any perceived 'power differences' between the participants and myself. As the chief participants were students and caregivers, I emphasised my dual roles of student and parent, rather than my role as researcher, so that there was some feeling of commonality between us. I made every effort to ensure that my language and manner was as un-intrusive and compatible as possible. As stated earlier, participants had control of determining a conversation setting and time that was most comfortable and convenient to them.

Ethical sensitivity is, to my mind, as it is in research literature, a vitally important trait for any researcher. Therefore, maintaining respect for the study participants and ensuring that the treatment of all people involved was handled with sensitivity and tact at all times were paramount. In this regard, I also looked to my university supervisor for assistance and guidance, in addition to taking into account other researchers' experiences of ethical issues.
In this chapter, I will give a brief description of the background of each participant/family, including the context in which each conversation took place. In each case, these are followed by pertinent excerpts from each transcript that highlight the participants’ views, concerns and experiences of homework. Full transcripts have by no means been included, as these were extensive. However, I felt it important to include substantial sections of the conversation transcripts. The purpose of doing so, as previously outlined in the section Why Individual Stories?, is to provide a rich description of each family’s experiences and feelings, thereby creating both resonance and verisimilitude (Creswell & Miller, 2000; Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), by allowing the reader to identify with and understand more deeply those experiences described by the participants.

Underlining is used within excerpts to indicate emphasis placed by the participants upon certain words. Words placed in square brackets and italicised indicate my own additions, used for clarification. A set of three dots immediately after a word within excerpts indicates that the participant ‘trailed off’ or paused, while ellipses, distinguished by spaces before and after, indicate omission of text (that is, that only the relevant comments from that part of the conversation have been included). Omissions have not been made where doing so would alter the meaning or general gist of the participant’s story. I will analyse and discuss these conversations in light of the research question, and identify and discuss common themes in Chapter 5.
The Teacher's Perspective: A Conversation with Gary

Gary is a year seven teacher at Saunders Primary School. He is married with two school-aged sons, who both attend the school at which he teaches. At his request, our conversation took place in the school staff room during Gary's 'DOTT' time (Duties Other Than Teaching). Gary was keen to participate in the research project, and was extremely enthusiastic about it, but found it difficult to find the time to 'fit things in'. Gary expressed concern that there were many demands upon his time within his teaching role, of which the students were only a part. This is echoed in a section of the transcript that I have included below. I believe that the best way to explain Gary's philosophy on homework is to include his own words. The following passages are excerpts from our conversation:

Teachers can give too much written homework or worksheet type work. Homework to me should be something that really excites and interests the child that they can go and think "I'd really like to go and find out about that. I'd really like to know". Even though that's not measurable, I think, not measurable from a teacher's perspective .... I support reading every night ... they should be reading something they're interested in, um, and also reading about current events .... Spelling and writing I think is pretty much the same. Spelling to me, if the child for example knows that they're not as good a speller as they'd like to be, then they should be doing some work every night. And similarly with writing .... I think it's really important, and possibly we don't focus on that enough as teachers, to get the kids to do written work outside of school hours in itself.

Other work I'll set the children is stuff that we're learning about at the time, which relates to the theme or topic that I'm running with, so it's fairly subject-specific ... some kids will download something from the internet, which doesn't necessarily mean they understand what it's about.

I guess the other perspective for me is homework not as a penalty, but for children who haven't finished their work that's been set aside in class ... maybe if the majority, at least half to three quarters of the class have the work completed anyway, so the last small group need to say, "well I'm behind here. It's up to me to go and finish the work myself and get it in. So sort of three steps I guess for me. Reading and spelling effectively and writing every night...
should be. Reading at a year seven level, say, fifteen, twenty minutes minimum, up to maybe an hour. Spelling and writing, maybe ten minutes minimum, up to twenty five minutes, say half an hour. So that would be something that I would expect of the children every night. I don’t know whether I really get that. You can ask the kids and they’ll just say yeah, because they’re just basically placating you and saying that for the sake of keeping you happy.

So, subject specific – I guess I give less homework of that. Might be one or two things a week. Because I don’t, even though grade seven level I’m conscious that the kids are going to high school the next year, and they want to take a positive attitude about doing homework to high school, because I don’t think it’ll be too positive for too long after that!

[in regard to setting homework as practice for high school] Yeah, see I take a differing approach to that [to some parents and other educators], almost quite opposing really, because, and part of the reason is I think that we need to say to the kids that you’re only a child once and you need to experience and enjoy your life ... perhaps in some ways we might be robbing them of that pleasure and enjoyment.

[concerning homework given at younger and younger age] I mean, where do you start? I mean, do you start giving homework at grade one, formalised work that you say, “I’m going to collect this, and if you don’t do it you’re in trouble”? So I’m conscious of that. I, and people say I don’t give enough homework, but then I say, “well it’s not my task really to give homework. It’s my task to inspire and motivate the kids enough that they will go away and do it themselves.

[in response to a question about parents who believe he should give more homework] I think part of the reason those people in our community exist is that they might be suffering, well not suffering but having exasperating situations at home, and they don’t know how to deal with it, so they turn to you as a professional and ask you to deal with it, which is a bit of a bandaid effect. What they really need to do is get themselves more involved in their child. And show some interest .... I see some parents being overly pushy [toward their children]. Perhaps almost like the ‘ugly parent’ syndrome in sport, and you may get that in an academic sense. We don’t get to see that as much because there’s not such an open forum within our community. So it’s sort of something that the parent can, I guess pressure onto their child, and there’s only the child and the family experiences that pressure.

I’m not about being a police person to monitor homework, and where would you get the time even if you wanted to you, you couldn’t possibly do it. It’s busy enough now teaching grade sevens now it seems, um, with the issues that are going in the current climate with a lot of the kids, and being asked to do more and more things it seems, and to fit fifteen or twenty minutes of
homework marking on top of the normal school day, it’s just being impractical I think.

I don’t like to set homework for the sake of homework, and this would come back down to the unfinished work and that’s why I’m strong on it, is to say well, this is a part of your assessable task for this particular theme or activity or subject, and whereas you have chosen to work at a certain rate or talk to your friend or minimise your achievement in your class time set, the consequence of that is that you now need to take that work home to complete that work, and then bring it back to me. If you fail to complete the work, you still need to bring it back and I’ll mark it accordingly, and if you’ve only done half the work then you’re only going to achieve half the possible mark, or out of the possible mark. So I guess my approach is to say well, you can achieve this mark if you choose to do the work. If you choose to do the work ... we’re asking them to make choices about how they behave every day, their work ethic, the independence that they demonstrate, the initiative that they show, and some cope very well with that and others don’t. And that’s the way it is.

I mean, I’ve had kids say to me this year, “Mr B., I haven’t been able to complete my work”, and I, I guess one of my phrases is to say, “Don’t give me an excuse, give me the reason”. So, if a child can demonstrate an appropriate reason for why they haven’t been able to complete a piece of work in class or even at home, then I’ll accept that and I’ll negotiate with them to either give them extra time or fit it in from there.

(Gary, personal communication, 2002)

**Jill and Trent**

Jill is a primary school teacher currently teaching at junior primary level. She has previously taught middle and upper primary classes. Trent attends the school at which Jill works. She is married, and Trent lives with both parents and his older brother, who attends upper high school. Both parents are working full time, though Jill has worked part-time for some years, and has only taken up full-time work in the last year. The family lives close to the school (within walking distance). They have a personal computer and a laptop computer at home, with Internet access as well as educational software and books. Each child has their own room, though they often work at the kitchen table or in the
family area. The family have lived in the area for approximately six years. Trent plays sport and spends time building and racing vehicles with his father and older brother. English is the first language of all family members.

Jill: People lead busy lives outside of the home with regards to sport and other activities so as a whole, yeah, I think it — any homework usually interferes a bit, but, my experience is that the kids tend to leave it to the last minute, and so it'd be less of an interference if they did it a little bit at a time. Like when they're first given the homework and spread it out, but then often kids don't have those skills, planning skills to do that. And I believe that maybe that needs to come from the school, teachers, to break the homework up into smaller portions and give it, so if they've got a week's worth of homework say, give a little bit each night and set the task for each night and say well that needs to be done by tomorrow. And the next day, so that by the end of the week, or whatever period of time it is, the kids have actually had the opportunity to do it bit by bit because it's a skill that kids just don't know, and they have to be taught it. So yeah, I mean Luke's pretty good, he's pretty independent, he doesn't always need a lot of help, but it's still often a last minute thing, so it often involves people helping him maybe, but it often involves a late night; cross words and getting it done because it's due tomorrow.

I believe too that homework, really, if a kid's worked hard at school during the day, there's actually no need for the homework. It's a little bit different if they've been slack and haven't completed it, then maybe then that's a strategy the teacher can use for when you haven't used your time well, here's a bit of homework, but giving homework for the sake of homework — no.

Your job is to do it for homework; if you don't do it for homework, it's a recess and lunchtime job, or something like that. Yeah, because I think kids work hard; I think when you put adults in similar working conditions to kids they'd find it very difficult — to do that all day, to turn around and actually put some more hours in at night. Kids work generally pretty hard from nine to three, and um, they need to pursue other things that aren't as easily pursued at school. But at the same time, there's some things, maybe, um, nothing springs to mind, but maybe with some things they can only be done for homework. Sometimes a homework task that might involve the family, like gathering of information that can be used in class, um, locating something that might maybe be used in class — sure. That's got to be done at home. But I feel that sometimes homework is given for the sake of homework. Having said that, you haven't had a lot of homework this year, have you? [to Trent] Either you haven't had it, or you haven't done it, or you've done it secretly! Well what do you think about homework?
Trent: It's stupid [emphatically].

Jill: Why is it stupid?

Trent: Because you've got to do it at home ....

Jill: Do you think it's easier to do those things sometimes at home without the distraction of the other kids?

Trent: Do it at school so you can talk to all your friends when you do it.

Jill: But you got Aaron [brother] to help you on that last one. What else did you do – sometimes you do homework, don't you, that you're not happy with what you've done at school. Like, remember when you were doing that yacht, that land yacht? You weren't entirely happy with what you'd done at school, so you came home, but it wasn't set homework, it was something you chose to do.

Trent: Yeah ...

Trent also spoke of the disparity between the homework practices of different teachers, telling me that some teachers give much more homework than others.

Trent: Yeah, in year five we had to do worksheets ... I didn't do 'em at home. I did 'em before school ... just in my own class. I came in early and did 'em.

When asked if there was any particular kind of homework that he liked or didn't mind doing, Trent replied with a simple 'no'. I asked him what it was about homework that bugged him: He replied. "Because it makes you have to use up your time, when it's the end of school". He did comment that the only aspect of homework he had enjoyed was using the Internet. When we discussed this further, he pointed out that this was because he could talk to his friends through Internet 'chat'. On reflection, he said that this wasn't actually a part of his homework, but something he was able to do because he was already 'on the net'. When asked what he did outside of school time when not doing homework,
Trent replied that he sometimes played on the computer or played electronic games, but that he liked to play golf (a new interest for him) and also:

*Trent*: Play basketball, go to basketball training, play on the trampoline, play with the dog, do stuff with Dad and Mum, go into town sometimes ... go-karting sometimes; go out to the go-kart track; uh, normally I play hockey on Saturday

I asked Trent if he had ever had to put off or cancel one of those things, or not do something he was interested in because he had homework to do:

*Trent*: I did, but I just choose not to do homework, I do the thing that I want to do. I just hand in what I’ve got

*Jill*: I think you find though, that once you get stuck into your homework, it’s like any task, whether it’s at home or school. You generally enjoy doing it, because you’re doing something for yourself....

If it’s something you can’t do, then that’s when the frustration comes in. It’s the kids at home, and if you haven’t got anyone to support you and help you, you have to always do it on your own, which you’re lucky to student um, the other day I’ve helped you, Dad’s helped you, Brandon’s helped you the other day; and it is always much more fun if you’ve got someone that can help you do it ... see I have busy times where I don’t always have time to do it. It’s a bit like that task that Mrs [LOTE teacher] has set you; to do that on your own might be a bit awkward, but when you’ve got someone else to do it with, it won’t be so bad.

Jill and Trent went on to discuss homework problems that arose when neither the parent nor the student was quite sure of how it was to be approached:

*Jill*: even as a parent, sometimes you know of a way, especially maths, there’s often different ways to do things, you know of a way to solve that, but it’s not the way they’ve been taught at school. And then there’s friction there, because “that’s not how Mr so-and-so told us at school”, so you know, Yeah, *[To Trent]* I don’t think over your time, that you’ve ever had too many worksheets to do.
Trent: In year six and year five, I had maths worksheets, lots of worksheets to do.

Jill: Oh, did you have them in year six regularly?

Trent: Yeah, but I used to always do it at school. I didn’t bring it home.

Jill: I sort of believe that if it’s like that, and it can be done at school, then maybe that’s where it should be done, because if you do need the assistance of someone for whatever reason, well that’s fine then too. See, as a teacher, not as a parent, I do send reading homework, and I do send repetitive stuff, sight words, that I can’t as a teacher do every day with every child. That only takes a couple of minutes, and if parents could possibly manage that couple of minutes every day, because it’s a repetitive thing, you know the more often you do it the better you get at it, if it can be done at home.

Being reasonable as a teacher, kids do have home lives, and if they read all the time for example, and they don’t read one night, well there doesn’t have to be a consequence for that, because you know the child generally reads most nights and there must have been a very good reason ... but that’s as a teacher’s point of view. I don’t mind what they read. I would prefer they would enjoy what they’re reading. But the reading homework, I believe that kids, even older kids like Trent should be reading every night, and I can see more value... ["No!" says Trent. Laughter]

But we do at times have to read things for information, but I agree, that’s as we need to. So I guess make it flexible, make it tailor made more, if you... but then there are things like tables that no matter what, individuals have to learn them. Just motivating, I guess, kids to learn is important.

During discussion of reasons given as to why homework is necessary, the 'because they will have to do it in later years' argument came up. Jill, expressing frustration both as a teacher and as a parent, stated, “But it’s not giving a valid reason for homework, nobody ever at any point gives you valid reasons”. Jill also said she was aware that all students have different home environments, and went on to say that:

I think homework’s much easier when you’ve got capable kids. And with the support: sometimes that, kids that badly need support at home don’t get the support, and the type and duration and the frequency of homework makes a difference.
I asked both Jill and Trent for their response to the notion that some people have suggested that homework should be banned, that we shouldn’t have homework at all:

**Trent:** That would be good! Yep! [and on what he would do with that time] All the other stuff that I like doing ... having a sleep, sometimes, when I’m tired.

[Noting that he is often tired after school]

**Jill:** I think you have to be very careful about that, because as a parent I used to love hearing my kids read and things like that. I actually think that there’s a great deal of value in reading at every opportunity, and kids can read and recite sight words to parents every night whereas the teacher doesn’t have time. I just think they’d have to be very careful about a blanket banning of homework, and they’d have to be very careful what they called homework.

