

**PARENTS' STORIES OF HOMEWORK:  
EXPERIENCES ALONGSIDE THEIR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**

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## ABSTRACT

The objective of this program of research was to listen to parents' voices on homework with a focus on what homework means for their children, themselves and their families. While, within this body of literature, there is consensus on a definition of homework, a multitude of studies on homework and its effect on academic achievement and the development of work habits, and an extensive body of literature on types of homework assignments, there are no known qualitative studies on homework from parents' perspectives. Within schools, teachers are positioned as knowing professionals and parents are positioned as helpers, who know less about the learning process. Power and authority rest with educators who make decisions important to teaching and learning – decisions about homework policies and practices, for example – often with little or no parent input or participation. Because teachers ask for little input from parents, parents rarely feel they can talk to teachers about their children's experiences with homework and the resulting impact on their family.

Determining what knowledge parents of elementary school children (pre-Kindergarten through Grade 8) hold about homework, how they feel about homework, how homework impacts their children, how homework impacts them as parents, and how homework impacts their families was the focus of this narrative inquiry. The parents' stories highlight the non-academic benefits the parents believe exist for their children through their engagement with homework. They also bring to the fore the many reasons homework can be problematic for their children and for them as they attend to the individuality of their children and the complexity of their family lives. They raise important issues for educators to consider in relation to homework: the implications

variations within families, schools, teachers, parents and students may have for homework policies and practices; the need for reciprocity in home/school communications and the development of equitable rather than hierarchical relationships between parents and educators. Possibilities for changes in teacher education, both preservice and inservice; for a rethinking of policy and practice for both parents and educators; and for the direction of future research all emerge in this work.

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Lastly, I want to acknowledge all of the teachers who believe we can continue to make a difference in the lives of children, who believe change is a good thing, and who constantly strive to make education better. Our job is one of service, and we continue to serve by learning beside the parents and our students.

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## Chapter 1

### The Teacher, the Parent and the Researcher

*Life is a train of moods like a string of beads;  
and as we pass through them they prove to be many colored senses,  
which paint the world their own hue,  
and each shows us only what lies in its own focus."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

I am a mother and I am a teacher. Throughout the temporal flow of my teaching career from past to present, these words have meant different things to me at different times, leading me to question their basic definitions. As I sat and reflected, I decided to open my Webster's Thesaurus (1990) to compare and discover the basic terms used to define each. This well known Webster's book used a variety of words for 'teacher,' such as lecturer, master, mentor, and trainer (p. 908). By looking at the terms commonly used, I saw where the title of 'teacher' can be misconstrued as 'person who knows all of the answers.' As I searched to find the terms used for 'parent' within the Webster's Thesaurus, I found words which did not parallel those of teacher. The terms, which included one who fusses over, fosters, indulges, and nurtures (p. 833), had a personal and emotional tone, rather than a professional one. I began to think about the descriptions and how they brought me to see the small picture of these two seemingly different worlds. Viewing the words in the thesaurus suggested that parents and teachers have contrasting positions. This didn't make visible the commonalities that truly exist between both. Yet, the educator I had become knew they authentically overlapped in the real world. I am a teacher parent and a parent teacher, always more than one thing at any one time. I find I couldn't and still cannot separate the roles of mother and teacher as the Webster's Thesaurus clearly does.

I must admit, before having children myself, I offered a one-sided, teacher view on school, families, and homework. It wasn't until I was able to step back as a parent that I could relate to how other parents felt and truly opened myself up to the changeless expectations I had for my perfect 'one size fits all' family and 'one size fits all' classroom. I had to refocus and adjust the lenses through which I viewed the roles of mother and teacher. I found myself looking through both lenses separately through lived stories and moments. Later, I found myself wondering why I wasn't able to see the value of looking through both lenses at the same time; just as a telescope becomes more powerful when I look through multiple lenses, so did my vision of teaching. I found strength within both roles of mother and teacher. Bateson (1994) described the various roles best when she said the following:

My life has forced me to adopt multiple levels of focus, shifting back and forth and embedding one activity within the other, parent and observer, teacher and student. I have been fortunate in living several lives simultaneously, the effect of layers of commitment. There is even room for awareness of the process of learning. (p. 96)

I now believe I do my best work as a teacher when I take on both roles together. I know this from my lived experiences as teacher and as mother.

### **Ignorance and Awakening from Past to Present**

Over ten years ago, near the beginning of my teaching career, I remember sitting at my desk visiting with some of the children in my class when a student carefully unfolded a note and handed it to me, a clear sense of dread on her face. The note was

written by her parents and stated that Tracey<sup>1</sup> could not get her homework done. The reason was not given, therefore I did not feel her incomplete homework was justified. I accepted the note with a nod and a weak smile but I just couldn't bring myself to understand how a family could put other things in front of homework. "If it was my family," I thought, "homework would be a priority!" On another occasion, a student came up to me in the hallway and explained that he couldn't get his homework done because he got home much too late after soccer and music. My response was, "Well, you'd better pick your priorities."

As the temporal flow of the past enables me to reflect on my teaching, I am humbled and acutely aware I did not put myself in the students' shoes. In the classic novel *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), Harper Lee writes, "You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view... until you climb inside his skin and walk around in it" (in Henry, p. 21, 2004). This shifting of positions was a difficult process for me. I lived inside my world of the classroom and my world as a teacher. I lectured, I mastered the curriculum before teaching it, I spent time coaching, and I adequately trained and prepared my students for the next grade. Based on these criteria, I was a "good" teacher. Did I nurture the children? Did I attend to their differences and respect that every home had varying expectations? Did I come to know the students personally or learn about their families? Did I invite the parents to share their wishes for their children's schooling or did I believe I knew what was best? It saddens me that I did not teach to the individual child, nor did I respect where each was coming from. I did not

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<sup>1</sup> Pseudonyms have been used to protect the anonymity of students and participants, including parents, children and staff. Actual names have been used for the schools that I was/am employed as well as for my own children.

nurture the needs of each individual student, as a parent would with their child, nor did I teach them the important skill of being empathetic. My professional knowledge was presented alone, without parent knowledge (Pushor, 2001) interwoven with it. The boundaries between my profession and my home life as a parent were clearly separate. I knew within my heart I was not on the right path, along my journey of becoming the teacher I always wanted to be. In *The Alchemist* (1993), Coelho described a personal legend as something you have always wanted to accomplish (p. 21), something that takes you through a journey of experiences. I have always wanted to be a great teacher, yet I found within my heart that something was lacking. Coelho added that we need to learn to recognize our omens and follow them (p. 42). My omen was how I felt within my heart. By listening to what my heart was saying, I knew I could make positive changes. The process of going back to university was "... an eternal testament to the transforming power of our dreams and the importance of listening to our hearts" (book jacket). Clandinin & Connelly (2000) refer to narrative researchers as being "... wakeful, and thoughtful, about all of our inquiry decisions" (p. 184). I needed to recognize that the various roles which were part of who I was could not be separated. Wearing only one hat at a time did not provide me with a clear view. In my past, I looked through my single lens, and I was a single-minded teacher. In my present, I have opened myself up to more possibilities, reaching beyond the boundaries where I felt safe, to the awakening and sometimes frightening reality that we can all do better.

The purpose of this research was to inquire into parents' experiences of homework alongside their children and families. I wanted to look beyond the formal positioning of teachers in schools to the lived experiences of parents (Clandinin &

Connelly, 2000, p. 40). I listened to three parents tell stories of homework – of its benefits and disadvantages to their children, to them and/or to their families. I listened as they retold those stories, imagining new possibilities for homework to be lived out in ways that could honor their families’ beliefs and their time spent together outside of the regular school day. I weaved their stories together to construct meaning; it was slow, accurate and purposeful, much like a spider weaves its web.

In narrative inquiry, I acknowledged the importance of my place within the research. The ‘hats’ I wore, and recognized, provided my own stories of experience around homework. I recognized that all of the knowledge I had, with the multiplicity of my roles, served to enhance what I did as a researcher in the field. I was excited about the research journey, the path to understanding homework and what it meant for the parents, families and children. As Coelho reiterates, “Whenever we do something that fills us with enthusiasm, we are following our legend” (1993, p. x). My legend begins here.

### **What do you mean, “You Don’t Like to READ?”**

As the directional flow of my journey continued forward, I brought myself closer to the present, to the days when my first child entered school. That year was a big change for our entire family. There was less play time and more time spent on learning to read. I was excited for him and comfortable with the entire process because, as a teacher, I had seen how quickly children could adapt to new situations. Jonah loved kindergarten, with all of the activity centers, concerts, friendships, and birthday parties. I reminded him that Grade One would be similar, except for attending school every day of the week. Boy was I wrong!

After a couple weeks of settling into school, Jonah brought home some homework. “Ah...just a couple little books to read,” I said to myself, and we finished the homework promptly. He continued to receive two new books a night, with the added assignment of writing one or two sentences about each of the books. “Ah... just a little more homework...,” I said to myself again, but this time with some hesitation. As the weeks went on, I noticed that the books coming home were getting longer, some as long as 45 pages, except now, as well as reading them, he was also expected to write several more sentences on each. The fun we used to have doing homework together turned into a torturous routine with me begging and prodding Jonah to finish the work. I did what I could to make it seem exciting and I promoted the ‘quality’ time we would be spending together, but as time went on, Jonah began to complain about the homework. As the books became longer, and much more time consuming to read and write about, he began to comment aloud, “I don’t like to read!” There was an obvious silence that followed when he said it. I can still feel the echo of his words traversing from my ears to my heart, much like an electric shock that travels through your body. Hearing those words crushed me as a mother, and a teacher.

As a teacher and as a mother, I believed my kids would love school and flourish. How could my child *not* like reading...the basis of all good learning? It didn’t take me long to figure out Jonah sensed my frustration with the workload he was receiving, and I sensed his exhaustion with the expectations put on him. Jonah loved reading when he chose the books. He loved reading when we relaxed together to read. I felt caught in a dilemma. I was a mother who cared deeply about how my son was feeling about himself, school and about reading. My home landscape had changed in a way I was

not comfortable with. There exists a belief expressed in the literature that "...the common homework system is causing some people harm. The harm starts in the early grades with long-lasting implications to self-concept even if adjustments are made later on" (Goldberg, 2007, p. 8). Yet, in my professional positioning as a teacher, I believed expectations and homework were part of both the school and the home landscape. I was deeply conflicted, my lenses became blurred, and I didn't know what to do. How could I ask Jonah's teacher to lessen her expectations for my son, when as a teacher, I assigned homework? I began to question the validity of the homework we were doing together. I began to question if there was a better time to do the homework. Bateson (1994) uses an analogy to show that learning should occur everywhere in many different ways, not just by doing homework.

Teaching children that there is a correct time and place for learning, we also teach them to stop learning when they manage to escape from school, or to keep what has been learned specialized to one context and quite inaccessible for use in others, like tourists who become tongue-tied in Paris after years of high school French. (p. 208)

As I tried to wipe my lenses with a clean cloth, and refocus my thoughts, my beliefs on homework began to shift, but sometimes, when things shift too quickly, they become unbalanced.

### **Struggling with Decisions - Going Forwards and Backwards**

This internal struggle caused me to think back to an earlier time in my teaching career. My colleague was excited about initiating a new idea in her early years' classroom which was a homework folder. I remember feeling impressed with her idea

and thinking to myself, “I hope my son gets a teacher like this when he goes to school!” The teacher’s homework folder reinforced my own teacher beliefs and practices around homework at the time. I present this memory now because it shows how much my understanding of homework shifted when I became a parent of a school-aged child. The multiplicity of my positioning was bringing me to a place of uncertainty.

Going forward in time to another school year, Jonah’s teacher sent home very little homework. Jonah and his younger brother, Elijah, spent some of their luxury time playing make believe games like ‘heroes,’ ‘secret ninjas,’ and even ‘school.’ When they weren’t playing make believe games, our family was playing board games, playing outside and reading for fun. Jonah liked to go to a local coffee shop with his father and they would both bring their own books to read, as they sat by the window. The boys were involved in extracurricular activities as well but we never felt pressured for time by schoolwork. This quality or luxury time was enjoyed by all of us. Reading became a hobby and school became a place that both of my children looked forward to attending.

I can’t help but wonder about the contrast in these two homework experiences and how they were lived out in my experiences at home with my son. Why had one teacher expected two books plus writing to be accomplished at home each night and the other teacher believed that reading two books a week was enough? What was the rationale for their homework practices? How was the amount of homework being determined? Outwardly, with little homework to do, I looked forward to the game nights and relished our family’s much needed luxury time together, which was rarely planned or organized ahead of time. This led me to ask if the structure my son experienced in school was part

of the problem. Maybe he just wasn't developmentally ready. Perhaps John Dewey said it best when he wrote the following in *Experience and Education* (1938):

Call up in imagination the ordinary schoolroom, its time schedules, schemes of classification, of examination and promotion, of rules of order, and I think you will grasp what is meant by "patterns of organization." If then you contrast this scene with what goes on in the family, for example, you will appreciate what is meant by the school being a kind of institution sharply marked off from any other form of social organization. (Dewey, 1938, p. 18)

Inwardly, I still struggled. "What would happen if Jonah didn't do homework like all of his peers? Would he fall behind in his next grade?" I wondered. "Will he be ready for the next teacher's expectations? What would the other parents think of me? How would that affect me? How would Jonah be affected socially if we refused to complete his homework?" My beliefs as a teacher and as a parent were diverging. It was in this place of uncertainty that my wonders about how other parents experience their children's homework became foregrounded.

### **Research Puzzle**

My research puzzle had interlocking pieces that, when separated, provided a narrow view on homework. This narrow view reminded me about a book I had read and reread to my children called *Seven Blind Mice* by Ed Young (1992). Within the context of the story, these mice are scurrying around, one by one, trying to figure out what the object is that lies before them. Each mouse runs up, down and all around *one part* of the object. They make a guess, based on their limited knowledge, and when they can't figure out what the object is, the next mouse takes his turn. Finally, the last mouse decides to

run up and down and all around *the entire* object. This mouse adds up all of the descriptions of the first six mice and a figure out the object is an elephant! I share this story because, like my research puzzle, I was not interested in guessing or seeing only part of the puzzle. I wanted to hear the detailed knowledge from various sources and I wanted to put the puzzle together while wearing my many hats. “Focusing on the pursuit of particular, narrow goals, we pay attention to a fraction of the whole, block out peripheral vision, and act without looking at the larger picture” (Bateson, 1994, p. 138). The stories I shared were the smaller puzzle pieces; the larger picture involved other people. I spent time with other parents and heard their own personal stories of homework.