I actually tell my parents, let’s not have a fight at home because they won’t do their reading. Reading at home should be pleasurable. Offer to listen to them, but if they don’t want to do it that’s fine. Because the pressure will come from me at school. And if I know, and I need to know that you’re more than willing to hear them, then that’s when you implement things. And it might be that, all right you haven’t read at home, then you read to me at recess, in some of their time. They don’t have to be nasty consequences, but they’re just consequences. Maybe the child’s just being a bit lazy. But I actually do believe that there should be pressure from the school, encouragement at home, to get kids to complete homework tasks. But I still do believe, I often set tasks that um, require a little bit of ‘homework’, just, not worksheets, but if they have to bring an old item and share an old item for news, because I like to make news very structured and specific, then that’s going to require some interaction and work at home. You know, fill out a, if you’re going to talk about an item, they’ll need to complete a sheet. Jot a few things down so that they’re prepared for speaking. And I believe things like that are valuable and I would hate to be told I couldn’t do that. But if you said to me, you know, you never ever have to do a maths worksheet for homework again, that would be fine!

But you still get these little waifs that don’t ever do it, so then, you actually as a teacher, make the time to help them so that they can be the same as everyone else. And sometimes you do have to put a bit of pressure on kids, the lazy ones.

(Jill and Trent, personal communication, 2002).
Sharon, Tony and Bianca

Bianca's parents, Sharon and Tony, are married and reside with their four children in a home that is relatively close to the school. One parent works at the moment, though they had previously both been working. Each child has their own bedroom. The house has a small amount of living space, and the children do not have desks. The family has a basic personal computer at home, and describe themselves as having limited resources. Bianca has an older brother, who has left school and taken up a traineeship, an older sister who was attending the local government high school, but now attends a nearby Christian school, and a younger sister. Bianca and her sisters participate in a martial art, and have a firm commitment to it. English is the first language of all family members.

Initially the conversation was to take place with Sharon and Bianca. Tony did not wish to be involved, as he was too busy. When I arrived, Tony was outside, working in the garden. However, as the conversation unfolded, I saw that Tony had been listening from out of view, and he began to speak with us, at first from the next room. Eventually he joined us at the table and spoke quite passionately about their experiences as parents and his views and feelings on the issues. Sharon, Tony and Bianca had a great deal to share, and I have included a substantial part of our conversation below, beginning with Sharon and Bianca's initial reaction to the topic of homework:

Sharon, Bianca and other siblings in the background: Yuck! [Laughter]

Sharon: In general. Yeah, it's more of a pain I suppose, but it's something that I think you're supposed to be onto the kids more, but half the time you're not, you're too busy doing your thing to be um, checking them, I suppose. When you know they've got homework, you're going "have you done your homework", but when they haven't mentioned it, it's something that I don't think about too much.
We've got four kids, we're pretty busy, and when I was working particularly, life revolved around work totally, even though, you know you come home and you've got chores, you feel like ignoring the other things, you know and you feel like, who cares?! [Laughter]

Bianca's first response to what she thought about homework was, "I don't know". She appeared unsure of what I 'wanted to hear'. Her demeanour initially indicated that she was a little suspicious of my intentions! I assured both her and Sharon that whatever they said would not be shared directly with the teacher or school, and that the finished research document would be written so as to conceal their identities. I reiterated my desire to hear their candid responses. Bianca went on to say that she did not like homework, but that she had not had much this year, as the teacher tended to give homework only to those who didn't get enough work done in class. "I do it, but I don't like it". She noted that the teacher often gave them extra time to finish things in class. Those like herself who worked well in class and "got things done" generally did not have much homework. She did wish to share with me that this had not been the case in other years:

Bianca: I don't think I've had any this year. Yep. Like, when I was in year five, like every week we got a different homework sheet to do, and had to do that.

Sharon: She does it, she likes to get it done, which is good.

Sharon then talked about the fact that they have four children, each of whom has struggled to varying degrees and in different ways with homework:

Sharon: I've got a son who hated school totally in general anyway, and oh, he had a horrendous teacher for homework. She kept going, you know, you have to prepare them for high school, and they need heaps and um, just such a drain. It was full on, it was a lot, and then you've got to nag them, you know, "you haven't done your homework", it was just so over the top that you couldn't have cared less what the teacher was trying to achieve. I mean, she
basically destroyed that [parental] back-up because it was just so over the top it was ridiculous. And I've got my younger daughter, and she's good with her homework in general, she gets a bit of homework and she gets it done, so um, no they've all got a different attitude. There's one that's, "oh, I've got to get it done, I'll get it done now and get it over with", mainly, and these two, you know, homework hasn't sort of kicked in a lot, I suppose, because she's just going to high school next year, so that'll probably change a bit more.

I asked Bianca if homework was not really a problem for her then:

**Bianca:** Oh, yeah! Like, I've had a project where I've had like, Tae Kwon Do on, straight after school and I have to get a project finished and I stayed up, and it was [handed in] late! That was a stress!

**Sharon:** Hmm. We have that a lot with Erin as well, my other daughter, she does Tae Kwon Do about five nights a week as well, and she'll be coming home from that at nine o'clock and "I've got to finish my homework, got to hand it in tomorrow!" And that's, um, it's something [Tae Kwon Do] that they're quite involved in and it's been really good for them, so, and especially with Erin, she's very focused on it, so they're focusing on that, and she sort of keeps out of trouble. So to me, the Tae Kwon Do's more important than the homework, because of the social values that she's got from that as well. She can do her schoolwork at school. And if the homework's not done, I mean I like it to be done, but I mean, sometimes you can't do everything. It's not the priority for sure.

Well I believe there's only a certain amount of things that you're really good at, there's lots of things you can do but there are only certain things that you have a real aptitude, that you can do something more with. And I don't think anything should get in the way of that, because you should be able to at least try to take it wherever you can, and if it doesn't work out that's fine, but if you don't give it your best shot and you don't do it while you're young, then you don't get those opportunities again, or it's very difficult.

And they're exploring all the things that they can do, and um, homework; they're still getting their basic education at school, and I think um, in a higher education or going on, if you want to do something and you know what you want to do and you have to do some work at home then you know what you have to do, but it's your attitude that gets you through your life anyway, so you go out and do something and you want to do well, you will do well, and if you need to go back and study, you'll go back and study. So I just think all those things, the person you are or become is what makes you go on to achieve anyway, so, [not doing] a little bit of homework doesn't matter.
Well see for us, what we’ve seen for Erin, I mean she’s always been kind of outgoing, but watching her development that [Tae Kwon Do has] brought about, and with all of them, all the other kids as well, it’s developed leadership and confidence, I mean you just watch them grow with it, and it’s amazing. And it’s a hands-on thing, a lot of what they do for school doesn’t develop those parts of the person.

I asked Bianca if she believed that not having homework would affect her learning. She replied:

Bianca: I don’t know, maybe, a little bit.

[I asked why] Because, like, you have to do like maths or whatever, for homework, and it could be stuff that you didn’t learn at school, so the teacher can, like see if you can do it.

Sharon: A homework sheet, I mean quite often they’ll bring something home and go, “well how do you do this?” It’s just twenty questions or whatever in maths say, and you say “well haven’t you learnt this in school?” And they say “no”, so you’ve either got to sit there and teach them that or they don’t know or whatever you know.

But it’s the teacher’s work we’re teaching, we didn’t set it. And um, sometimes you look at it and you think, I don’t know, I don’t know the answer! It’s just this question, and there’s no explanation at all, and you think it could mean this or it could be that, I mean I don’t know, and I haven’t done this for twenty years! So it’s a bit of a pain in that respect, isn’t it?

look sometimes you just say I don’t know but just write that down and at least you’ve tried something, but also you try and explain it and you’re not a teacher and it’s really hard to explain things to other people! To get them to understand it. It’s kind of like giving directions to go somewhere when you know how to get there without even thinking about it, you know where it is, but what the hell was the name of that street!

As Bianca voiced the pressure that she felt when she had homework to do but wanted to honour her commitment to Tae Kwon Do and pursue other interests, we talked about what would happen if she chose not to do homework. She said, “I’d probably get into trouble with the teacher. It’d affect my marks, my report”.

42
Sharon: It's difficult because we've had like, my son, and at that age, they don't really care what their report says other than that they might be in trouble for it, that part of it, you know. It's not a, some children are more results-orientated, but if you're not, you know? I think, in general, whatever they're saying they have to back it up ... because the, well, "you're responsible for yourself" kind of thing, I think that's really rubbish, and it's so immediate from one extreme to the other. And that doesn't work for that period of adolescence, and it's just, they're not totally adult, they're still growing and changing in their frames of thought - immature! So soon as you're saying "you must do your homework or else", and there's no "or else" at the end, it's a joke, and there's no respect or any of those things, it all falls down. I mean, I think if they want to set their homework, and they expect it in, then they've gotta be prepared to do the detention with them after, or something. The note home to the parents, I mean my daughter gets them, she'll get a note sent home, and I have to sign it and return it, which just means that I know; nothing else really happens. But, and I don't like to get those notes, I mean it's "aahh, what's that!" So, um, there's just got to be some kind of, in lots of ways there's no extra motivation. I mean, you've gotta get yourself motivated to do homework to start with!

Bianca: [In regard to relevance] Depends what it is really. Most of it, not really. Just had to do it, to get it done.

Sharon: Any projects that were fun, any good topics that you've liked? How about when you did one of the French ones, did you like doing that?

Bianca: No, not really! Well, they don't really interest me, it's like, I suppose I'm going to have to do it.

Sharon: I suppose um, if there was some kind of better reward, perhaps? Everything works on a reward system in school, it's just a matter of how or what, I mean if it's group, you have groups competing. I mean if you had homework in groups, that might encourage them to be motivated. I mean, but then you've also got groups going, "ah, we're not winning enough points!", or whatever! You've got to feel like you're getting somewhere. And if there's no [intrinsic, personal] reward at the end of the day, you don't know where you are, doesn't appeal to you, does it? [To daughter, who replies emphatically "no"].

The only thing that [older daughter] was doing of [personal] value, well she was studying for a test, and it was all about money management, and I thought, Huh, my God! Someone actually teaching them something they need to know! Actually something that you'll use and I mean, you talk to anyone and they all say the same - they're the sorts of things you should be doing in school. Instead of that, you're learning a whole lot of rubbish, in a lot of ways, you know, or it seems like, and they bring homework home...
Well my son will bring something home, and you look and they go, "oh, what have I got to do that for", and I mean I'm the parent, I'm supposed to be saying, "oh OKAY, this will be really good"; and I don't. I think, oh what a stupid thing, why do you have to do that? And I say, if it's really stupid, I say "no, don't worry about it! I don't care", because I just think, right, what were they thinking?

Bianca: Like the Olympiad!

Sharon: Oh those maths things? Oh my God! How do you do that? They were awful!

And well, when you can be reinforcing a negative, when the kids are practising it wrong, is a waste of time, because you're sort of battling along, and until you're actually going through and doing it, it doesn't go in, and then you go home and you're doing it wrong - it's going in and it's wrong.

In general I suppose, homework to me is a negative experience. You don't ever think, well, that was really good, they've really achieved something, or that was really important. Never ever do those things cross your mind! Like, "have you done it? Bloody well hurry up, you need to do it, you need to go in the shower and you need to go to bed"!

Yeah, it's dinnertime and you're saying, "get that crap off my table!" [Laughs] They've just got to find a spot and then do it, or they lean on the bedroom floor or whatever. They've all got their own room, I think that makes life easier all round, so, but when they want to study, we've got two main living areas and they've usually got someone in them, and it's not a quiet place to be. There's in your room, but there's no desks set up or anything, so it's lying on the bed or on the floor or that kind of thing. And we don't have anything in the way of books or anything like that.

Sharon talked about the fact that all homes and families are different; that the homework is sent there and is marked on an equal basis, as if it were done in an equal environment. Their family circumstances had, like mine, not remained static over the years in which they had been raising children. She noted that although all four children had felt pressured by homework, it had been more difficult for her son to cope than it had been for her daughters:
Sharon: The kids that are in the lower end of the scale probably feel more and more inferior as they go along, and then they probably arc up more I think, you know? When you say homework, I’ve done homework for my son, because he was in trouble so often, and it was just such a big drama and problem. I would do his homework, on some things, just so I could get it out of the way and I didn’t have another damn phone call about this crap! And it wasn’t stuff that I thought, oh, that’s important, but it was just, we’ll type something up, and that’ll do, you know? And, you sort of, that’s defeating the purpose obviously, but I didn’t care – it was just more, get it out of the way and get this problem over with. And it was becoming such a pressure on him that he couldn’t handle it, you know, out in the backyard in tears and that you know, boys and bottling things, and just because of the pressure in every angle. But he didn’t want to get in trouble at the school because he hates it, and all those things, and it just explodes, and it’s just like, forget the homework, we don’t care about it, I’ll do some homework and just take that pressure off.

I mean, he’s trying to be the big tough guy, but he’s actually a very emotional, sensitive sort of guy, but that brings out that sort of thing. The outside’s the sort of tough exterior and inside they’re soft as mush! And that was him for sure.

I mean, oh yeah, and that was him for sure. I mean on top of that trouble at school and everything and trying to be the tough guy and exploring, I mean the trouble factor that goes with it and then the pressure at home, you know, and then you’re saying “you’ve got to get yourself sorted out” kind of thing and then its oh God, homework, and then it’s another phone call and then it’s like, ugh! I mean, we were prepared too, with all that, we were ready to back the school; we said we would back them. They ring us up and there’s a problem, they know it’s reinforced at home and we did all those sorts of things, and in the end they’d ring you up and, oh, he’s not wearing school uniform, and it’s like, oh, do I care? I mean, at the end of the day, things are a lot more important than that. You know, a lot of the whole school system is actually pretty ordinary ... I mean he was a talented writer, but they’ve got no idea. You know, the whole system and so, and then there’s the homework with the factors in there as well, and it’s just, yeah...

And making them totally responsible for themselves at such a young age, that does not work. Then that is, when they get a bit older, they go off the rails.

Tony: What’s the worst they do, they suspend you for a week, you have a week off. Or they kick you out of the class and they put you in detention where they don’t have to do any work, and I reckon a lot of it with boys too, is just to cover the fact that they’re getting left behind, so they just, I think, play up in the class, they get kicked out and get detention it makes them look good in front of everybody else and they don’t have to face up to the embarrassment that they can’t do the work.
If you haven’t got ‘em in primary school, by the time they get to high school, you’re wasting your time — well, not wasting your time, but you’ve got a lot more to work on ... If the kids aren’t passing at Primary school levels, if they’re not passing, you know where the kids are at and you can pick up on the kids that are having trouble there, pick it up a lot earlier. Like, you can see that they need to get that extra help, but then they [teachers] just don’t get the time. Plus, you need more teachers to really see to what the kids need, but to get those teachers costs the government $40,000 each. If they can get them in [capture their enthusiasm] in Primary school, you’re a lot better off.

Sharon: See, say like Tae Kwon Do, and they’ve worked all the way to achieve something, and they’ve got their goal at the end of it. Whereas the classroom, perfect reward system for him; play up and get kicked out! More homework, more trouble, less school!

Tony: Yeah, he could play up on purpose and they’ll kick him out so he didn’t have to do the work. And we know what he’s doing, you know, and there’d be three or four of his other mates in there as well.