The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember what we hear is their story. (Coles, 1989, p.7)

I was interested in how parents made sense of homework within their family. I was interested in how parents storied the impact of homework on their children, themselves and their family, both positively and negatively. I wanted to explore parents’ preconceived notions of homework and what homework meant to them based on their own personal knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) shaped by when they attended school. I wanted to know what ideas parents might put forward if they were given an opportunity to have a voice in re-imagining homework.

Developing relationships with these parents and their families was key. “When narrative inquirers are in the field, they are never there as disembodied recorders of someone else’s experience. They too are having an experience, the experience of the

inquiry that entails the experience they set out to explore” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81). This temporal sharing of knowledge has occurred within parental landscapes since the beginning of time. However, it was time to give voice to parents so the everyday lives of families could be explored and used to help educators determine changes in thinking regarding current homework policies and practices. By becoming part of the experience and including the parents’ stories, I was “... in the parade I presume[d] to study” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 81). In order to complete my puzzle successfully, all of the pieces – the teacher, the parents, and the students – needed to be put together to provide a clearer, more broadened picture of the puzzle.

### **The History of Homework**

In order to understand the complexities of how homework affected families, I needed to recognize the current working definitions of homework. According to Cooper (1989), “Homework can be defined as any task assigned by schoolteachers intended for students to carry out during non-school hours” (p. 2). When searching the Webster’s Dictionary (1990), homework was found under the main heading of ‘home’ and was defined as “... work or piecework, done at home; schoolwork to be done outside the classroom...” (p. 264). Both definitions pointed to the school or teachers as the ones who instigate the practice and the home as the recipient of the practice.

The area of homework has been studied for over 100 years. Kohn (2006), acknowledging an early study by Joseph Mayer Rice, says, “Research goes back at least to 1897, when a study found that assigning spelling homework had no effect on how proficient children were at spelling later on” (p. 26). Studies have continued throughout this time, and still, open forums on homework in the schools, within university training

and in the homes have not occurred. “As early as 1927, a study by Hagan compared the effects of homework with the effects of in-school supervised study on the achievement of 11 and 12 year-olds. However, researchers have been far from unanimous in their assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of homework” (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 3). My directional flow led me back to when I started teaching. Homework was not mentioned very often. It was just assumed that students who did not finish their work in class would continue it at home. How did educators understand homework or its purpose?

The study of increases and demands in the homework assigned to students has been cyclical in nature historically, occurring about every 30 years. “The push for homework has indeed waxed and waned throughout our history” (Buell, 2005, p. 54). More recently, it is obvious the cycle has again peaked much like the crest of a wave. The increased demands we have been seeing with children in the elementary and middle years started, for me, about eight years ago. According to Bennett and Kalish (2007), “... elementary and middle school kids have been hit with the biggest increase in their overall load” (p. 14). Children as young as five are being inundated with homework books or folders with daily activities they are expected to complete by the next school day. In a Newsweek article titled *Too Much Too Soon* (September 11<sup>th</sup>, 2006), it states:

...Kindergarten is the new first grade and first grade is like literacy boot camp. They are spending hours doing math work sheets and sounding out words in reading groups. In some places, recess, music and art are being replaced by writing exercises and spelling quizzes. (Unpaginated)

Expecting children who are developmentally young to do extra work that requires sitting still and remaining focused after school hours has a definite effect. “They fail before they learn to tie their shoes” (Goodman, 2007, p. 19).

When I began my teaching career, almost 12 years ago, there were few students and teachers who raised the topic of homework in classrooms, casual staffroom conversation, or professional development sessions. When I search my memorybank (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) I cannot recall lived stories of homework. I think the issue of homework was at a low, at the trough of the wave, during this time in my career.

As opinions of homework differ from teacher to teacher, so do the opinions of researchers. There are obvious discrepancies within researchers’ results. From achievement results, to the amount of homework assigned, to the ages of students doing homework and to the time students spend on homework, few researchers agree. For example, “Some people insist that kids aren’t working any harder than they did in the past. But a 2004 national survey of more than 2,900 children done by the University of Michigan found that the time kids spend doing homework has skyrocketed by 51 percent since 1981” (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 11). A *New York Times* article stated, “Once the pendulum swings one way, it takes a long time to reverse direction, but there are signs that heaping on homework for young children is taking its toll” (in Kohn, 2006, p. 6). When I visualized the metaphor of homework, I pictured and felt the weight of the pendulum being thrust in this new direction. As a parent, pushed by the pendulum’s swing, I felt there was no way to stop the rhythm of the motion without getting knocked over. For my children, the weight was also overwhelming. Kohn affirms, “The most striking trend regarding homework in the past two decades is the tendency to pile more

and more of it on younger and younger children” (Kohn, 2006, p. 6). If we removed the opinions and looked solely at the results, the true discrepancy lies within communication. Are teachers made aware of the studies on homework? Are parents aware of these studies? How do we share this information? How is it important to the well-being of the student, the child, the parent and the family? How do parents perceive their children are responding to the weight of the pendulum of homework?

### **The Short and the Long of It**

Both short and long term studies have been completed on homework. The majority of studies done to date address the issues of homework and academic achievement (Cooper et al., 1998; Hong, 2001; Lam, 1996; Meloy, 1987; Olson, 1998; Smith, 1990, 1992; Wyn, 1996) as reported by Cooper et al. (2006, pp. 11-14). The lack of information on whether learning actually occurs makes it more challenging to attend to the more complex issues of deciding what homework is most valuable as well as how each family can divide their time to ensure each child’s academic needs are met. These problems are all too often faced by children and families who do homework. “Overall, the available homework research defines “beneficial” in terms of achievement, and it defines achievement as better grades or standardized test scores. It allows us to conclude nothing about whether children’s *learning* improves” (Kohn, 2006, p. 37). Only recently have authors and researchers begun to suggest that looking to outside sources, such as the parents and families themselves, for more information on how homework bears upon their families would not only be beneficial, but necessary.

When I read through the literature on homework, it seemed as though the writers used the testing results to support their claims about homework, whether they are for or

against. As Kohn (2006) notes, “The literature reviews done over the past 60 years ... report conflicting results .... There is no good evidence that homework produces better academic achievement” (p. 27). Yet, in Cooper’s 1989 study, “Homework accounted for less than 4% of the differences in students’ scores (in Kohn, 2006, p. 27). Buell and Kralovec (2000) also did an extensive review of research that promoted homework, and in doing so, showed that these studies provided inconclusive results as to homework’s academic value (Buell and Kralovec, 2000, pp. 76-78). Although Cooper used these same results to say that homework does indeed improve academic performance, when I looked at the big picture, I questioned whether the small increase was worth all of the hours that children spend on homework?

Along with results on achievement, studies clearly demonstrated that assigning homework to younger children has increased dramatically. “A long-term national survey of several thousand families discovered that the proportion of six-to-eight-year-old children who reported having homework on a given day had climbed from 34 percent in 1981 to 58 percent in 1997” (Kohn, 2006, p. 6). Kohn continued to note that in 2002 that same proportion jumped to 64% and the time this age group spent on homework increased by a third. “In fact, it’s with younger children, where the benefits are most questionable (if not absent), that there has been the greatest increase in the quantity of homework!” (Kohn, 2002, p. 38) Why are we pressuring our young children to do more homework? What purpose will it serve?