Sharon: And the principal was like well, “I don’t know any kid that likes sitting in detention with nothing to do”, and we’re like, oh, you have no idea! Well, we had to send an instruction out, not to send him out of the class. I mean life has consequences, but when you go to high school, more than ever, it’s just this big problem pit with huge depth to it, and the rot starts soon as they walk in the door.

I think what they wanted was to ring us up and just let us handle everything, and I said to ‘em, what do you want me to do? We don’t have this problem, it’s you, it’s your system, it’s the whole area, and you don’t have anything in place that can reinforce what you’re doing. And I mean that’s not necessarily the teachers, that’s just the whole system and it just was a joke.

Tony: If a kid’s not happy in class, they won’t want to do anything.

Sharon: I mean, you probably should insist that they’re moved from a bad class or teacher, but even when you do ask for them to move or something, they say oh no we can’t, it’s like a major problem, too hard for them to do, and you’re stuck with it. But we’ve had, like we’ve had teachers, like particularly for [son] in grade three, we had the best teacher I’ve ever had, and Bianca had her in grade one. [A teacher who practiced a student-centred approach]

She’s fantastic, because she interested the children, and she just, she interested all the children, and she was interested in all of them, not just one or some. And Ross would come home telling us about great stuff about ants and bugs and creatures, and they had them in the class, and they looked at
them and they did things. But they did better things than just the usual sort of thing and he would come home and he couldn’t wait to talk about it and get there and do it, and he loved the teacher, and she just, she was a special teacher, and oh, he did the best he’s ever done. And he’d gone from such a bad year the year before, and so behind, because he had a ridiculous teacher. They had two teachers and they didn’t know what they were talking about. They contradicted each other, and your kid is the one in the middle, and he was getting in trouble. Grade three, he was just a totally different child. And he went through okay, managed, but then he went to high school, and all downhill.

Tony: Once a bad attitude sets in, they just get further and further behind and then they think, oh I can’t do that, and they’re not, they give up even trying. Because they don’t want to be embarrassed either ... it’s affecting the kids.

Sharon: Yeah see, anything to do with humiliation, you just, oh...

But if you, like we were saying with these people doing the student centred learning, they’re all choosing. It’s harder to compare against each other as well, they would all do their own thing, but they would do it with the teacher’s help.

[Returning to the problem of helping children with teacher-designed tasks at home] And the thing is, you don’t know how to teach it, because you’re not a trained teacher, but I guess that’s, I mean some of the teachers, they’re a trained teacher but they still don’t know how to teach! So if the teachers can’t do it, how am I going to do it?! And it’s a skill to captivate their imagination, and if you can get in there like that, you know once you’re interested in something, you just propel yourself through it. And that’s half the battle.

Tony: If you can relate it to something, then it’s easier to remember or understand. If you can’t relate it to anything, then you just lost it

Sharon: And if, like with everything you do, like you can tell someone time and time again, you should be doing this, you shouldn’t be doing that, you know say kids and teenagers, all the time you’re telling them, but all of a sudden when they want or need to do it themselves, that’s the highest motivator you can have!

Bianca: Well I do it [homework] because I have to do it. I do it but I don’t like it. I’d rather go to Tae Kwon Do, and I play the flute. I like to relax. Play the Sony sometimes. It all depends if you’re going out, or whatever. But sometimes you have to do homework.
Tony: She likes to do a lot of reading too, for herself, you know?

Sharon: Generally they come home, raid the fridge, put the TV on, sit down and watch TV stuffing their face [Laughter] and then it's like, “got to go to Tae Kwon Do”. One goes four days a week or something, and so does [younger daughter], so basically life revolves around that for them, then they get home and dinner, shower and go to bed, most of the time.

Bianca: See your friends, sleep over - like Friday I stayed over, movies and stuff, talk on the phone...

Sharon: Yeah, homework isn't the priority in this house, that's for sure. If you can get it done then you do it, but you should, obviously, but at the end of the day, it's not the be all and end all, there are more important things.

Just getting back with the um, the school, each year you know they try and reward children but, and they have the book award at the end of the school year, um, every year Lauren's sort of up there, but she's not 'the one', and it seems to quite often be a teacher's child because the teacher is very onto the homework and the things, yeah. But the disappointment that comes from that trying and hoping, and so there's another part of that where you sort of go ugh, you know. Like when you try really hard and you get a report that says 'can do better'!

Tony: There needs to be reward for effort. Like a lot of seems to be rewarding a good grade. Like it's good if they're getting the good grades, but we want our kids to be real kids. Then you got kids that are really trying hard and getting nowhere, it seems.

I think, you know when you've got like three or four classrooms of year four, or something like that, well the kids should have a sheet of all the teachers that are gonna teach that year level, and choose their preference of the class that they want to be in. Like then they're happy, but even if you can't get them all in to their first choice, then that might tell them something too. Because some teachers do have the reputation of being the grumpy bitch, and that makes a lot of difference.

Sharon: If he hadn't had such a good teacher that year, we would have lost him in that system way back. But she just did such wonderful things for him that it carried over and then he had a few other teachers along the way that were ordinary, but he'd picked up and he could keep pace again and he was okay. His grades and that actually were quite good, and he managed. But it wasn't good enough, and when he went to high school, then they really lost him.
And the thing is like she [Bianca] had that same teacher for grade one, and her spelling and reading and writing is just, she's very very good at it, and I know it was from the basis that that lady gave. And she got good parental involvement, but also she just inspired the children. But it was great. [Older daughter] had a different teacher in grade one and battled all the time.

(Sharon, Tony and Bianca, personal communication, 2002).

Sheree and Louise

Louise lives with her father, mother and older brother in a small home that is within driving distance from the school. Both parents are working at the moment, though Sheree is planning to resign from her job in the coming year in order to allow Louise to take up a scholarship opportunity in Perth. Sheree has a degree in a health-related field, while Louise's father works in a labouring role. They have a personal computer at home, including software and a substantial amount of reading material. Each child has their own room. Louise is described by her teacher as being a 'bright' student academically, and is the recipient of a sporting scholarship, which will be taken up in her first year of high school. English is the first language of all family members, though Sheree is of European background.

I have included some of Sheree and Louise's most poignant contributions. Once again, the conversation began with Sheree and Louise's general thoughts about homework:

Sheree: I guess we're pretty casual about it all here, um, you know the kids do pretty well at school, and their reports have generally come back pretty, you know, we're really very happy with the reports, they just seem to get better year after year. Um, so the kids seem to be okay, and I guess I don't push the whole situation - the kids seem to be a bit the way I was, in that I was very much a, um, just before it's due kind of person, yeah, and the kids seem to have developed that sort of style as well, um, and they get by, and so... I guess if the kids were struggling and, or if we were getting reports back saying there's a problem or they're not handing things in on time, so we are fairly
casual, as long as the reports are coming home okay, then I guess I’m pretty happy about it all. I worry a bit, because now, I mean I don’t spend hours worrying, but [Older brother] is in high school now, and his standard, he’s happy with, we were talking about this just this morning, he’s happy to pass, whereas there are other people in his class, you know one of them in particular wants to get the best marks, and um, wants to beat everybody else. So um, but he’s happy to pass, and I just sort of wonder, I guess when you contacted me, and you start thinking, well what do we do to support the kids with their homework? It’s sort of pretty casual, but I just wonder whether if we had’ve been a little bit stricter with Michael and you know, kept the telly off a bit longer and all that sort of thing, whether he could’ve developed better homework skills. Although he does spend you know two or three hours in his room every night, which I think is enough, um, he doesn’t spend hours in front of the telly as a rule. He’s got his favourite shows, which I actually admire him for, because it’s so easy to sit in front of the telly and stuff, so yeah, we’re pretty casual about the whole thing, but I guess my feeling is that as long as the reports are coming home, well, but I just sort of think maybe that we haven’t, we perhaps could have been better in um, just making things a little bit more um, not stricter, what’s the word? Um, you know, sort of time commitments and setting down certain periods of time and that sort of thing, just, but that’s not the way that I work [Laughs].

And it’s interesting, just the last two teachers that Elyse has had – really terrific, well, one of them’s probably better than the other, but um, one of them last year, the year six teacher, when we went to the parent-teacher meeting um, and the question was asked about homework, he um, and there was quite a few parents there, and he said “I don’t give homework, so I’m happy for the kids to, you know if they work hard in school”, and I was amazed – a lot of the parents, um, particularly the year seven parents because that was last year, it was a split six/seven, particularly the year seven parents were concerned that if they weren’t given homework, how was that going to impact on you know, the fact that they will be getting lots of it in high school, so um, he wasn’t going to give homework, but he actually did in the end I think under pressure. Is that right? [to Louise]

Louise: Uh, he gave the homework only to the sevens.

Sheree: That’s right, that’s what he said, I’ll give it to the year sevens and not the year sixes, but that’s another tack, and it’s like, okay, this teacher’s saying this, and this year I don’t think we even had a class meeting, so I don’t know what his thoughts were about homework, but, um, you know if teachers are coming at it from a different angle, then how important is that? But I guess, I don’t know, we talk a lot as a family and um, we talk a lot about, um, I think, they’re interested in things and we kinda always have been with the kids. We’ve never treated them as little children as such, so they’ve sort of, not had to grow up, but we’ve talked to them on a, you know, adult sort of level. Like Louise, I think it was at the beginning of this year, there was um, just stuff to try and get an idea of their knowledge base, remember you told me you did a
general knowledge thing, and Louise got just about all the questions right, and it was stuff just that she would have read in the paper and um, seen on TV and we would have talked about, and it was all a whole range. Remember that? And you got just about all of them right.

**Louise:** Yep, I think I was the only person that did get most of them right.

**Sheree:** Yeah, which to me means that maybe we’re you know, on the right, you know, because I do... and that’s what we’re comfortable with. *Husband* and I are similar in that way, and that’s what we’re comfortable with and, you know, I was never a great student, I always just got by and I mean I managed to go on to Uni and working now, and happy. And it’s not the brightest students necessarily that make the best teachers or physios or nurses or doctors – that’s not the be all and end all, it’s the other stuff that matters.

I mean, well my kids do the maths that I did, and I just can’t, I mean maybe it’s different, maybe they’re teaching it differently, but I just can’t recall any of it. I can’t help at all, because you know, and I did reasonably well in the maths subjects, but I just can’t recall any of it, so it’s like, you know, where did that go, and why did I bother doing it? And he’s [son] struggling a bit with that now.

But, we’re pretty casual about it all [homework]. But I guess it’s life experiences, and we share, and we have a lot of conversations about a whole range of different things and that’s just as important to give. We like our kids to be balanced, and um, the kids maybe, my perception that kids that, like, particularly a colleague of [son] who, she wants to be the best and she wants to do medicine so she has to score well, um, very driven and passionate about her schoolwork, passionate about being number one with that, and that’s fine, but we like our, we want our kids to be balanced, so they have sport and they have their school and they have their friends and just a balance of what they like.

**Louise:** I play soccer and basketball, I like sport and stuff, and sometimes I go out with my friends and everything. Sometimes watch TV, to relax, listen to music, go on the Internet.

**Sheree:** Mmm, you do a bit of writing.

**Louise:** M-hmm.

**Sheree:** She loves dabbling in a bit of poetry and that sort of stuff, writing for herself, which is really, I was so pleased, because I was never like that, and I’m not like that. My husband’s a bit like that and it’s just, and it’s not something we’ve sort of said go and write something, you just find something on her
desk and it’s so nice, and um, yeah, she’s a good little writer, she dabbles in that a bit. Is that true?

Louise: M-hmm, yep.

Sheree: But sport is probably our thing, in our family, yeah! And [son]’s surprised me as well, you know, he’s got a lot outside of school. He um, plays a lot of basketball, he’s this year taken up umpiring quite a lot as well, and he’s got a part-time job as well, on Saturdays, and he’s amazed me, I’m really proud of him in lots of ways, because he’s a kid that, most of the time, and I look at it like this, that what you see in your kids is the stuff that reflects you sometimes and what you see that’s what you don’t like is usually the stuff you don’t like about yourself. And I wish he was a bit more organised in that he didn’t leave stuff to the last minute but as long as he gets it done I suppose. And he’s normally very good at organising his time and he’s not, you know, because he doesn’t sit in front of the telly. Like I was always a worrier and you sort of worry and your thoughts used to get scrambled inside, you know and God I, I’ve got all this homework you know, waiting to be done, but I’d sit and procrastinate and just worry about it all while it sits there and time ticks away, but he seems to be able to go into his room, say he’s there a couple of hours say between basketball training and work or whatever it is, and he’ll go and do a couple of hours. I mean he’s got the music up and the house is tiny, but, you know he’s got the music up full blast, but most young kids are like that, so um, that’s just all part of it I think. But he’s actually pretty good. I think if he put a lot more time and you know what it’s like if you leave things to the last minute, and if I had’ve started a few days earlier I probably would’ve done a better job, um, and I think that’s the case with him. If he’d not leave things to the last minute he probably would do a better job, but, he’s actually surprised me a bit coz he doesn’t worry, and he does kind of fit it in. He’s a very organised kinda guy, he’s very self-sufficient, he’s very, without actually talking about it, he seems to have it all together in his own head. How to fit it all in, and his reports aren’t flash, but he certainly gets by.

I used to, especially in primary school, and we were talking about it this morning, um, compare, okay you got this mark, and what did she get, and he? And I don’t do that anymore, because he didn’t like that at all, and I guess I’m a bit more relaxed about it all, and as long as he’s happy, and that’s ultimately, I don’t want my kids, I suppose once I realised the kids were not gonna be ‘the best’ at something, there good, they’re really good at most things, but they’re not gonna be ‘the best’ at anything I think. And when you have your own kids you reflect on your own upbringing as well, and um, you say, oh God, that’s probably why I’m like that, because mum and dad were like this with me. Well I’m not going to be, you know? But no, he’s pretty organised, and he seems to get the job done, and I’m amazed, because he’s not a worrier. Peter and I can both be worriers and worry about little things too much and um, and I guess that’s why we want our kids, we try and help our kids to be balanced. Don’t sweat the small stuff and all that ... So I guess
with our kids, we’re pretty pleased with how they turned out so far – we don’t
tell ‘em often enough though!

Louise: Some of my teachers, you just had to do homework when you didn’t
finish it in school. I usually finish the stuff we have to do in class, so like, if
you didn’t finish it, it was only like five minutes or so.