That homework is actually being assigned in classrooms is clearly shown in the research, but whether the homework is valid or helpful to the students and the families is what researchers are after. “There is a long history of questioning the educational value

of homework and of examining the price families and children pay for the practice” (Buell, 2005, p. 62). This questioning has not resulted in researchers discovering the answer to the value of homework. Those studies would take many years to complete and researchers have not come up with a way to test the validity of homework on a non-academic scale. The academic value in the elementary years has been disputed and rarely agreed upon. Even though Cooper’s work demonstrated the process of homework showed a marginal increase in academic results, in 1989, Cooper summarized, “There is no evidence that any amount of homework improves the academic performance of elementary students” (in Kohn, 2006, p. 39). While Cooper offered an explanation, Kohn believes it is open to interpretation. The following quote from Kohn demonstrates the current disparity of research results and the need for more research in the elementary area.

...[T]he fact is that after decades of research on the topic, there is no overall positive correlation between homework and achievement (by any measure) for students before middle school or, in many cases, before high school. More precisely, there’s virtually no good research on the impact of homework in the primary grades.... (Kohn, 2006, p. 38)

The homework pendulum has been swaying back and forth repeatedly. We keep moving from assigning lots of homework to assigning less but rarely, as educators, have we stopped to question the kinds of homework the students are getting. Rarely, as parents, have we stopped to ask if the homework our children are doing is beneficial to them. Perhaps it is time to stop the pendulum from swinging too far one way or the other

and time that we try to discover the advantages and disadvantages of assigning homework so every family and every student benefits.

### **If Homework Doesn't Increase My Marks, Why Do it?**

There is no doubt there are many different belief systems and values which each family adopts around the idea of homework. Generally, and according to the Webster's Thesaurus (1990), values can be defined as good, beneficial, useful and significant forms of merit (p. 930). Kohn (2006) begins his workshops with parents or educators by questioning them about what they want most as long term objectives for their children. He asks what characteristics they would like to see their children have. When parents and educators respond, no one lists academic characteristics as the main focus (Kohn, 2006, p. 66), but rather their desire for their children to develop life long skills that will help them to become successful, caring and responsible members of society.

As a teacher in the system for over 10 years, and when looking at the provincial time allotments for classes, the majority of time during school is to be spent on academics rather than ethical values and beliefs. Perhaps this is because narrowing in on each family's belief system would be a very time consuming process. Looking at Kohn's survey, if most parents' wishes for their children are to be positive members of society, then it would make sense that school systems re-evaluate their homework policies and include the values each family deems important within their lives, even if it requires no work being sent home after school. "Work and schoolwork are part of our system of core values, and they play a vital role in our lives, but they do not define the totality of those lives" (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. x). Should we be questioning the extent that the core values embedded in homework dominate our lives outside of the regular school day?

“Discussion about reasonable homework limits is more than just a debate about education; it provides an entrée into other core concerns about our civilization” (p. x). As our society changes and families change, schools and the policies that direct them may need to be a part of that change as well.

In a survey done by Kohn, 1,480 parents and 242 educators were asked to provide reasons they liked homework. Two-thirds of those surveyed felt it ‘develops children’s initiative and responsibility.’ In a second study, secondary teachers thought it helped students gain study skills and better time management (Kohn, 2006, p. 52). These statements cannot be validated by the research, but rather, stand as perceptions.

The studies on homework, to date, have looked primarily at achievement, and not work habits (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. 29). Therefore, research has not been done to substantiate whether these perceptions are indeed accurate. Many parents believe responsibility is learned; but in contrast, when parents sit down with their children to do homework and supply answers, perhaps even write the answers, one could ask, ‘Are they instilling the possible value of responsibility through homework?’ “Parents have to manage this kind of homework every step of the way. This seems a peculiar method for helping children learn to take responsibility” (p. 127). Even if parents aren’t involved in homework, there is no evidence that homework teaches responsibility.

### **Homework Instills an Ethic of ‘Hard Work’ in Children**

Another value many parents want to instill is the value of hard work. “Thus, an effort to make children into hard workers by compelling them to work hard – to instill good work habits in them by sheer force or cleverness – reflects a stunning ignorance about how human beings function in the real world” (Kohn, 2006, p. 59). Cognitive

development and research studies demonstrate not all children are ready to handle the responsibility or work load at the same time. No one debates that children develop at different times physically, but what some people tend to forget is that children develop at different times cognitively. Buell (2005) discusses the neuropsychological and psychological studies that have been done on the amygdale in the brain (p. 19). Brain research (course notes, ECur 830) shows that the amygdale develops at different stages, thus moral reasoning and delay of gratification occur at different stages. “This recognition that moral reasoning goes through stages has implications for the homework debate” (Buell, 2005, p. 18). Is it then possible that all students are ready for the responsibility of homework assignments? Children still exhibit a sense of immortality and an inability to acknowledge distant risks. Therefore, Buell questions stiff homework assignments because many students have difficulty managing the skills needed to complete the assignment when the rewards will occur way down the road. In these cases, the parents may end up doing the work for their child because there may be an obvious reluctance towards the assigned tasks. How does the ethic of hard work become instilled in a child whose brain is not ready to understand the concept?

A common belief, even from former students I taught, is that when children work hard, they will achieve good marks. How does this belief hold true for those students who study more than anyone else for an exam and still receive one of the lower marks? “To the best of my knowledge, every study that has ever investigated how grades affect intrinsic motivation – the disposition to learn – has turned up bad news” (Buell, 2005, p.186). Developing a good work ethic involves being responsible, and the idea of giving out external rewards, such as grades as motivation, seems to defeat the purpose. “But if a

child's motivation is external rather than internal, homework isn't even fostering personal responsibility, which educators cite as one of its virtues" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 62). If the motivation is rewards such as money, parents' acceptance, or being on the top of the class chart, the child isn't developing their own sense of personal responsibility.

Thinking back to Kohn's question to parents about what they think is most important for their children to learn, and their emphasis on values such as hard work, responsibility and independence, the literature shows that "... homework will have no impact on these crucial qualities" (Kohn, 2006, p. 67). Once again, the value of homework is brought into question. Just as there is no indication homework improves academic achievement, neither is there research to support its role in the development of important values.

### **Why I Chose This Expedition: Studying Homework and Families**

Homework, previously defined as instigated by teachers or schools and received within the homes, has the potential of affecting students, parents and families positively or negatively. To date, there are many families who have experienced the demands of homework, both external and internal, within the context of their families. "Kralovec and Buell found homework often disrupts family life, [and] interferes with what parents want to teach their children" (in Goodman, 2007, p. 39). Even though families are experiencing these disruptions, parents' voices are nearly absent in the research. "[I]t is time for the study of parent involvement in homework to begin ..." (Cooper et al., 2006, p. 48). A public agenda survey in 1998 noted that one half of parents had had a serious argument with their children over homework. Another third reported that homework was a source of stress and struggle (Gifford & Gifford, 2004, p. 279). I know that with my

family, Jonah is not the one organizing the books that he brings home. It is me. Do I need a lesson in priorities and organizing? How does it make other parents feel?