Sheree: The one thing that has gripped me over the years with both of them,
not with the kids but with the homework is, and part of it is that she’ll often
not tell me things until the last minute. Especially for things like dress-up
stuff, and also the technology stuff, like um, you know making things, or
having things that you had to bring from home, like the technology stuff that
they have to then make in class, and we’re not a dress-up kind, you know,
we’re not a technology kind of family, and um, so when Louise used to tell
me things at the last minute and it’s like, “Mum I’ve got to take stuff in
today”, or “we’ve got dress-ups and I’ve gotta be, have a halo” or something,
it’s like aagghhhh! And you want your kids not to miss out and some parents
are really good and they have these great big elaborate costumes, and your
kids are the ones, you know, obviously you didn’t put a lot of effort into it,
but there’s a reason for it, and we’re just not a dress-up kind of family,
and um, we don’t have bits and pieces, you know. My husband’s not a very
um, handy-man kind of guy, so we don’t have a lot of junk and stuff around
the house as such, but.. Louise had to make this land yacht, and like, they
needed wheels for it. Can’t the school provide it? I mean they need to bring
stuff and I’m thinking, what can we use for land yacht wheels?! And you
know, it’s like, oh! Well she won the race or whatever, so I suppose in the
end, look Louise I haven’t got anything, we’ve left it too late, we’ve tried to
come up with things. So I suppose what she had to do in the end was beg,
borrow and steal from others – is that right? – and can I borrow that, I guess
in a roundabout way we could pretend you know, I did that on purpose, but
the pressure was on her. I don’t know whether she stole things from other
kids though, I hope not! And when she has things at the last, minute, I get
really pissed off with her. Because she’s made me that stressed. [Elyse makes
faces and gestures to indicate that yes, this is very true!] Sorry, [regarding the use
of the phrase ‘pissed off’] I use that word quite a lot! Um, I get stressed and um, that
makes me, I don’t like feeling uncomfortable like that.

Sometimes the teachers don’t give enough time. I think that’s the case with
this year’s teacher, is that fair enough? [to Louise] You didn’t get a lot of
notice? [Louise indicates yes]

I know Louise can be like that sometimes, you know, forgets when she comes
home, but I think there are some teachers like that. I think there were a few
instances, especially with this dress-up thing – you know I hate this dress-up
thing! After work all day or whatever, it’s ‘Chicken Treat tonight!’ [Laughs]
And especially with the kids’ sporting commitments, you know, [husband] and
I are heavily involved um, and have been for many years with coaching and
on committees and that sort of thing and so there's phone calls and running around.

I think that's why Michael's sort of taken on coaching roles and umpiring and things like that, and those are skills, like leadership skills that he's using in itself. Dealing with adults on an adult level and you know, negotiating times for umpiring that fit in with his other commitments ... And it's hard, and you do get guilty. It's like, I mean I know a couple of the kids, particularly the young fellow that got dux this year, he's an only child...

Louise: Yeah, he does, you know like, hours of study at home

Sheree: You know, you hear about it, he spends an hour on his trumpet with his mum. She doesn't work I don't think, but you know, if you work, you work. It is hard, I mean I do envy these stay-at-home mums in lots of ways, and um, she obviously put in a lot of time and effort, and the rewards are there, but I don't know, I like my kids the way they are and they're very balanced and they're nice people. And that's life! And um, [husband] and I have always um, the back part of the report that has to do with personal qualities and attitudes, how you get on with your peers, teachers, you know other adults, they've always scored really well with those, To me they're the life skills. The other stuff will fall into place, but if you haven't got those...

Over the years actually, it's not just been this year, but, because I guess schools are trying to also give a range, a broad range of experiences, you know, technology and, as well as the usual academic type, the maths and all that, you know I understand where the school's coming from, but it was just, I don't think, I don't remember having lots of that when I went to school, but obviously schooling's quite different now, and that aspect is probably the most stressful. The other stuff, the kids are pretty good at and, you know I suppose I felt more comfortable with sitting down and helping them with their maths sheet and, I mean, we didn't really read a lot to each other, did we? Bits and pieces, a bit sometimes, like when the guilt thing hits you, it's like, okay, we better do some reading together and then sign the book or whatever...

I mean, she reads, I suppose it's fits and starts, when it interests her and when she feels like it, like you've been doing a lot of reading lately, and she even, going to the library herself, the local library. Went there without telling us and joined herself up and came home with a library card! She wanted this book and became a member, did it. I mean I had to sign something. I mean, it's really nice to see that bit of independence happening. [son]'s not much of a reader. He'll read the newspaper, and he'll read surfing magazines, but he's quite different. He's very much you know, into town with his mates or at the beach or out with girls or like, he likes to be with people. Louise likes to be on her own a lot, she's not so much an initiator of social activity. She's happy to go out, but she doesn't initiate a lot. No, I guess, yeah, it's just that whole,
the bit that I was more comfortable helping them with was more the academic stuff. The other bits I was more uncomfortable with.

I don't think a lot of it extended them. It was pretty easy, I don't recall them having to ask us a lot for help. The odd times. So I guess the more important aspect of it would be that it's another part of, um, that homework is something that is very important, will become very important in secondary school and tertiary education, with study. So it was more to do with, that is a part of it [high school], and you will need to learn to do stuff at home, and it is a part of it, and don't look at it as a pain in the bum, but look at it as a part of the thing, and try and become comfortable with it. So more to do with that, do you know what I mean? Because I don't think a lot of it really extended them and pushed them.

With [son], um, I mean I know this about if he hadn't completed something in class, you take it home and you complete it at home, but I find that with him, that study - and Uni is much more than that, you don't get given homework as such, you get your assignments or whatever, and it's much more about going through your lecture notes, um for that day or week or however many you've got - and I don't know that school has and if high school is preparing him for that as much. He talks about homework, and he talks about um, getting assignments done, and you know what have you - it is homework as such, but I don't see [son] doing that [going over what he has learnt], and I don't know that the school is doing that - maybe it's just me..

And it seems they do get a lot of homework, and when is the time going to be available to them to think over things? And understand what they've been taught, and not just feel the pressure to complete an assignment, or a question, and your mark at the end, yeah. I mean I'm not a teacher and so I don't, and I suppose it's a way of the teachers, maybe the topics are set such that to actually complete that topic or that question you do need to go over and study those concepts and understand them, and maybe that's why they do it, but I don't see that. They are, it seems to be complete the homework and that's enough, and the teacher will be happy. It's not, there's not an expectation of, okay that keeps the teacher happy, now what will keep you... yeah, I won't get told off, I'll pass, but where's the bit that will actually get you beyond that? And help you understand things and enjoy life?

It's about teachers really learning about their students as people, and that is a really big ask, I suppose, but they need to know their students don't they? I mean they talk about their teachers, you know, "I don't like that teacher", you know, there are some that are better than others, and that does reflect in their liking of that class, or that subject, and their attitude. And I don't think that a lot of teachers understand, or validate the responsibilities that kids have. And, not the control maybe, but the effect that they have and that their attitudes have on the kids.
I think primary school-wise, I think most teachers are aware of that, but we still have had occasions where it has happened where it's due in one or two days and I think, well, no! You know? And, what will happen, I think, me being me, is that if a teacher puts that expectation, and it does interfere with, and not necessarily just a sporting commitment but other things, I'm afraid I'll make that decision. I would write a note to the teacher saying we weren't able to do this in that time. I think I've only done it once or twice though. The homework still has to be done though, and I kind of feel put out that the teacher's put that expectation on the kids, I suppose without that awareness that families do have enough pressure.

But as I said before, it's about that balance, and I know [son] is, he's like me, he um, he's got a lot of things happening in his life, he's not driven academically, that is not him as a person. That is not the way that he will live his life, and for me to push that as a parent is not valuing the him that he is. He is the sort of person that will want to have his social life, have his sporting life, because that part of his life is really important. I think um, teachers, it's all about getting to know the kids. You don't have to maybe know their parents personally, but just getting to know what they're like as people. Maybe "what I can do, because I know he or she is like that", give them, make sure the kids in the class achieve what they want.

I mean, that's about parents also telling the teachers what they're about, and I'm not a great one for going up to school, and I don't think I even met Louise's teacher this year formally, I shook his hand for the first time on their graduation, you now! I mean, he knew who I was and everything, but working full time, you know. But it's also a two-way thing about parents also, I mean letting the teachers know, and teachers do want that information I think, and they seem to want to know if there are personal hassles that may interfere in their schooling, that may impact on school. And my feeling is that teachers want that bit, most of the time. And they want them to succeed, but it's a two-way street. But some parents are better at that, at involvement than others.

I mean, what will they remember in years to come? What's important in the bigger scheme of things? And, if they don't go to uni straight after year twelve, pfff! You know, there are people that don't do that! And life doesn't have to turn out bad, you know? And what do they say, that the jobs they'll be doing when they're thirty may not even exist yet! I mean about change. You just don't know what will happen, or the choices that life will put in front of you. The bottom line is that I want the kids to be happy, to learn people skills, to learn the value of things.

I just really like life skills - the other stuff will come later, like as long as they can use maths in life and they have good penmanship - their writing is legible, and they make sense and their grammar is good, all that sort of stuff, and people skills. I think the life skills are just so important. Like the suicide
rate: I don't want my 20 year old kid hanging in the back shed you know, what's the point of anything if he goes and does that, you know? And if he hasn't learnt the life skills to make him be very comfortable with himself, to be comfortable with choices, good, bad or otherwise, to be comfortable with failures, which we all have? All of that.

Friendships, the value of friendships, the value of relationships, you know, what's the point of having ten degrees up your sleeve if you haven't learnt to deal with life, and just be comfortable with yourself as a person, to not make constant comparisons between yourself and others, to have a sense of I'm okay, to be comfortable with asking for help, and knowing that we don't have all of the answers ourselves. It's okay to ask for help. So having all those sorts of life skills is important. You make the choices, learn lessons as you go along, failures are a lesson, all that sort of stuff is what I want my kids to learn.

(Sheree and Louise, personal communication, 2002).

Karen and Nathan

Nathan lives in a 'blended' family. His parents are divorced and his mother Karen lives with his stepfather and Nathan's five other siblings and step-siblings. Karen and her partner have been together for approximately five years. Nathan has minimal contact with his father, who lives overseas. Of the six children, five live at the house permanently, while the youngest stepsister, who is seven, alternates between two households. The eldest child is eighteen, while there are two children aged sixteen and two aged twelve. The family lives in a large, near-new home within driving distance of the school. They moved to the area approximately three years ago. Karen took up tertiary studies after her divorce and now holds a degree in a business-related field. Both Karen and Nathan's stepfather are working. The family has a well set up home office, including a computer with digital camera and other hardware and software. They have a large collection of books at home. Nathan's stepfather has a well-equipped home workshop. Nathan has been a participant in the school's gifted and talented program, and was the recipient of a school achievement prize. English is the first language of all family members.
Karen: Homework-wise, all of them, in primary school have been, they've had to do it. Very rarely have they volunteered to do it. Some subjects, once you say you've got to do your homework, then they get into. Others are, they're in and out, in and out; I need to get a drink, I need something to eat, I can't do it; and it's too hard, all that sort of stuff. Um, Daniel is a bit of a problem. He's pretty good, but you have to keep at him. If it's fair he likes to be outside, and especially with all this warm weather. Winter's not quite so bad. He's put in quite a few hours on a few projects.

Nathan: This year we haven't really had that much homework, just the stuff we haven't finished.

Karen: Yeah, that's right. Uh, [partner] found with [twelve year old daughter], who's the same age as Nathan, that uh, her studies before in maths and reading were really really bad, so he just said to her, you come home at the end of the day and you're not going to play, nothing, until you've done half an hour reading, and then she was allowed to take a break. She did maths as well after that. But we had to stay onto her. You know, if she could get out of it she would, but now that she enjoys reading, it's not so bad, she'll grab a book and read.

Nathan: We haven't really done much [homework] this year, but in previous years... I didn't really like it all that much. So, may as well get it done. Yeah.

Karen: The hardest one I try to teach them is um, and even with the older ones at high school, don't leave it to the last minute and get yourself in a knot then because the resources you need aren't available or you can't find them. And sometimes you're good about it, [to Nathan] and sometimes not - more often than not! And they just get themselves into such a tizz then that they virtually get brain-block, you know, and all they can see is a brick wall. Having been at Uni myself, I think I found that! Even to get the research done early so you've got everything there. But, um, and they do know that that's a fact, but it's a case of doing it's different. Easy to say - harder to do.

I mean, they stay up late to do it, then they have to get up early in the morning to finish it and, yeah.

Nathan: Last year we got sort of, maths sheets, coz at school we did this mental thing, where we have a strip of 20 questions and we had to finish it in
less than five minutes, so, we had a test every Friday for them, so we usually had one of them after school every day. Apart from that we didn't have much.

Karen: You had projects didn't you Nathan?

Nathan: Oh yeah, but there weren’t that many of them. This year we had, there was the land rights one, and the Rottnest Island one.

Karen: And what were those game things you had to make up too?

Nathan: Oh yeah, we didn’t end up finishing them, Mr [teacher] just went off them for some reason. I don’t know why.

Karen: I was sort of surprised that they didn’t get that much homework this year in year seven.

Nathan: He said he was preparing us this year for year eight, but I don’t see how he was doing that without giving us homework.

Karen: It’s surprising actually, compared to like, when I was at school, how little homework they seem to get really. I mean we used to have a lot more, I think.

And different teachers, too, do different things. And that’s the thing though; sometimes, depending on the teacher they used to say, the teacher used to say if you haven’t finished your work in class, you had to take it home and it was homework. But I mean, even like year six I found they had set maths homework to do. Maths sheets to do, where Nathan hasn’t had as much as that this year

Nathan: Ah, it wasn’t that hard, the work. I got it over and done with.

Karen: Nathan’s pretty bright.

Nathan: I found it ... [long pause] all right. [On how the homework has helped his learning] Oh, maybe I’m better at my maths, but... hmm...

There were some things where I had no clue what was going on so I had to ask the teacher about that. And apart from that, it was basically pretty boring.
Karen: But this is something that I've tried to teach, instil into my kids, is that your teachers are a what? [to Nathan] Same as the library, same as the Internet, they're a...?

Nathan: A resource.

Karen: Exactly. And I think, you go to them, and you pump them for information. And the other thing is, do you like people to come and ask you for help? Yes! Well don't you think your teachers are the same? You know, so I think that's where, it's one of your resources to learn from, you keep going back, and even if you have to ask the same question because they haven't given you an answer that you've understood, keep going back so that they have to reword it in such a way that eventually you'll say, oh I know it now. And not to be frightened of them. They're not going to bite!

Nathan: Some of them get a bit aggro.

Karen: Well some of them, that's like my daughter in high school, she says "oh there's some crabby teachers there", but she just learns to get along with them. I mean, she knows that she might have to put up with them for a year or two, but find a way round them. There's not much point in taking up a fight with them, because at the end of the day you're penalised, not them.

It's hard, when you get a teacher that's not a good teacher. I had one, when my eldest was in year 4. But her maths and her spelling, which I found in year four were very formative years, suffered. And especially her spelling now, has never ever made up for it. And I wish I'd said. Because I had heard that she had that reputation, because she was in there, and I just thought oh, I'll see how she goes. It's, you know, other teachers that she's had have been absolutely brilliant, and you think oh, occasionally you're going to get a bad one unfortunately, and do you stick with it or do you stand up? And it's a hard one to do, that's for sure

[On what she has done in such situations] Well in a situation like that, her maths, it was picked up next year with her teacher, she got a good one straight after, which was good, but her maths was down. So I went up to the teacher and said right, teach me how you're teaching them, because we learnt division very differently, and so I was there with her for about an hour and she taught me how she was teaching the kids division, and every night I sat her down and I gave her ten questions. So, obviously, you know I found a way round the problem there, and her maths never really suffered too much because I made up for it and maths is my forte. But, it's very hard to, in spelling

I find that at primary school level you can, you can help them, but once they start getting up to high school it's hard. Daniel will tell you himself you know,
car trips and stuff we've, I say like, give me the Roman numeral for fifty-seven, those sorts of things. All those sorts of things we've played as car games haven't we?