I remember many times in my past, as a beginning teacher of grades six to nine, when I assigned homework daily and I expected it would be completed unless the child's guardian notified me otherwise. I even had 'homework helpers' that I hired in my class to help me get the work ready for those students who stayed home because they were sick. (As a parent, if my child is ill, the last thing I would expect him to do is school work.) If students were missing school because of a vacation, I sent work along. I was told by my sister, who is also a teacher, that I should be teaching Grade Eight because of my homework expectations. At the time, I smiled, as this was a great compliment. I thought to myself, "Me teaching Grade Eight? She must think that I am smart!" Kohn (2006) says the "... classrooms where there's currently a lot of homework are often the same classrooms where the homework isn't particularly worthwhile" (p. 172). Never once had I asked myself if the work I sent home was helping each student. I just assumed that it was. I am not proud. I can admit that Kohn was describing my classroom, especially the first few years that I began teaching.

From my review of the literature, I have learned there has been a definite increase in homework for students, and the expectations that parents, schools, teachers and society put on students could be taking a toll on the families themselves. As Bennett & Kalish (2007) say, "The current pile-it-on approach to homework is not the answer. In fact, it's counterproductive" (p. 4). Many children are not developmentally ready for the big homework push. "In an effort to push children academically, schools are pushing them

beyond what's developmentally appropriate in both their class work and homework” (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 152). Parents want to see their children succeed. But homework is assigned at what cost for the family? It is time that parents are brought into the conversation.

This study addresses the current knowledge gap in the literature of the experience of elementary years parents and families on the varying issues of homework. The significance of this narrative inquiry is that it creates a space for parents' voices to be heard. As Henry David Thoreau said, “It is not enough to be busy; so are the ants. The question is: What are we busy about?” (Cowhey, 2006, preface) It is time to hear parents' stories of homework and the impact it has for children, parents, and families. Parents' stories may enable teachers, administrators and policy makers to take a second look and gain new insights, new meaningful ways to understand and implement homework in their own programs.

Trying to understand how parents view homework is not new to me. I have been thinking about this ever since my sister told me I should be teaching Grade Eight instead of Grade Five. As I wrote about parents' stories of homework, I drew on the work I have been doing for the past 12 years as a teacher, and nine years as a parent. I let the stories other teachers and parents shared, sometimes when I was in my role as parent and, other times, when I was in my role as teacher, speak to me.

Once my literature review was underway, I spent time contacting other researchers. I was curious whether there were studies on homework done in Canada. Kohn (personal communication, May, 2007) responded quickly, after speaking to his publisher. He said that although he searched for this information as well, to date, he did

not know of studies done in Canada. My research has added to the literature on homework in two significant ways: it brought parents' voice to the discussion of homework and it provided research in a Canadian context. "It is time to take a new look at homework and move beyond debates on its effects on achievement. Homework is a clear case in which many aspects of society influence both process and outcome" (Corno, 2000, p. 2). Through my teacher lens, I knew some students may benefit from homework while others may not. Through my parent lens, I knew "... excessive homework can make students dislike learning and turn away from becoming life-long learners" (Goodman, 2007, p. 80). If it is our goal as educators to turn all of our students into life long learners, then we need to hear parents' stories so we can understand the impacts, positive and negative, homework has on children and their families. These insights will be invaluable to the future of education. "Insight, I believe, refers to that depth of understanding that comes by setting experiences, yours and mine, familiar and exotic, new and old, side by side, learning by letting them speak to one another" (Bateson, 1994, p. 14). By placing myself side by side with parents, having conversations about our children's experiences with homework, then reflecting on what it means as a teacher and a parent, I bring knowledge and awareness to an area that has not been studied before. Researching parents' stories of their lived experiences with homework helps to bring new voices and new knowledge to this topic.

### **Writing Narratively: Methodology**

I chose narrative inquiry for several reasons stemming from my past and from several sources. As a child of a single parent, time was limited. So, when it was story time, and I was able to crawl onto my mother's lap and listen to a story, it was precious,

uninterrupted time. I remembered traveling to see our extended family during holidays and summer vacation. My fondest memories were sitting around the kitchen table and listening to everyone tell stories of their pasts, presents, and futures. But the most important narratives that I still hold close to my heart were those told to me by my grandmother, on my father's side. She told me stories about my father; stories of his youth, friendship, dating, school and careers. But mostly, she told stories about my sister and me, with our father. You see, my father died when I was six years old, and I never really got to 'know' him. My only passage to my father was through my grandmother and the stories she told.

As a teacher, I shared my enthusiasm for stories with my students by reading aloud, verbalizing stories and writing stories. We planned on how we could make our stories better by looking at different writing techniques. We sat in circles with a story rock and made up funny stories, sad stories; human stories. My personal family stories and my professional stories have both helped to shape the landscapes from which I wrote. I wrote from a temporal position in which all of my stories helped to form my future. Both landscapes were intertwined as my personal stories blended into my professional life. They had to. It was my story, my narrative.

As a researcher, I was interested in the experiential knowledge of parents – the “personal, practical knowledge” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995) of my participants garnered through their lived experiences with homework alongside their children and families. Parents' personal knowledge arises from all of their life experiences – past and present; individual, social and traditional; from their particular context (what they have read, where they have been, who they have interacted with). The parents' practical

knowledge of homework arises from their interactions with their children and as a family, from the “circumstances, practices, and undergoings [with homework] that themselves had affective content for them” (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995, p. 7). Personal, practical knowledge is experiential knowledge; it is knowledge which is educative for “self and others” (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, xxvi). As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) state, “...reaching across autobiographically storied boundaries is possible, perhaps even necessary, for the creation of narrative insight” (p. 66). The participants and I carried our stories on this journey, we shared our stories, we respected each others’ stories, and we learned from the stories. It is our personal, practical knowledge, embedded in these stories that I pulled forward as a researcher.

Clandinin & Connelly (2000) tell of the experiences of both participants and researcher when they write, “In narrative inquiry, it is impossible (or if not impossible, then deliberately self-deceptive) as researcher to stay silent or to present a kind of perfect, idealized, inquiring, moralizing self” (p. 62). While traveling, I used my lenses of parent, teacher, and researcher. My lenses slid together and apart throughout my journey, enabling me to shift, blend and story the positions. I put on many different lenses to tell of different experiences, those of the three participants in this narrative inquiry, as well as my own as mother, teacher, and researcher, to capture various stories of homework. Therefore, I have stories from the researcher and stories from the participants, clusters of narratives that inevitably converge and diverge throughout my writing.

The methods of a narrative inquirer are not rigidly formalized. I was aware, through my readings on narrative inquiry, of the need to stay “wakeful, and thoughtful, about all of [my] inquiry decisions” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 184). By

negotiating relationships with the participants, developing field texts, considering new questions or wonders, looking at the advantages and disadvantages of homework in both particular and global ways, I knew my writing would lead me and my readers to a space filled with discoveries as well as more questions. As a narrative inquirer who lived closely with my participants, shared my own personal stories from past to present, and reflected on the emerging tensions and threads throughout my field texts, my goal was not to surmise definitive answers to my questions, but to find within the narratives of experience "...glowing embers with a potential to light fires of imagination and understanding" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.179).

The stories shared by my participants and myself incorporate Clandinin and Connelly's (2000) dimensions that are part of the three dimensional narrative inquiry space (p. 50). Narrative inquiry enabled me to attend to the dimensions of interaction (the personal and the social), temporality (past, present and future) and situation (place) which are alive within lived stories and conversations. The interactional dimension involves the development of relationships I have lived, and it ranges from listening to stories about my father with my grandmother, reading stories with my mother, having conversations with my colleagues and friends, to the taped research conversations with parents. In this research, I continued to share my experiences and my personal and professional stories with the three participants. As I listened to their stories, and as I shared my own stories, we tried to make sense of the topic of homework, from past to present. "Narrative inquiry is a relational inquiry in its truest sense" (Caine, 2002, p. 33). The relationships in my narrative inquiry were with three parents with whom I have a history and who, in the past, expressed an interest in inquiring into homework policies and practices.

During my years of teaching, I had the opportunity to relate to parents on many different levels. I attended parent council and community events, as well as cheered students on outside of school hours at their extra curricular activities. It was during these times I was had conversations with parents that were based on more than school and teaching. The relationships I developed enabled me to interact on a different, more personal level and they also enabled me to discuss my plans for pursuing my master's degree. When I told parents of the topic I was interested in studying, some of them exhibited a keen interest and desire to be included. Later, when I was moving schools, I asked these parents, if it would be okay to contact them in the future if I, indeed, decided to go ahead with my graduate schooling. These same parents were invited to be participants in this study because they are parents who are interested in the topic of homework.

The interactional dimension involves the personal as well as the social. It involves moving from the outward social space to the inward personal space of thoughts, feelings, and reflections. The individual space is a space of sense-making. It is where I thought about the stories my participants shared with me, where I pulled forward stories of my own in response, where I analyzed all of our stories for common threads and for tensions, where I made connections between and among our experiences and with the literature in the field. The personal took me backward in time to my childhood, and to earlier years as a teacher and a parent. It kept me situated in my current research, and it took me to a future of imagined possibilities, as a teacher and a parent. The personal moved me from place to place – my childhood home, my classroom, and to my current home with Matt, Jonah and Elijah. As a narrative inquirer, I am an individual with my own stories to tell,

and I am a person who is always in relations with others. I continually traverse between the social and personal facets of the interactional dimension (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000, p. 2). Clandinin and Connelly (2000) share that while we "...compose our narrative beginnings, we also work within the three-dimensional narrative inquiry space, telling stories of our past that frame our present standpoints, moving back and forth from the personal to the social, and situating it all in place" (p. 70).

The temporality dimension, the backward and forward, is the central feature of narrative inquiry. For each of us, our current positioning "... has a past, a present as it appears to us, and an implied future" (p. 29). The temporality of my experience comes to fruition through the teaching, parental, and lived experiences from my past combined with the practical and academic knowledge I have pursued. From asking students to pick their priorities when I began teaching, to experiencing my son's dislike of homework and reading, my stories have shaped who I am as a researcher and my interest in the research puzzle I chose to pursue. While sitting in the coffee shop with Rachelle or Janelle, sitting in Selina's office, or sitting alone in my office at home, I was able to travel backwards and forwards. Whether we were sharing stories of our pasts, recalling conversations or stories of the present, rethinking stories of the future, or rereading field texts, we traveled along a continuum. "We are therefore not only concerned with life as it is experienced in the here and now but also with life as it is experienced on a continuum..." (p.19). We all have storied pasts, a storied present and an imagined future.

Although situated in one place at any one time, I actually moved to many places through conversations, memories and various field texts. While with the parents out for coffee, with my sons at home, or in my office with my field text, I located myself in other

places – places of my childhood, schools and classrooms I have taught in, and in the places the parents’ stories took me. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) added, “... to experience an experience – that is, to do research into an experience – is to experience it simultaneously in these four ways and to ask questions pointing each way” (p. 50). With each new direction – the movement inward and outward, backward and forward – and with each new experience, I developed more insights, connections, and questions. All of the dimensions had a purpose within my narrative inquiry.

As a researcher, a mother and a teacher, I encompass many layers. These layers helped to provide me with a clearer lens in which to view the lived stories. Narrative inquirers “... make themselves as aware as possible of the many, layered narratives at work in their inquiry space. They imagine narrative intersections, and they anticipate possible narrative threads emerging” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 70). The broader picture developed by working with participants on a personal level and by viewing the landscapes with each lens separately and then overlapping them to help construct my experiential narrative journey on many different levels. “We live immersed in narrative, recounting and reassessing the meanings of our past actions, anticipating the outcomes of our future projects, situating ourselves at the intersection of several stories not yet completed” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 160). As my journey continued, I lived my experiences alongside my participants. I not only lived the experiences but I told and retold stories of these experiences in order to imagine living future stories of homework in new ways.

## **Discovering the ‘Roads Less Traveled’**

I must admit that at first, I was frightened to travel because change can be difficult, but the innate desire to discover untraveled roads lied in my search for positive change in education. Hutchison (2006) described how our lives change and how we can become better people because of that change. I was searching for new meaning alongside parents, which meant I was not alone. Therefore, as a parent and a teacher, I traveled onward. I put on a researcher’s lens as I pursued questions about homework, toward my own self discovery, my own personal legend. I was excited about my pursuit because it was personal to me and included my own children as well as my chosen profession. My mind and heart were vested in this process.

Chapter 2 reveals how I did my research, who my participants were, and how I made meaning of the stories they shared about homework and their families. The analysis of our conversations led me down new paths which I disclosed throughout my writing with honesty, humility and determination. As a teacher, a parent, and a researcher I, “... came at this Journey from opposite directions. [I met parents] somewhere in the middle and [chose] to walk forward side by side. It is simply the best [I] could do. And for that I am very proud” (Hutchison, 2006, p. 248).

## Chapter 2

### Field Text, Research, and Wonders

*“Nothing can exist outside the context of a relationship. Everything you do, therefore, is an exercise in relationship. . . . When you read these words you are practicing a relationship with the meaning stored in them through written language—the archive of humanity’s journey through time.”*

Griffin-Weisner & Maser

Throughout my research, I engaged in a collaborative process with three parent participants. The overarching research puzzle framing this study was to understand how homework was experienced by parents and children from the parents’ viewpoint, and what the impact of these experiences was for those families. It is from these stories that parents, teachers and other researchers will begin to see new possibilities for rethinking current homework policies and practices. Parents, in the context of their families, are the focus of this inquiry. I provided them with invitational statements to consider before the conversations to offer them time to frame and to think about their stories. These conversations provided me with an opportunity to hear the parents tell stories of themselves and their experiences with homework, stories of the dynamic and complex interactions with their children around homework, stories of their children’s homework, and of other related events and experiences impacted by homework.

#### How I Came to This Place

During my research, I needed to consider how I would analyze and interpret the field text I obtained. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to field texts as records a narrative inquirer keeps on their experiences during the inquiry process (p. 89). These field texts once combined and reread, provide ‘data’ that is open for interpretation. As a researcher choosing narrative inquiry, I knew that my own autobiography, including stories of my experiences with homework as a teacher and with my own children, was

essential. I kept several forms of field texts to navigate through my narrative beginnings (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.70) and my present sense of where the participants and I stood on the topic of homework and families. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) list a multitude of field texts throughout their book *Narrative Inquiry*. From a variety of personal journals, teacher stories, letters, research conversations, family stories, documents, photographs, narrative maps to other life experiences, field texts can be any data that helps to form the final research text (p. 93). I used as many field texts as I could.