Nathan: We have.

Karen: Set them games that um, not only that but something different than they might get at school. Well the other thing is I've always encouraged them to read, from the time they could start reading, I used to read to them even before they could read, so they're good readers, good spellers, simply because you see the word over and over when you're reading it. Eventually you're going to know how to spell it.

Nathan: I've got a humongous drawer that's just full of books!

Karen: And you know, members of the library and stuff like that, so wherever we've gone they can borrow books and, like Daniel has always read the novel type books with full print from a very young age as has [sibling] which surprised the teachers, but I encouraged them.

Nathan: It's heaps of fun [reading]. Every time I'm bored I'll just grab a book and sit down.

Karen: Just his birthday and Christmas as well, and on his list there's always books. The latest one out...

Nathan: I've read all of them [the Harry Potter series]. I'm into John Marsden books, they're pretty good. Got one for Christmas. The Philip Pullman too, I've been looking for the ones that go past Northern Lights but haven't found it.

Mr [teacher] read about five books over the year, and that was good. We sit down on the carpet and stuff, he gets us to lie down and just reads us a book. Says you can lie your head on your desk or just draw.

Karen: Yeah, your kids find some and just read and read and read them - Naughty Stories for Good Girls and Boys -

Nathan: [sister] read that one over and over.
Karen: It tended to be maths and projects was the main emphasis once they got to a higher level. You were saying that you got tested on the reading [texts that were sent home] that you did? [to Daniel]

Nathan: Oh, accelerated reader program, just in school through the computer.

Karen: Yeah, it was hard as, like I said with Rachel and her reading, um, as well, is finding something that they're interested in to read, because she didn't want to read. She knew she had to improve it but she didn't like the books, so we said, go into the library and get books out of the library that you're interested in. And she started to branch a bit from that. But it's hard sometimes to find that little area of interest, where you know, this is where you can start the wedge in and to get them started.

But that's the thing, they're always banging on each other's door, you got a book I can read? And even as I get a book, because they come to me, can I read that, and sometimes I'll say yes it's suitable and sometimes I'll say no it's not. Like I've read the Danielle Steele books because, well, they're easy reading, not too mind-blowing, and of course the kids have been straight onto them, you know, hanging off me waiting for me to turn the last page, because it's more sort of their thing. Sometimes you come home and your head is so full of textbook stuff that you just want something light and full of fluff. So the older ones, they even read Nathan's Harry Potter books, and [twelve year old sister] too...

Nathan: She got through half of Harry Potter in one sitting.

Karen: But we even play Blackjack here, don't we? So the kids have to add up to 21 fairly quickly, and the seven year old has, and she's getting quicker and quicker at her adding, and they think it's great, card games. We're going to play Blackjack tonight, but they don't realise they're learning maths. We play Blackjack with money, because we've got lots of five and ten-cent pieces, like they've got to work out money as well. But like I said probably the only way we'd really reinforce it [schoolwork] in that way is games. We've got lots of games in the house as well.

The thing is it's different from school, you don't want to come home and it's a repeat of school. If they're going to be teaching something, I'd rather them do it at a level that I don't think they're doing, when in fact you are, and that's, yeah, if they're going to read, they do it because that's what they want to do rather than, I mean... Um, [partner]'s not a good reader. He had a dreadful experience with school, dreadful so that even now as an adult there are times where he's considered going back and learning.
It's takes time [homework], and sometimes at the end of the day, you know, I don't want to do this! [laughs] With six kids, or even five in the house... I always say to the kids if you want to ask things or talk, come and do it while I'm cooking tea, because I can do that without thinking. So I can use my brain for you while I use my hands to cook. You know, when I've walked in at the end of the day, I need a little bit of time to chill my brain out ...

Well Nathan's the youngest in the house, or Nathan and [his step-sister] are, and [youngest step-sister] when she comes here is younger because she's seven. So, we do things like um, we'll write letters to her and get her to write letters back, things like that. We'll write and we've got a digital camera and the computer and we'll put a picture on the bottom of it, so it's a bit of fun.

Nathan: She's got a letter up there to Santa.

Karen: Yeah, she's got a letter up there to Santa.

[In regard to activities being purposeful in a real life context] I The thing I think with a lot of kids is they can't see any purpose in it, then they just hate it because it's boring. And it's hard too when the kids come home and they say why do I need to learn this? But it was actually very, very interesting because when we laid the pavers out here, we started in the corner and were working this way, and we wanted to know if we were keeping straight and square, and I thought straight away I know how to do this, and [partner] goes how, and I said Pythagoras's theorem. And he said how the hell do you know that? And for some reason, and it was Mr Oates, my maths teacher, and he told a joke about it, and that's why I remembered it, and of course it was then, kids get your calculators out! It had a use! And that is sometimes very hard to show the kids, to use an example, and there's an application for it, but you just don't know, you don't know where you're going to need something like that. But it's very hard sometimes to say you need to learn it. You even come up with it [to Daniel]: "what do I need to learn this for?"

[In regard to children's other activities] The thing is, all those things are just as important, and it's the thing is, kids have to be able to play with their friends and stuff, they're still learning how to get on in, out in society. It's fitting in to community. If they don't have time to interact with their peers, then how are they going to learn to interact when they've left home, for one? Family's always valuable, so you've got to have time, it's like any relationship, you need time, so...

But I mean homework is important too, so you sit down and do it, you fit it in, you know. You end up with some kids, you know one guy who we know of that um, his mother kept him home and he studied and studied and never went out and played sport and all that sort of stuff and, he - when he left home apparently his whole world fell apart and he's constantly sick, and you
think well that's an extreme example of too much head in the books and not allowed outside the door, what it does to you.

Nathan: A lot of people play basketball.

Karen: I mean. How do we know we’re not holding back a future world champion? And we say that's just as valuable. It is really hard, but Daniel’s a good all-rounder with his sport and whatnot. He would love to excel on the football field or not worry terribly much about what's happening in the books, but the thing is I keep saying to him you've got a good brain, it'd be a shame to waste it. Balance, that's the thing.

Nathan: [On what sports he plays] Um, basketball in summer and hockey in winter. Football as well. I really want to play soccer and hockey in winter too, but...

Karen: It's not so much the playing, it's the training. I always say to them, I prefer it if they have um, three things that their into. One is a sport, one is a community outreach type thing, and another is cultural. So, like Daniel plays clarinet, he plays sport and, like with the girls, they used to do Brownies or something like that, so it's teaching them a little bit about the community that they live in.

Nathan: I want to be an air force pilot.

Karen: Well he's always wanted to do that, and I keep saying - we've heard some horrible stories about someone going through years and years of study only to fail a test at the end of it and that's it...

He's bright enough to do what he wants to. I keep onto him sometimes, if something's hard to do, and you haven't got the motivation to do it...

Nathan: Yeah, if I don't get into the air force pilot I want to be like, you know, get a sporting career with the NBL! [laughter]

We spoke about the consequences of not completing homework:

Nathan: All Mr [teacher] says is if you don't finish it at home, you're going to have to like, do it when we're doing sport, and that definitely gets me doing it! I don't like to miss out on sport!
Karen: I don’t have a problem with consequences. Even when you’re older and you’ve left home and you’re in the workplace and you don’t do what you are told to do, there are consequences, so they’ve been instructed that this is a duty you have to complete, you don’t do it, these are going to be the consequences. Um, homework is part and parcel of going to school. You’ve got to do it. Whether you want to do it or not, that’s just bad luck. But that’s how things are, you may as well get it over and done with than have it sitting there staring you in the eye.

Nathan: Or go do something else.

Karen: While you’re doing then always in the back of your mind, Oh God, I’ve still gotta do that. Do it now, swallow the bitter pill, and then your day can only improve from there on in, because you’ve got it done. I support teachers in that sort of thing, that’s for sure.

They all have a study desk in their room, so they have no reason to say, “I didn’t have anywhere I could sit and do it”.

Nathan: Sometimes I do it out on the table though.

Karen: They like to do it out here, sometimes. Some of them do, some of them, like [sister], like when they’re doing art work in particular, because they can spread out all over the table and it becomes a social thing – “what do you think? do you reckon that would look good here?” And all that sort of stuff. They’ll come out here if they need help with things, like they need help with their maths, or whatever.

Nathan: It’s a bit noisy out here though.

Karen: Yeah, if it’s something that requires concentration they tend to disappear.

Nathan: [Sister] will play her music at full bore - I don’t see how she can concentrate.

Karen: They’re all different – some like it full volume. [oldest sibling] always used to do hers out here, even though she had a study desk. Uh, she’s a very social person anyway, so, anything she did, if it was in the house everybody was in on.

Nathan: Her desk is covered in hair stuff anyway!
Karen: But yeah, she used to always be out here. Um, yeah Daniel disappears, he's quiet. [sibling] likes her music on - [stepsister] tends to be quiet too actually.

Nathan: She has her music on a bit. I can hear it in my room, but obviously no one else can, coz they don't complain.

Karen: Um, I suppose the biggest thing with homework is motivation.

Nathan: Yeah, I really get that from you Mum! [Laughs] You know, you get me started!

Karen: Well that's the thing is that sometimes they'll come out and you can just see that they just don't even know where to start and you've just gotta say well, okay, horrible thing to say, but I always used to say to them, even in an exam, write up the top, RTFQ -

Nathan: Read the fucking question! [Laughter]

Karen: Sometimes, even when they're younger, they'll come to you, they say I've got a project to do. I just keep asking them; What have you been doing in class that has led to you doing this project? Until eventually, you've got enough information to figure out what the teacher's wanting from them, and then you can say, okay, this is what I perceive that he wants to know; this is what you need to find out, and you can go this way or this way, or you can go this way with it. So like I said, but every now and then they just get a bit stuck - "where do I even start?" Like I said, they just see this big plain brick wall and they don't know how to even get started on it.

Karen: Sometimes, even when they're younger, they'll come to you, they say I've got a project to do. I just keep asking them; What have you been doing in class that has led to you doing this project? Until eventually, you've got enough information to figure out what the teacher's wanting from them, and then you can say, okay, this is what I perceive that he wants to know; this is what you need to find out, and you can go this way or this way, or you can go this way with it. So like I said, but every now and then they just get a bit stuck - "where do I even start?" Like I said, they just see this big plain brick wall and they don't know how to even get started on it.

Karen: Oh, yeah, yeah, that's right! [Reminded by Nathan of a situation where homework came up at the last minute] Oh, there's plenty of that! Our stand in the house tends to be that if you yourself only had short notice, then we will expend the effort, but if you've known for two weeks and you've left it to the night before, we will not help, because it's your own fault. And you can go back and tell your teacher, I only went to mum and dad last night and they said no.

You know, we say, we will help you if you give us fair notice, but we can't just drop everything as well, you know, so, but yeah we do get the situations, "I can't find anything to make this stick to there", and, "I can't find a, I need a piece of wood this big", "but I need this and I...", and you think, God where do I start!! But um, yeah we take a different policy. If they've had plenty of notice, and they have left it to the last minute, it is their responsibility.

Karen: Mmm. In that case, we'll help them. [Talking about the whole family getting involved in a last minute homework project] Yeah, yeah. Well, go and ask [sister] if she's got... or, older stepsister will you have a look in your room and see if you've got any wool! Or out in the shed, and... In that sense, six kids at home can be helpful!

Nathan: Yeah, and if they did it, they can help you out...

Karen: Yeah, we do get that sort of thing happening, like, one of them, “I did a thing on that - I wonder what I did with it?”, came out with all the pamphlets and everything, and it was good. And it helps I suppose when they do technology and stuff that [partner] is a mechanic and you know, we fiddle around with building things and making things, so we've always got bits of tin or wood and wheels and...

Nathan: I always go straight to that workshop!

Karen: Whole workshop full of stuff, yeah! So we're sort of somewhat better equipped than most I think, because I can remember when I was on my own, I used to come home and, even just to say I need a piece of wood, I'd think, yeah, right! But we've always got it here!

Not only that too, it's that two is always better than one, um, so, some things that the kids go to [partner] with because it involves metal and wood, and I need holes drilled and things banged and that sort of stuff, and other things they'll come to me for. I'm probably more art inclined, or, and quite often I'm the think-tank, and [partner], he's the one that gets out and does it and how shall we go about it?

Yeah, [partner]'s more hands-on, so, I mean he's pretty good, like that cape you had to make, you know with the sheet, and sewed the button on and got it all draped right and everything, you were a king in some...

Nathan: Uh, prince. In our assembly item.

Karen: Coz, what was I doing that night? I was doing something else, with one of the other girls, had to be done. So [partner] said, well I can sew a button on, so that was good. Yeah, what was - there was something else - there was a few of them that night needed things on or done...?
Nathan: Oh, and that crown thing too, and you got [step-father] to help you with that.

Karen: Same night of the week, yeah! I think there was three of them had something on that night, so yeah, it was all of us, all hands on deck, the older ones helped the younger ones, and, you do that while we do this and we'll go on with the next step after you've done that and, you take over this bit here and, so you know, I would say a big family probably the good outweighs the bad. I mean it's not always easy, that's for sure, and there's certainly more arguments and um, more running around on our part and what-not, but the good side is that they can always find someone that will do something with them or help.

And they'll help each other out with their homework and what-not when they can. You know [older sibling] I think she was going to her sister to help with her ma'v, and one was going to her "can you help me with this" and, I don't know if you and [same-age stepsister] tend to do it as much do you?

Nathan: Nuh. She sometimes comes to me, but I usually avoid it. Whatever I need to know, I usually go to [oldest sibling].

Karen: Well [middle sibling] didn't enjoy school either, in any shape or form, did she?

Nathan: [Same-age stepsister] says she's going to drop out at year ten, so obviously she doesn't like it either. I'm going to go right through. I have to if I want to be an air force pilot.

Karen: [Talking about her Bachelor Degree] It was a three year course and I did it in six years. And I said, I will do whatever units I can do that fit in to the kids' school schedule, because I was going to be there for them after school. So um, and therefore it took me six years, because I could only do so many units.

Nathan: There was one where you came home at like five.

Karen: Yeah, then I had to have someone there to look after you. That was the only one. Oh there was that one that I had to travel to Churchlands, otherwise I would have been there.
5. ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Looking at the stories of the participants, told separately but placed beside one another, a collage of homework stories begins to evolve, a ‘patchwork quilt’. A powerful and valuable set of individual pictures has emerged from the conversations. Each story is intriguing and valuable in its own right, but by placing them alongside one another and ‘stepping back’ to view and reflect upon them as a whole, one sees that they have become pieces within a much bigger picture; an equally powerful and telling one, offering the reader an overall perception of what draws those stories together - the common themes that emerge are the elements that link them.

In this chapter I analyse and discuss the rich descriptions of homework as experienced and perceived by the four participating families, with reference also to the teacher’s story and to the Western Australian Department of Education’s homework policy (Department of Education, 2001). The data is analysed through the identification and discussion of key themes that emerged from it.

The following key themes emerged from analysis of the research and are discussed in this section: homework as a negative experience ('A Bitter Pill'); responsibility for homework completion ('Policemen'); the importance of homework ('The Stuff That Matters'); family priorities, compliance and choice ('That’s The Way It Is'); and Dialogic Discourse. The discussion of these themes is followed by a brief examination of the data in relation to silences, drawing on Michelle Fine’s research on silencing in public schools (Fine, 1987).
A Bitter Pill: Homework as a Negative Experience

Although each participant's situation was unique, the idea of homework itself held negative connotations for all concerned, including the teacher. On the face of it, this is not surprising, given that homework is a contentious issue. It is, however, the nature of the negative discussion around homework that is of interest.

Gary gave a detailed description of the type and amount of homework that he sets and expects to be completed by the children in his class. This amounted to a substantial workload, though most was expressed in the form of an expectation, rather than formal monitored tasks. As he said, "I don't know whether I really get that. You can ask the kids and they'll just say yeah, because they're just basically placating you and saying that for the sake of keeping you happy". This is interesting when compared with the conversational contributions of the students, who all noted that they had not had much homework this year in comparison to previous years; only work that was not completed in class and some project completion were mentioned. Gary identified his homework practices as centring on student-initiated practice and consolidation of skills and subjects covered in the classroom, as well as the completion of unfinished in-class work. He saw the setting of homework as an expected part of his role as a teacher, though both his demeanour and conversation portrayed a distinct level of discomfort with homework - both in setting it and in monitoring it. He noted, "it's not my task really to give homework. It's my task to inspire and motivate the child enough that they will go away and do it themselves if they really have an interest".

Gary identified a number of negatives surrounding homework during our conversation. He felt that teachers often assign too much 'formal' homework; that is, work that must be
handed in, marked and/or has consequences attached to non-completion. He was concerned too that ‘formal' homework is being given at an increasingly earlier age. He also touched upon the pressure that he felt was placed upon him as a teacher of year seven students to set homework in order to ‘prepare’ students for high school: “I'm conscious that the kids are going to high school the next year, and they want to take a positive attitude about doing homework to high school, because I don't think it'll be too positive for too long after that!” Gary stated clearly that he did not agree with this argument for homework, saying, “I take a differing approach to that, almost opposing really ... I think that we need to say to the kids that you're only a child once and you need to experience and enjoy your life ... perhaps in some ways we might be robbing them of that pleasure and enjoyment”, and also that “people say I don't give enough homework”. This issue was raised by parents and students, from differing perspectives. Sheree related her experience at the previous year’s parent-teacher meeting:

the year six teacher ... said 'I don't give homework, so I'm happy for the kids to, you know, if they work hard in school', and I was amazed - a lot of the parents ... particularly the year seven parents, were concerned that if they weren't given homework, how was that going to impact on you know, the fact that they will be getting lots of it in high school, so um, he wasn't going to give homework, but he actually did in the end I think under pressure.

Even though Karen identified homework as being a problem for all her children and step-children, and particularly in compelling Nathan to 'get it done', both Karen and Nathan had expected that more homework would be given by the year seven teacher:

Karen: I was sort of surprised that they didn’t get that much homework this year in year seven.

Nathan: He said he was preparing us this year for year eight, but I don't see how he was doing that without giving us homework.
Karen: It's surprising actually, compared to like, when I was at school, how little homework they seem to get really. I mean we used to have a lot more, I think.

Jill also raised this issue and expressed frustration with the notion, both as a parent and as a teacher. Although she had been offered this 'preparation for high school' argument as a justification for homework both as a parent and by other parents, she did not see it as a valid reason for giving homework, going on to say, "nobody ever at any point gives you valid reasons". Yet Jill both expected her children to receive homework and has set it herself. Sharon shared a story of a particularly difficult year for her son, in which he found difficulty coping with the large amounts of homework given by the teacher. The teacher's justification for the homework was that the students needed large amounts in order to be 'prepared for high school'. Clearly, there was an expectation that a significant amount of homework would be set in the upper grades as a preparation for high school.

For some, like Sheree and Louise, a decision by the teacher not to set homework was a welcome relief, and for whom the pressure exerted by other parents for homework was perplexing. For others, like Karen and Nathan, there were concerns that the students may be put at an academic disadvantage by being somehow 'unprepared' for high school.

Another negative factor identified by Gary was time, or rather the lack of it. He notes that it is unreasonable to expect teachers to mark homework each night in addition to an already demanding day of teaching responsibilities, saying that teachers are "being asked to do more and more things it seems, and to fit fifteen or twenty minutes of homework marking on top of the normal school day, it's just impractical I think". For students and caregivers, time was a significant factor. Homework encroached upon the amount of time available for non-school-related pursuits, family interaction and relaxation.
Even when students had little to no difficulty with homework, its interference in daily family life was evident, described as the usurping of time and the physical and emotional encroachment on the home. Usurping of family time included whole-family activities being postponed or cancelled due to a homework task that required completion within a set period. Encroachment occurred when students needed to use main living areas as study space and/or required others in the house to "keep quiet", turn music off, and so on, in order for effective study to occur. Again, this was evident in some form across all households, from the largest to the smallest.

All of the parents and students, in one way or another, described homework as an unpleasant chore or duty. It was disliked to varying degrees but seen as something that needed to be done. This was a consistent description across all conversations regardless of the student's academic ability or outside interests, the family's resources, or the student and family's general attitude toward school. This description was also consistent across all children in all households involved. Considering that the study included both well-resourced and sparsely resourced families, and households with from two to six children, this is an issue that is worthy of consideration. All parents and students accepted homework as being a part of school life, and that students would be expected to complete it. Even so, all of the parents had cited their own experiences with homework as being negative, and that the word generally evoked negative associations for them, both as parents and as past students. Karen's words summed up the feelings that had been expressed by all participants when she said "do it now, swallow the bitter pill, and then your day can only improve from there on in, because you've got it done". Comments along the lines of, 'get it over with' were common within each family's conversation.
Lack of motivation was cited by all as a problem. Homework (of any kind) was often described by students as boring, and parents complained of the difficulty they experienced in attempting to get students started on their homework, as well as in keeping students 'on task'. All parents complained also of a 'last minute syndrome'—homework tasks that required a substantial amount of time and effort being brought to their attention at very short notice (such as the night before it was due). This was sometimes because the student had 'put it off', had difficulty getting started, or forgotten the task, and sometimes because the student had only been given the task at short notice.

Another negative aspect that was particularly problematic for some families was the type of homework that required costumes to be made, or 'technology' projects that required some kind of building or hardware components (for instance, pieces of wood, wheels, sails, and so on). Sheree, in particular, dreaded such tasks, saying, "we're not a dress-upish kind of family, and um, we don't have bits and pieces, you know. My husband's not a very um, handy-man kind of guy, so we don't have a lot of junk and stuff around the house as such", and later, "that aspect is probably the most stressful". Interestingly, Karen and Nathan spoke of being well-equipped when 'technology'-type projects were sent home (Nathan: "I always go straight to that workshop!") , yet they still found such projects intrusive, in that they often encroached upon the whole family's time and resources. Having a large family meant that several children could have substantially demanding homework tasks on the same night, involving an 'all hands on deck' approach, according to Karen.

Although in many cases homework tasks are set that are not valued by parents or students, there are also many instances where homework tasks are valued, but the work remains an intrusion upon families regardless of its perceived value. As mentioned earlier,
homework was described in negative terms by all participants, however the intensity of
the negativity felt and expressed varied. Sharon echoed the other parents and students
when she reflected that, "In general I suppose, homework to me is a negative experience.
You don't ever think, well, that was really good, they've really achieved something, or that
was really important. Never ever do those things cross your mind". A far more intensely
negative homework scenario is discovered, however, when Sharon and Tony share their
son's previous homework trauma:

Sharon: I would do his homework, on some things, just so I could get it out
of the way and I didn't have to have another damn phone call about this
crap! ... and it was becoming such a pressure on him that he couldn't handle
it, you know, out in the backyard in tears and that.

Sharon and Tony's frustration was deepened by their inability to convince the teacher
that the work was too much for their son. The teacher's implication was that their son
was simply 'lazy'. Sharon found it easier to simply complete homework tasks for her son
on some occasions than for either her or her son to face the teacher with unfinished
work.

'Policing': Responsibility for Homework Completion

Gary saw a problem in the fact that when work is sent home, the teacher cannot monitor
how or by whom the work is done. "You know, they may have just got a calculator out or
just got their older brother to yell out the answers, so it just defeats the purpose", and
disliked 'checking up' on homework completion: "I'm not about being a police person to
monitor homework, and where would you get the time even if you wanted to?".
Likening the monitoring of homework completion (that is, prompting and checking that work is completed and handed in) to the role of 'policeman' is an interesting analogy. Overwhelmingly, every parent felt that it was to some extent their role to assist their children with homework tasks. They saw that assistance as consisting of spending time helping with the homework itself, providing a quiet study space, providing physical resources, or providing motivation and explanations. It was this last form of assistance that caregivers likened also to a 'policeman's' role. Karen recalled spending a great deal of time prompting and 'nagging' Nathan to complete homework tasks. She said that this was particularly difficult in fine weather, when he would rather be outside. The following observation from Karen epitomised those of all the parents: "they're in and out, in and out; 'I need to get a drink, I need something to eat, I can't do it, it's too hard', all that sort of stuff ... Nathan is a bit of a problem ... you have to keep at him". Echoing this, Nathan stated that, "Mum makes me do it anyway, so may as well get it done when she tells me to", and later, when discussing his lack of motivation; "Yeah, I really get that from you Mum! You know, you get me started!"

Jill described Trent as a fairly independent worker who did not require a great deal of help with homework. However, she said that Trent tended to leave homework 'to the last minute', "so it often involves people helping him maybe, but it often involves a late night; cross words and getting it done because it's due in tomorrow". Jill, her husband and her older son had all helped Trent with homework in the weeks preceding our conversation. As a full-time teacher, Jill also found this difficult at times: "see I have busy times where I don't always have time to do it".

Students were not alone in lacking motivation. In regard to her role as 'homework policeman', Karen said, "It [homework] takes time and sometimes at the end of the day,
you know, I don’t want to do this! With six kids, or even five in the house ... you know, when I’ve walked in at the end of the day, I need a little bit of time to chill my brain out”.

Similarly, Sharon noted that:

I think you’re supposed to be onto the kids more, but half the time you’re not, you’re too busy doing your thing to be um, checking them ... We’ve got four kids, we’re pretty busy, and when I was working particularly, life revolved around work totally, even though, you know you come home and you’ve got chores, you feel like ignoring the other things, you know and you feel like, who cares?!

Although Gary felt that it was not his job to be the ‘policeman’, some parents felt that they were being forced to take on a ‘formal’ teaching role when they were not equipped to do so, or were not familiar with the teacher’s ‘agenda’ or methods. Sharon objected to this, saying, “But it’s the teacher’s work we’re teaching, we didn’t set it. And um, sometimes you look at it and you think, I don’t know, I don’t know the answer!” Both Sharon and Tony returned to this issue later:

Sharon: And the thing is, you don’t know how to teach it, because you’re not a trained teacher, but I guess that’s, I mean some of the teachers, they’re a trained teacher but they still don’t know how to teach! So if the teachers can’t do it, how am I going to do it?!

In contrast, Sheree described her family’s attitude to homework completion as generally “pretty casual”, and that she and her husband were happy as long as the children were doing well at school in general and had positive attitudes. However, she expressed feelings of guilt, saying that she worried that perhaps they had not ‘supported’ the school enough by being stricter about homework, or enforcing a homework routine.
The Stuff That Matters: The Importance and Priority of Homework

Each parent, as well as the teacher, made the point that children should be happy. But homework seemed to be an unhappy experience for everyone in this study. At best, it was seen as boring, and 'a pain'. At worst, a drama that caused tears, frustration and led to apathy and negativity toward school.

So how important is homework? A strong point made by parents was that their children needed time for a range of activities other than schoolwork, in order to develop as well-rounded individuals. This was illustrated by Tony when he said, “It’s good if they’re getting good grades, but we want our kids to be real kids”. Jill believed that children “need to pursue other things that aren’t so easily pursued at school”, saying, “kids work hard; I think when you put adults in similar working conditions to kids they’d find it very difficult – to do that all day, to turn around and actually put in some more hours at night”. Gary too believed that children “need to experience and enjoy life”.

Sharon spoke of her children’s commitment to Tae Kwon Do as being of vital importance to them. She commented that “it’s developed leadership skills and confidence, I mean you just watch them grow with it ... a lot of what they do for school doesn’t develop those parts of a person”. The value of other pursuits was a common thread through all conversations. Parents and students saw benefits gained through sport and leisure activities, often described as ‘life skills’, as being of much higher importance than homework. In fact, parents and students held a nebulous belief that homework must hold some benefits (otherwise why would teachers assign it?), but none could be identified.
The more relaxed outlook on homework in Sheree and Bianca's household is a result of Sheree's reflective approach. She reflected upon her own schooling and also on the effects of her earlier, less relaxed stance: "I used to, especially in primary school ... compare, okay you got this mark, and what did she get, and he? And I don't do that anymore, because he didn't like that at all and ... you reflect on your own upbringing as well". Sheree, Sharon, Tony and Karen all believed that homework should be viewed in relation to a broader picture. As Sheree said, "what will they remember in years to come? What's important in the bigger scheme of things? ... The bottom line is that I want my kids to be happy, to learn people skills, to learn the value of things". Sharon and Tony were clear about where homework was placed for them in relation to other interests: "Yeah, homework isn't the priority in this house, that's for sure. If you can get it done then you do it, but you should, obviously, but at the end of the day, it's not the be all and end all, there are more important things". The following statements by Sheree are powerful:

I think the life skills are just so important ... if he hasn't learnt the life skills to make him be very comfortable with himself, to be comfortable with choices, good, bad or otherwise, to be comfortable with failures, which we all have ... the value of friendships, the value of relationships, you know, what's the point of having ten degrees up your sleeve if you haven't learnt to deal with life, and just be comfortable with yourself as a person, to not make constant comparisons between yourself and others, to have a sense of I'm okay, to be comfortable with asking for help, and knowing that we don't have all of the answers ourselves? It's okay to ask for help.

That's Just the Way It Is: Power and Choice

"Everyone knows that teachers give homework and students do it. That's just the way it is" (Hinchey, 1998, p. 9). Pat Hinchey's words permeated my thoughts as I transcribed and re-read each conversation. Gary says it, Karen reiterates it: "that's how things are". Students and parents echo it in phrases like, "just do it, get it over with", and "I do it
because I have to do it”. We accept the status quo. As parents, as teachers and as students, we don’t question it. Or do we?

Our lives are busy. Our days are filled with many activities and responsibilities. This is the message that resonated through every interview, with teachers, students and parents. Yet, both students and parents accept homework as a practice that must be done, that must be ‘gotten over with’.