Making note of my narrative beginnings began with journaling because journals are one way of creating field texts. I kept three journals – a personal journal, a field note journal and a reflective journal – which all became part of my field texts. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) reminded me that “... [c]omposing field texts means being alert to what one’s participants do and say as part of their ongoing experience, and it means keeping records on how they are experiencing the experience of being in the inquiry” (p. 88). My personal journal provided the opportunity to record my inward thoughts, ideas, and assumptions throughout the research process (Shields & Devin, in Caine, 2002, p. 49). I started the journal when my son, Jonah, began Grade One. The journal, traveling backwards, provided another dimension to the field text, foregrounding my parent and teacher stories (Kirby & McKenna, in Caine, 2002, p. 49).

The field note journal included outward accounts of work in the field where I made jot notes of the environment where the conversations took place. I also noted key stories and wrote down narrative expressions (p. 79) such as participants’ actions, and other happenings around us. These field notes served as a permanent record of my field working process, and became part of my research portfolio. Clandinin & Connelly (2000)

define field notes as "... ongoing, daily notes, full of the details and moments of our inquiry lives in the field, [and] are the text out of which we can tell stories of our story of experience" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 104).

The reflective journal moved backwards and forwards throughout the writing process as it was used to document analytical and interpretive accounts. My analysis served to examine all of the field texts for meaningful themes, issues or patterns. It was important for me, as a researcher, to use inductive thinking to generate the themes, categories and theoretical positioning to further my thesis work. The importance of field texts is noted by Clandinin & Connelly because "... using fieldtexts [helps to] fill in broad historical outlines constructed through memory...In narrative inquiry, our field texts are always interpretive, always composed by an individual at a certain moment in time" (p. 84). While I met with the participants, and once I came home from our meetings, I reconstructed the experiences and interpreted what I thought they meant.

As my research progressed, I spent many hours re-analyzing the field texts with new insights and new narrative threads. I collected field texts and looked for key themes, then went on to collect more field texts through later conversations to develop deeper understandings of these themes (p. 73). I highlighted the emerging threads and mapped these themes on large bristle board paper. Each thread was color coded and as I reread the field texts, I matched the texts with the themes on the chart. As the conversations unfolded, new questions arose, and time was spent on reviewing the puzzle pieces, reshaping them to fit into a picture that made sense for the participants and me. "Narrative inquiry, from this point of view, is one of trying to make sense of life as lived" (p. 78). By continually turning back to my field notes, I was able to step back from my personal relationship

with the participants as a narrative inquirer. I drew roads converging and diverging, roads running parallel and intersecting, and roads that reached a dead end. The maps I drew changed several times, as different threads emerged. As a researcher rereading, redrawing, and moving in and out of the storied experiences, I was able to foreground threads that spoke strongly.

The meaning and social significance I derived from my field texts helped to form my thesis as a researcher, but as a narrative inquirer, I needed the collaboration of my participants.

We learn that we, too, needed to tell our stories. Scribes we were not; story tellers and story lovers we were. And in our story telling, the stories of our participants merged with our own to create new stories, ones that have been labeled collaborative stories. The thing finally written on paper (or, perhaps on film, tape, or canvas), the research paper or book, is a collaborative document; a mutually constructed story created out of the lives of both researcher and participant.

(Connelly & Clandinin, in Caine, 2002, p. 12)

By traveling alongside my participants, I was able to slow down and re-examine the connecting threads that traveled inside, outside, and beside each of their lives.

### **Meeting the Participants**

Traveling alongside my participants, with my own roles as parent, teacher and researcher, I needed to adjust and shift my lenses so I could place myself within the participants' shoes. This required a special kind of vision and empathy as well as the essential need to record thoughts, feelings, actions and insights. In my reflective journal, I chronicled descriptions of the objects I saw, the sounds I heard, the people I met,

interesting things those people said, and I collected memorabilia to record my excursions in their entirety. I didn't want to miss a thing! Each participant or destination I came to had a history I needed to include, for without history as a starting point, I would wander aimlessly into the future. The participants and I traveled with a purpose in mind; the formation of new relationships, the discovery of new information, and the willingness to share our knowledge about how homework affects our families.

As a narrative inquirer I chose to have conversations *with* parents rather than interviews *of* parents because true narrative inquiry is built on the establishment of relationships through trust, care and respectful listening. "Conversation entails listening. The listener's response may constitute a probe into experience that takes the representation of experience far beyond what is possible in an interview" (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p.109). I felt that interviews were too structured and did not allow for following new and interesting paths of knowledge, and thus, could have limited my research. I met with each of the participants two separate times for three to four hours each time. Regular contact was maintained after the meetings through e-mail correspondence. By having conversations, I was able to immerse myself in the moment with the participants and then puzzle over the field texts to discover underlying themes relating to homework instead of following scripted questions in the order they were written.

### ***Getting to Know Rachelle***

My first destination was a meeting with Rachelle, a married woman nearing the midpoint of her life, and mother of two children. I have known Rachelle and her husband, Andre, for about four years, starting when their first child, Channel, entered my Grade 5

classroom. Two years later, I also taught their son, Thomas. I had asked both Rachelle and Andre if they would like to meet me to discuss homework within their family, knowing that Andre played an important role as well. Rachelle was first to respond, and thus, my willing participant. My relationship with this family started because I was their children's teacher, but throughout the years, through several interactions at school events, and now, after several conversations, I have collected a clearer picture of how Rachelle really feels about homework; a clearer view of the history of this destination.

Rachelle and Andre, parents of Channel and Thomas, both work full time in the city. Their family lives in a comfortable home in an above average income area. Even though Rachelle and Andre live in an upper middle class area, they have both made choices in their lives that demonstrate their quality of life is not dependent on material things, but is dependent on the moments they share as a family. "Our kids aren't out there in terms of friends and activities. We spend more time together as a family than I would say they do out there with friends or activities"<sup>2</sup> (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). They have made choices with their careers that enable them to be home shortly after their children arrive home from school because, "... when Andre's had jobs in the past where he's worked till eight o'clock at night, or he's gone for three days at a time, that really affects the kids, really affects the kids. They don't like that; they want him home every day at five o'clock and he makes every effort to be there" (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

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<sup>2</sup> Dissonances such as "um," "er," "uh," and repetitions have been removed from the participants' phrasing to allow for more fluency. The meaning behind their words has not been modified in any way, and has been checked by the participants themselves.

### *Shared Stories with Rachelle*

It was just after dinner time on a snowy and cool Thursday evening when I was sitting with Rachelle at a local coffee shop. We chose a spot by the frosted window at the end of the café so we could enjoy some privacy while we sipped our coffees and talked about how long it had been since we had seen one another. I could feel the chill from the window creeping into my bones, so I grabbed my cup and warmed it between my hands. Once we were settled and comfortable, I inquired about her children, Channel and Thomas. They were both doing fine.