Students choose to do many things with their after-school time: play sport, practise a martial art, read, relax, visit with friends, talk with family, play games, watch television. Sleep. And as was mentioned in the previous section, families see all of those things and others as important to a child’s social, emotional and physical development. So what happens when homework collides with these other things? Often, according to students and parents, the homework comes first. Otherwise, there are long days, late nights, last-minute whole-family homework completion sessions, and in some cases, ‘excuses’ to teachers, which may or may not be received with varying degrees of understanding. Sheree reported that she had sent notes to teachers when homework had interfered in family life to a degree that she found unacceptable, though she said that she had only done so on rare occasions.

Although Gary said that he did not see it as his task to give homework, and felt that too much was given, that children “should enjoy life”, he also expected that children who had difficulty completing work in class time should complete it at home. He also identified lack of time as one reason for not allocating set homework tasks (other than completion of in-class work, which did not add to his marking workload). Gary felt that a teacher’s day was already busy and demanding enough, without having to add homework marking:
"to fit fifteen or twenty minutes of homework marking on top the normal school day, it's just being impractical I think". Yet to set homework at all means to require students (and their families in many instances) to sacrifice time at the end of their days - which are often very busy - to complete such work.

To enforce homework practices, teachers and schools usually exert power - through status and knowledge, and through the organisational power of punishment and consequences. Where there were no consequences, the students chose not to do homework - students that were considered academically 'bright'; students for whom schoolwork was difficult; students who loved to read; students who loved sport; students from large homes and those from small homes; the well-resourced and the less well-resourced. The teacher set an expectation that a certain amount of home time be devoted to reading, writing and spelling practise and consolidation. There was no 'policing' or monitoring of this. Both students and parents stated in each case that in Gary's class, not a lot of homework was given - 'just' some projects and completion of unfinished work. Trent had told Jill that the homework he was doing was by choice. Jill was under the impression that Trent had worked on certain tasks at home because he wanted to do his best and that he preferred to work at home. When cross-checked with Gary's discussion and that of the other students and parents, it seems that Trent was in fact completing unfinished tasks - completing the work only because there were consequences attached for non-compliance. When asked what would happen if they chose not to complete 'formal' homework, students answered that the immediate consequence would be that they may receive detention or miss out on something they enjoyed. In the longer term, their marks and reports would probably suffer.
The practice of setting incomplete class work as homework implies a punishment for perceived laziness on the part of the student. Students have the power to simply not do the assigned class work if they have no interest in it, but the teacher and the institution have the power to punish. Such a consequence also punishes the student that is slower than the others, or has difficulty with the task. There is also an implication that students who do not want to do homework are being lazy, or are not ‘focused’; they do not care about their academic ‘career’. The implication is that caregivers who do not support the teacher/school’s policies are in some way deficient, that they are ‘troublemakers’ or that they do not value education. Educational institutions appear to pass on an assumption that children must do homework or they will not learn responsibility. In turn, they will not ‘make it’ in the working world. Teachers appear to assume that if children do not do homework, they simply watch television or play computer games, pursuits that are not valued by teachers. Paradoxically, some children, like Nathan, are spending many hours in front of a computer screen or a notebook (either the traditional or the electronic type) completing homework, when they would rather be playing basketball, soccer or hockey, playing games with family and friends, or reading a book.

So do 'oppositional ideologies' attempt to break free of hegemony in this case, and what are the consequences of doing so? Resistance, when practised, was usually veiled, such as via parents completing homework tasks for children in order to avoid consequences. Those who attempted to openly question what they considered to be oppressive homework practices (such as Tony and Sharon) were made to feel that their views were not valuable or relevant, as they did not have ‘educational expertise’. By questioning, they were seen as not valuing education. Tony and Sharon learned that open questioning of school practices left both them and their children labelled as ‘troublemakers’, and that
either compliance, subversive methods or school failure were the only viable options available. They felt that teachers saw them as ‘inferior’ due to their educational level or socio-economic status, and because their values did not necessarily agree with those of the school or education system:

Nathan, who is a passionate reader, comes from a very well resourced home and is recognised by the system as academically ‘gifted’. He was the most outspoken and articulate student participant. Interestingly, Nathan was the student out of the four from Gary’s class (excluding sibling stories) that was the most resistant to homework completion. His mother had taught him to ‘go back and ask’ when he did not understand something, and to see teachers as a resource. Bianca’s parents were more resistant in their views and actions, but identified less with teachers and the school system. Bianca herself was quiet and compliant. This was perhaps due to Sharon and Tony’s previous experiences of open resistance with Bianca’s brother. They were deeply dissatisfied with being ‘unrecognised’, identifying a ‘them and us’ feeling.

Sheree noted that there was implicit pressure upon parents to show how much they ‘valued’ homework tasks through their level of involvement. This extended to comparisons with the efforts of other parents, even leading to a feeling of competition. She spoke of feelings of guilt when she did not value or ‘get involved’ with homework tasks. When describing some of the ‘dress-up’ type tasks, she said “you want your kids not to miss out and some parents are really good and they have these big elaborate clothes, and your kids are the ones, you know, obviously you didn’t put a lot of effort into it, but there’s a reason for it”.

83
Contradictions: The (ll)Logic of homework

The contradictory nature of the discourse surrounding homework is evidenced in the conversations of the participants. The voicing of frustration with homework practices and its negative impact on families is often countered within the same conversation with a support for those very practices.

Gary did not like homework, yet said that he set it and clearly expected it to be done, unless exceptional circumstances were disclosed. He felt that it took up too much valuable teacher time, yet he expected students and their families to be disciplined in allotting time after school for homework and consolidation of schoolwork.

Jill’s conversation contained evidence of conflicting ideas and feelings about homework that appeared to be exacerbated by her dual roles of parent and teacher. While frustrated at the inadequate reasons given to her for setting homework ("nobody ever at any point gives you valid reasons"), she nevertheless set homework for her students and expected it to be given to her children. Jill, like Gary, expected parents and students to value and find the time to complete homework tasks that she set, yet experienced difficulty balancing full time work and assisting her own children with homework tasks.

Sharon said that she and her husband wished to support the teacher and the school’s policies and programs, yet completed their son’s homework for him at times, in order to reduce the trauma associated with it and avoid the enforcement of behaviour management-related consequences resulting from non-completion. Karen and Nathan found homework problematic and stressful, yet at the same time were fully supportive of
the teachers and the school in setting it, and even expressed surprise and some concern that more was not given.

The DoE’s homework policy makes statements about what homework can do, but does not provide evidence for these claims with specific research or facts. Perhaps parents (and teachers) are expected to assume that all Department statements or claims must be backed by factual evidence, without having access to the source of such evidence. Their policy states that homework can be used as a means of furthering home-school relationships and keeping parents informed. It states that preparation for high school is not a good enough reason for the setting of homework. In contrast, it states that any homework policy must be responsive to individual needs, clearly relevant and developed in collaboration with students ‘where appropriate’. The document does not state where they consider such collaboration appropriate or inappropriate. I suspect that the intention implied by this statement is that schools might collaborate with students only on the type and frequency of homework, rather than on homework as a whole. And if the latter considerations lead to the conclusion that the setting of formal homework would not be appropriate or beneficial, then how is the school to consistently apply, monitor and assess homework that is gradually and consistently phased in? One may negate the other.

Silencing: Looking Through the Lens of Michelle Fine

Michelle Fine’s critical examination of silencing in public schools focuses on what is not talked about in schools, and how suppression of such talk occurs (Fine, 1987). She explains that:
silencing constitutes a process of institutionalized policies and practices which obscure the very social, economic, and therefore experiential conditions of students' daily lives, and which expel from written, oral and non-verbal expression substantive and critical 'talk' about these conditions .... Silencing constitutes the process by which contradictory evidence, ideologies, and experiences find themselves buried, camouflaged, and discredited. (p. 157)

According to DoE policy, students have the right to collaborate, or be involved in the development of homework policy, yet none of these students had any involvement or 'say' in any homework practices, let alone those that directly affected them. If homework causes problems for students and families, why don't parents challenge the teacher and/or school? The response of the parents in this study is that some do. Sheree had written notes regarding homework that intruded significantly on family life, but these notes simply postponed the homework task. They did not challenge the homework itself or the teacher's right to give it. Other parents had challenged teachers but found that this either labelled them a 'troublemaker' or led to the possibility of repercussions for their child. When students challenged or even questioned teachers, they risked a negative response, as Karen's children found - some teachers do 'bite'! This kind of experience with teachers and schools, particularly when it occurs more than once, is experienced 'by osmosis' by other family members, and by friends with whom they discuss their experiences. All then become wary of challenging a teacher or school's practices. Hence a family ethos that is summed up in statements such as: "find a way round them. There's not much point in taking up a fight with them, because at the end of the day you're penalised, not them" (Karen). Parents can also feel subordinated by the language and rhetoric of educators, who may use these as weapons against the unease brought about by the questioning of their practices. Such an approach to dialogue is explained with amusing irony by Disraeli (cited in Henry, 1979, p. 215), when he describes "a sophistical rhetorician, inebriated with the exuberance of his own verbosity". I have witnessed and
suffered the use of this approach in education, as had participants such as Sharon and Tony and their children.

Perhaps those students and families that identify with the school culture the least are more likely to openly challenge or resist it in the first instance but are met with 'disciplinary' responses, while those that 'fit in' and appear compliant still experience difficulties but feel guilt; that they are somehow deficient if they cannot cope. The experience of these students and their families appears to be that compliance and acquiescence is likely to lead to school success, while resistance and conflicting values is more likely to lead to trouble. As Fine states, "to question from above holds intellectual promise; to question from below forebodes danger" (1987, p. 158).

Even though the two teachers who participated in this study (Gary and Jill) had problems with and reservations about homework, they both upheld the practice as something that they believed had value, though, like parents and students, they had difficulty in identifying any. They did not voice their concerns regarding homework officially or allow their personal misgivings to stop them from setting it. Fine urges us to ask who is protected by silencing. She draws on the work of Freire and Shor when exhorting educators to be "vigilant about how silencing students and their communities undermines fundamentally the vision of education as empowerment" (1987, p. 157).

Perhaps teachers and the education system are fearful that, should they give voice to the possibility that their homework practices are problematic and may be oppressive or invalid, they would be compelled to radically change or abolish those very practices. As Fine's research revealed, in some cases, "naming ... would only unmask, fundamentally disrupting or contradicting one's belief system" (1987, p. 160). Or perhaps it is simply a
matter of not thinking about it at all, but rather merely perpetuating practices because that is what has always been done. As Jill said to me, "someone took the time to write this stuff. They must have known what they were doing. Who am I to question it or throw it out?" However, I reiterate Hinchey's warning: "the results of acting upon someone else's plan, contributing to someone else's purposes and goals, can be much more insidious than [inherited habits]" (Hinchey, 1998, p. 9).

But perhaps teachers have other reasons for the continuation of problematic practices. Perhaps they do not explicitly question the status quo because they themselves feel disempowered and silenced. Teachers can become disillusioned by increasing workloads, an apparently ever-changing curriculum and the cognitive, physical and emotional cost of caring. Simpkin (1983, p. 82) points out that “institutional routine encourages a hardening into role performance”. Actions then become automatic and unthinking. As Fine explains, “perhaps these teachers have themselves been silenced over time. For them, naming ... could only diminish the distance between them and us” (1987, p. 160). The teacher is the 'expert'.

For all participants in this study, the teacher appeared to symbolise both authority and knowledge. For parents and students, teachers ‘held knowledge’ that came from sources higher than themselves (such as the Education Department, and universities) and conferred it via their teaching practices. Homework in turn was seen as a symbol of the teacher and the school's authority - authority to decide what out of school activities are more important, and to enforce that decision through consequences. The Education Department hands down policies, principals enforce them, teachers enact them and the students (and their families) accept and follow them. “That's the way it is”. The reification of the distance between students/parents and teachers makes teaching practices difficult
to challenge. Allowing such challenges leaves open the possibility that the very authority that teachers and schools symbolise may be eroded. Fine posits that to not allow such challenge and open critique is to alienate students. It leaves their lived experiences unrecognised and invalid.

Quietly doing what is asked of you leads to a smoother transition through school. By encouraging dissenting voices to remain silent on the issue of homework, educators leave students and their families quietly alienated. Silencing occurs on an institutional level. Fine found that “dissent was institutionally ‘democratized’, exported, trivialized, or bureaucratized. These mechanisms made it unlikely for change or challenge to be given a serious hearing” (1987, p. 170). And so the status quo is maintained.
6. CONCLUSION

My interest in this research topic is no doubt greatly influenced by the personal experiences that I bring to it. Conducting this investigation has served to whet my appetite for further exploration into critical inquiry and increased my passion for my research topic. I have become very aware of the need to be mindful of the consequences of blind acceptance of the status quo. A practice that has become habit needs to be questioned, and if found wanting, changed. Acceptance of practices under the logic of 'that's just the way it is' at best results in unthinking repetition and perpetuation of such practices with no identifiable positive outcomes. Worse though, is the possibility of silencing, whereby stakeholders most affected are neither heard nor valued, thus ensuring the perpetuation of dominant ideology and practice.

While the stories shared in this thesis do not reveal outrage or indignation by every parent and child, they do show that homework has indeed been problematic, to varying degrees, for all of the families in this study. For some, their level of cultural capital was a contributing factor to homework completion – it was certainly easier to address tasks and their associated problems when the family had access to information technology, relevant media, parental expertise, relevant materials, and so on. However, even in a household such as Karen and Nathan’s, which was well resourced in many ways, negative issues that surfaced regarding homework arose from clashes between values – choices about how to spend out of school time, and which of those choices was valuable. What is vitally important and also disturbing about these stories is that all parties accepted homework as inevitable and necessary, yet no specific benefits arising from it could be identified by students, parents or teachers.
As Fine (1987) asks, what would happen if these voices were given expression? What if the stories and views of students and families were not only heard, but openly sought and celebrated? I suggest that the result would be a curriculum informed by the lived experiences of its greatest stakeholders, leading to practices that are far more relevant to those that are most affected by them.

While in the final stages of writing this thesis, I discovered an article by Gary Natriello, an American researcher and teacher educator who had some years earlier co-authored a research paper expounding the benefits of homework (Natriello, 1997). In it, Natriello laments, "one problem with offering advice too early in one's career is that one is apt to have to live with the consequences of that advice" (p. 572). He goes on to describe his experiences of homework as a parent and its effects upon his family. He notes that many 'warning signals' of the difficulties he was to face with homework appeared via the voices of other (frustrated) parents, though no such warning was heard from his educator colleagues. As Natriello details his family's 'not-so-positive' homework experiences, I contemplate their familiarity to me. Though his story resonates with my experiences, it may be surprising to some. For instance, I smile with recognition as he bemoans the fact that "routine tasks sometimes carry directions that are difficult for two parents with only advanced graduate degrees to understand" (p. 573), and again when he says:

I am there in terms of support for higher order learning. But I have recently learned firsthand the limitations of my ardour. To put it plainly, I have discovered that after a day at work, the commute home, dinner preparations, and the prospect of baths, good-night stories, and my own work ahead, there comes a time beyond which I cannot sustain my enthusiasm for the math brain teaser or the creative story writing task or the three-dimensional multiple intelligences-based project. At my house, the fancy carriage of constructivism turns into a pumpkin of didactism sometime between 8.30 and 9.00 pm. (Natriello, 1997, p. 573)
Implications and Suggestions for further research

The most significant implication arising from this research project is that the voices of students and families, as major stakeholders in this issue, have not been heard and valued as they might be. Therefore, I suggest that further critical research involving the voices of many more students and families needs to be carried out. According to Kincheloe and McLaren (cited in Crotty, 1998), oppression occurs, and indeed is most powerful, “when subordinates accept their social status as natural, necessary or inevitable” (p. 158). In accepting teachers, administrators and education systems as symbols of authority, and therefore allowing them the right to mandate what is and is not important, students and their caregivers accept subordinate status. They accept homework practices that dictate their use of time as necessary, natural and inevitable. Comprehensive and genuine dialogue needs to take place upon the issue of homework that is inclusive of all stakeholders.

Current homework policy (DoE) allows for multiple and conflicting interpretations, exhorting consultation and collaboration with students, yet also urging consistent application, monitoring and assessment of homework. The assumption is therefore that student and parent collaboration should occur only under the umbrella of the DoE’s background information and guidelines. Such background information makes claims about homework that appear to be unsupported within the policy document. I suggest that this document must be reviewed through a critical lens. It needs to agree with the Curriculum Council’s Framework document, and should be reviewed as soon as possible. Student and parent perspectives must genuinely be heard and acted upon by all levels of the education system. A system that rewards compliance must make a shift toward rewarding critical thinking and open dialogue.
Ultimately, the exploration of this research question has informed my own teaching practice and, I believe, will inform the teaching practices of other educators who read this work. At this point, the research has served to increase my own perception of homework as a veiled discrimination against families, even if that discrimination is implicit or well intended (that is, intended for the subject's 'own good'). C. S. Lewis (cited in Wilding, 1982, p. 48) echoes my thoughts here when he says, "of all tyrannies, a tyranny sincerely exercised for the good of its victims may be the most oppressive".

Sheree's words contain valuable advice from parents to teachers: "teachers, it's all about getting to know the kids. You don't have to know their parents personally, but just getting to know what they're like as people." Pertinent also is a statement by Whittaker and Garbarino (1983, p. 6) in relation to human services: "Some of what we may interpret as unreasonable client resistance becomes much more comprehensible when we put ourselves in the client's shoes, when we empathize with him or her".

For these four families, homework is problematic. It has had a negative impact upon family time. If other studies reveal similar findings, then we must recognise that the setting of homework is a problematic practice with the potential for negative consequences. This issue then needs to be addressed clearly and specifically. There is a deficit somewhere.

To my mind, the deficit does not lie in the children who say that homework is boring, or who do not complete it. Nor does it lie in the parents of these children when they place homework a little lower on their family priority list than non-school related activities, or have difficulty in justifying or explaining homework to their children. The deficit is in the logic of educators, however well-meaning, who not only believe that neither students nor
parents should question their practices or school and departmental policies, but do not question these practices themselves. Gary Natriello’s explanation of the effects of critical reflection borne by bitter experience contains a message for other educators, administrators and policy makers: “the most immediate effects on my work may be a newfound caution about offering policy implications that might somehow be taken seriously. I quickly review mentally other things I have written for lurking dangers ahead” (1997, p. 575). My suggestion — indeed my challenge — to myself, to educators, to administrators and policy-makers is to do the same. Reflective practice is essential if one is to avoid imposing one’s own values upon students and families. As Elliott and Hatton (1998, p. 48) note, “our actions, even where we are the agents of other individuals or organizations, have an ineliminable value dimension”.

Finally, I leave you with some poignant words from Lisa Delpit to all educators; “if we are truly to effect societal change, we cannot do so from the bottom up, but we must push and agitate from the top down” (1998, p. 49). She goes on to say that:

Teachers are in an ideal position to play this role, to attempt to get all of the issues on the table in order to initiate true dialogue ..., by seeking out those whose perspectives may differ most, by learning to give their words complete attention, by understanding one’s own power, even if that power stems merely from being in the majority, by being unafraid to raise questions about discrimination and voicelessness ... to listen, no, to hear what they have to say. I suggest that the results of such interactions may be the most powerful and empowering coalescence yet to be seen in the educational realm — for all teachers and all the students they teach. (Delpit, 1998, p. 47)
REFERENCES


APPENDICES

1. Letter Of Invitation To Participate In Homework Research
2. Letter Of Consent To Participate In Research
3. Letter Of Invitation To Participate In Research: School Principal
4. Letter Of Consent To Participate In Research: School Principal
5. Letter Of Invitation To Participate In Research: Classroom Teacher
6. Letter Of Consent To Participate In Research: Classroom Teacher
7. Department Of Education Homework Policy
I write to invite you and your child to participate in a research project that I am currently undertaking as part of my Honours Degree in Education at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. The aim of the research is to investigate how homework affects parents and children in different families. Through this research, I aim to give students and their parents a 'voice' in education regarding the issue of homework.

As a mature-age student and a mother of two, my interest in this research topic stems from my own experiences of homework, both as a student myself and as a parent. These personal experiences, as well as those related to me by other parents, have inspired in me a desire to tell the 'homework stories' of students and parents. Through this project, I hope to increase the awareness of educators regarding the variety of viewpoints, issues and problems that surround set homework tasks.

I will collect stories through conversational interviews with children and their caregiver/s. These conversations will take place at a time and place that suits you, the participants. I anticipate that each conversation may take around one to two hours, however this is flexible according to your time, needs and feelings. The conversations will be recorded on audiotape, to ensure that the interviews are transcribed as accurately as possible. Once I have transcribed these tapes, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript, so that you may verify or amend any part of the information if you wish. The tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed.

The participants will not be identified in this research; your/your child's/the school's details will remain confidential. Should you wish to participate in this research project, please sign the attached letter of consent and return it me at the address given, and I will contact you to arrange a time and place for the meeting that are most convenient to you and your family. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without pressure or prejudice.

Any questions regarding this research project can be directed to me on 9796 0525. If you have any concerns regarding the project and would like to speak to an independent person, please contact Dr Ken Robinson at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Hubbard
2. LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

I ............................................................................................................................ consent to my child and myself participating in the research project being undertaken by Jacqueline Hubbard as part of her Bachelor of Education Honours Degree at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus. I understand that the aim of this research is to investigate the homework experiences of several students and their parents.

In giving my consent, I understand that:

➢ Our participation is voluntary and we may withdraw at any time throughout the research project without any pressure or prejudice
➢ The information that we provide will be used only for the purpose of this research and any further use is to be negotiated
➢ The interview will be audio taped and transcribed by the researcher and a copy of the transcripts will be made available to us
➢ Recorded interviews will be destroyed
➢ Any information that we provide may be amended or deleted by us at any time during the research process
➢ We will not be identified in either the research process or the final document and our personal details will remain confidential

I agree to participate in the research on the understanding that I/my child/school will not be identifiable.

Participant Signature (parent/caregiver to sign) ..............................................

Date ....................................................

Thank you for your assistance in this project. It is greatly appreciated.

Jacqueline Hubbard
25 Burleigh Drive
Australind
Ph: 9796 0525
3. LETTER OF INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE: SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

Dear ............................................................

I write to gain permission to interview members of your school (a year seven teacher and several students and their caregivers) for a research project that I am currently undertaking as part of my Honours Degree in Education at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. The aim of the research is to investigate how homework affects parents and children in different families. Through this research, I aim to give students and their parents a 'voice' in education regarding the issue of homework.

As a mature-age student and a mother of two, my interest in this research topic stems from my own experiences of homework, both as a student myself and as a parent. These personal experiences, as well as those related to me by other parents, have inspired in me a desire to tell the 'homework stories' of students and parents. Through this project, I hope to increase the awareness of educators regarding the variety of viewpoints, issues and problems that surround set homework tasks.

I will collect stories through conversational interviews with children and their caregiver/s, as well as a short interview with the classroom teacher. These conversations will take place at a time and place that suits the participants. The conversations will be recorded on audiotape, to ensure that the interviews are transcribed as accurately as possible. Once I have transcribed these tapes, I will provide each participant with a copy of their transcript, so that they may verify or amend any part of the information if they wish. The tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed.

The participants will not be identified in this research: your school/students and their caregivers/the teacher will not be identifiable. If you are happy for this research to proceed, please sign the attached letter of consent and return it me at the address given. Participants are free to withdraw from the research at any time without pressure or prejudice.

Any questions regarding this research project can be directed to Jacqueline Hubbard on 9796 0525. If you have any concerns regarding the project and would like to speak to an independent person, please contact Dr Ken Robinson at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Hubbard
4. LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: SCHOOL PRINCIPAL

I ........................................................................................................ consent to allow interviews to be conducted with a year seven teacher and several students/caregivers from that class for a research project being undertaken by Jacqueline Hubbard. I understand that this research forms part of Jacqueline’s Bachelor of Education Honours Degree at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus. I understand that the aim of this research is to investigate the homework experiences of several students and their parents.

I have sighted the information given to participants, and in giving my consent, I understand that the following code of conduct applies to them:

➢ Participation is voluntary and we may withdraw at any time throughout the research project without any pressure or prejudice
➢ The information provided will be used only for the purpose of this research and any further use is to be negotiated
➢ The interview will be audio taped and transcribed by the researcher and a copy of each participant’s transcripts will be made available to them
➢ Recorded interviews will be destroyed
➢ Any information provided may be amended or deleted by the participant at any time during the research process
➢ We will not be identified in either the research process or the final document and our personal details will remain confidential

I consent to this research being conducted on the understanding that the teacher/students and their caregivers/the school will not be identifiable.

Principal’s Signature ____________________________________________

Date ________________________________

Thank you for your assistance in this project. It is greatly appreciated.

Jacqueline Hubbard
25 Burleigh Drive
Australind
Ph: 9796 0525
Dear ..........................................................................................

I write to invite you to participate in a research project that I am currently undertaking as part of my Honours Degree in Education at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. The aim of the research is to investigate how homework affects parents and children in different families. Through this research, I aim to give students and their parents a 'voice' in education regarding the issue of homework.

As a mature-age student and a mother of two, my interest in this research topic stems from my own experiences of homework, both as a student myself and as a parent. These personal experiences, as well as those related to me by other parents, have inspired in me a desire to tell the 'homework stories' of students and parents. Through this project, I hope to increase the awareness of educators regarding the variety of viewpoints, issues and problems that surround set homework tasks.

I will collect stories through conversational interviews with children and their caregiver/s, as well as an interview with you, their classroom teacher. These conversations will take place at a time and place that suits you, the participants. I anticipate that conversation may take around one hour, however this is flexible according to your time and needs. The conversation will be recorded on audiotape, to ensure that the interview is transcribed as accurately as possible. Once I have transcribed the tape, I will provide you with a copy of the transcript, so that you may verify or amend any part of the information if you wish. The tapes will be erased after they have been transcribed.

The participants will not be identified in this research; you/your students and their caregivers/the school's identifying details will remain confidential. Should you decide to participate in this study, I will contact you to arrange a time and place for the meeting that are most convenient to you. Should you wish to participate in this research project, please sign the attached letter of consent and return it me at the address given. You are free to withdraw from the research at any time without pressure or prejudice.

Any questions regarding this research project can be directed to Jacqueline Hubbard on 9796 0525. If you have any concerns regarding the project and would like to speak to an independent person, please contact Dr Ken Robinson at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury. I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Jacqueline Hubbard
6. LETTER OF CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE: CLASSROOM TEACHER

I ........................................................................................................... consent to participate in the research project being undertaken by Jacqueline Hubbard as part of her Bachelor of Education Honours Degree at Edith Cowan University, Bunbury Campus. I understand that the aim of this research is to investigate the homework experiences of several students and their parents.

In giving my consent, I understand that:

➢ Participation is voluntary and I may withdraw at any time throughout the research project without any pressure or prejudice.
➢ The information that I provide will be used only for the purpose of this research and any further use is to be negotiated.
➢ The interview will be audio taped and transcribed by the researcher and a copy of the transcripts will be made available to me.
➢ Recorded interviews will be destroyed.
➢ Any information that I provide may be amended or deleted by me at any time during the research process.
➢ I will not be identified in either the research process or the final document and my personal details will remain confidential.

I agree to participate in this research on the understanding that I/my students and their caregivers/the school will not be identifiable.

Teacher Signature ...........................................................................

Date ..................................................

Thank you for your assistance in this project. It is greatly appreciated.

Jacqueline Hubbard
25 Burleigh Drive
Australind
Ph: 9796 0525
7. HOMEWORK POLICY: WA DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

1 POLICY
1.1 Every school is to have a documented approach to homework that takes into account the needs of the students and the phase of their development, and reflects the context of the school.

2 BACKGROUND
Homework can support higher levels of student achievement by extending the time available for students to consolidate skills and concepts learned at school. It also extends the time available for the exploration of new ideas and new situations. Homework can also extend the time available to the teacher for the monitoring of student progress.

There is a community expectation that secondary schools, in particular, will set and mark homework. Many community members see homework as tangible evidence that the school cares about the educational progress of students. Homework can also be a means of furthering school-home relationships and can assist in keeping parents informed about the student's learning program and progress.

Consideration may be given to such matters as home reading programs, voluntary projects or activities which might become appropriate in the early childhood phase of development. As students progress through the early and late phases of adolescence, self-planned individual study and revision programs become important for many students. Schools may establish approaches on these issues as part of their documented approach to homework or deal with them as separate matters.

It is expected that homework will relate directly to the learning and teaching programs appropriate to the needs of students. Preparation of students for the time commitment of homework anticipated in years to come is not, in itself, a reasonable basis for setting homework.

It should also be noted that there are some learning programs and situations where it may be determined that homework is not useful or appropriate.

3 PROCEDURES
3.1 The principal is responsible for developing and implementing a documented school approach to homework that:
• is consistent with the Curriculum Framework and school plans;

• is developed in consultation with the school staff and parents and endorsed by the school council;

• is regularly communicated to students and parents;
• includes general guidelines for parents, where appropriate, as to how they can support and assist their children; and

• is supported and implemented by all staff.

3.2 Homework must:
• only be used to facilitate the achievement of learning outcomes;

• form part of a developmental learning program that is responsive to individual needs, clearly relevant, supported by classroom practice and, where appropriate, developed in collaboration with students; and

• be disassociated from any form of punishing students or means of securing discipline.

4 GUIDELINES
4.1 Homework should:
• support the development of the student's independence as a learner;

• further the partnership between school and home;

• avoid dependence on unreasonable levels of parental assistance or resources that are not readily available to the student;

• be set without impinging on reasonable time for family, recreational, cultural and employment pursuits relevant to the student's age, development and educational aspirations;

• be balanced across learning areas so as to avoid stress and overload;

• be phased in gradually and consistently as students move through the upper primary years and sustained through the secondary years; and

• be consistently applied, monitored and assessed in a whole-school approach that is responsive to individual needs and learning area requirements.

5 EFFECTIVE DATE 30 April 2001
6 REVIEW DATE 30 April 2004
7 KEY WORDS homework, learning, school Council