After exchanging some pleasantries, I asked Rachelle how she felt about homework. Her blunt response, “I like it,” surprised me. I couldn’t withhold my disbelief; it was obvious to her she gave me an answer I was not expecting. The chill I felt from the window came crawling back into my chest. What I thought I would be writing about in my thesis had suddenly and briskly changed. My family had not had great experiences with homework, and I assumed she would say the same. From that point on, I needed to respectfully observe that our conversation was about to hit a bump in the road. As a narrative researcher, I needed to be aware of where I was and where Rachelle was in relation to our separate experiences with homework. In order to learn more about how Rachelle was thinking, I decided to venture down a new path. So, I asked her, “Have there been years where there has been more homework than other years?” Rachelle referred to a year in which Channel had very little homework and she was not impressed. “She had very little homework... challenged very little, and yet had straight

As, straight 4s<sup>3</sup>... and I know my daughter is not a straight 4 student and that really bothered me” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). She continued, “I would rather my kid be challenged and made to do the work she deserves to do, including the homework. I see nothing wrong with homework.” I was curious what would happen if her children were placed in a classroom with a teacher who didn’t assign homework. “We would still make our kids do homework,” was her reply. Rachelle’s endorsement of homework, a bump on the road, permitted me to pursue a new line of inquiry sooner than expected; it enabled me to explore the value parents see in homework.

As the evening went on and the cool air could be felt through the window panes, Rachelle and I warmed ourselves by sipping our coffee. I felt a bit of unease as she shifted in her seat, and began to tell me about some of her family’s history. I leaned forward to make sure I could hear every word, because, when someone is sharing a part of their history, they are sharing a part of themselves. There is some unwritten belief that the ‘teller’ of the information has trust and confidence in the ‘receiver’ of the information. I had no intention of letting her down. There was much change in Andre’s family throughout his childhood. Rachelle’s parents were busy establishing and running a business of their own which took a great deal of their time and energy.

Right... and I think that goes back to my childhood, and Andre’s childhood where he didn’t have a lot of that [attention to school work], right? You always try to overcompensate for past situations and I think maybe that’s where we’re making sure that the kids know it’s important to do the homework tonight... because then you’re done, and tomorrow you can play. (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

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<sup>3</sup> In this school division, the report card rating scale is 1-4, with 1 being ‘not achieving at grade level,’ to a 4 which is ‘exceeding present grade level.’

Rachelle continued to share some of her and Andre's personal background information from when they were children. Both Rachelle and her husband have been working to ensure their children do not go through the same experiences they did, where priorities were not placed on education. They have also chosen to be very involved parents in their children's schooling. Rachelle and Andre want to make sure both Channel and Thomas have many choices in life, and choices mean working hard and being pushed to do their absolute best. Rachelle believes homework will certainly help her children develop the higher standards needed for a better future.

I didn't think Rachelle would surprise me two times in one evening but, when I asked her if she would give homework to her children on her own, she told me that even if the teachers did not assign homework, she would still find some homework to give.

When I asked her why, she replied thoughtfully,

Why do we make our kids do homework? To complete it. To make sure it's done and have them accountable. It's the desire to succeed. ... You don't want them at the bottom of the pack. ... I guess I don't want my kids to feel failure, so if the teacher didn't give homework, we would still make our kids do homework.

(taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

Although Rachelle has a solid job, she gave the impression that, had she been 'pushed' when she went to school, she could have chosen a different career path. She wants her children to have more choices than she had. Her past has been a crucial part of who she is as a parent of children with homework.

Rachelle believes she and Andre share a common bond in their parenting decisions. Their past experiences as children in their own families, 'work at home,' and parental involvement have influenced the decisions they make within their family today. This was evident when Rachelle said, "... our parents never pushed us and again you always want to do better. That's why I feel the need to push [our] kids and show them that it is important for them to strive to do their best" (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). When I brought to attention that Rachelle was using the word 'push' quite often, she explained what she meant further. Because their past is clearly influential, both Rachelle and Andre made decisions that enabled them to spend a great deal of quality family time with their children. As far as other recreational activities, Rachelle and Andre have kept them to a minimum. "Our life is probably a little bit saner than a lot of other lives and their families" (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). Spending time together doing homework was and continues to be the priority in their lives.

Did I get a clearer picture of Rachelle's perspectives on homework and on how homework plays out in her family? Interestingly enough, what Rachelle shared with me about her morals, values and beliefs as far as raising her children did not surprise me, given the contact I have had with her over the years. However, what she had to say about homework certainly did! Her idea of 'liking' homework was opposite to what I was expecting, given the reading I had done in the literature and my own personal experiences with homework. When I began writing down thesis ideas, my family was having difficulties with the homework being sent home, and I wondered if other families would feel the same as I did. Rachelle, within the first 10 seconds of our conversation, and after listening to her rationale, enabled me to look at homework differently. I no longer saw

homework as something to ‘get over with’ or ‘a family disruption.’ Rachelle opened my eyes to the differences within families and their experiences with homework.

### *Getting to Know Janelle*

My second destination was a meeting with Janelle, a married mother of two boys, Max and Harold, who both attended the same school until Max started high school a year ago. Janelle’s husband, Joe, worked long hours and Janelle wanted to be at home whenever her kids arrived from school, so she chose to work part time. Now that Janelle’s children are older, she has decided, at this mid-point of her life, that it is time to go back to work full time, which has been an adjustment. Their family lives in an upper-average income area of a city, close to the schools her children attend. This is important for Janelle because she has a sincere commitment to community, to giving something back. “I think that’s good, kids need to learn about community, about volunteerism. We’ve lost that; we’ve really lost that in our society” (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Living close to the school, volunteering at the school, and being an active parent for her children are all central to her sense of community.

I first met Janelle when I taught her oldest son, again, while teaching Grade 5. I saw Janelle many times throughout the year, as she was actively involved within the school and the classrooms; from being on parent council, to helping with school events, to attending most of the field trips, Janelle’s presence was common.

Both Janelle and Joe have their boys in several out of school or extra curricular activities. Joe has been involved with coaching, and Janelle has been the coordinator of fund raising and community events. Janelle’s involvement within her children’s lives is a crucial part of who she is as a parent. “I do feel like I am usually sitting down there

making sure either checking that they're doing the work right...or making sure they're getting it done" (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). The responsibility of homework has fallen into her lap, as the parent who chose to work at home.

### *Shared Stories with Janelle*

Spring was supposed to have 'sprung' but on this April night, the wind was cold and blowing the north air in circles around the buildings. Janelle was meeting me to share some of her thoughts, but somehow, we got the times mixed up. When I finally arrived, (somewhat late), she looked relaxed, was flipping through a magazine, and seemed to be enjoying the laid-back atmosphere. When I asked Janelle her personal views on homework, she responded, "It's good in the middle years" (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). This didn't shock me because after my conversation with Rachelle, I came prepared!

We focused our discussions on her reasons homework is valued at this age. "I think there's a place for homework. The kids have to learn the process of it down the road" (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). By process, she was referring to the skills acquired when completing the homework assignments. Instilling a sense of responsibility now and into the future was Janelle's main motivator for being partial to homework. "If they've been given specific instructions on what it is that they're supposed to do...then they have to be accountable for that." The snapshot I had of Janelle had clearly expanded. She is someone who believes in the teaching of values and morals, as well as the responsibility that goes along with being positive members of society.

Janelle, who worked part time hours so she could be at home with her children, felt it was her 'job' to help her children with homework. She sees value within that

traditional role. She remembers doing homework herself. Janelle had never thought of questioning homework because in her past, when "... [she] grew up, [she] didn't question teachers, [she] didn't question principals" (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). That's just the way it was. By the time Janelle and I had finished our coffee, I knew that she accepted homework in the younger years and saw value in it once her children were in middle school. Visiting with Janelle caused me to rethink how our past experiences with school and homework affect the current decisions we make with our own children. Are our past experiences with homework still relevant today?

### ***Getting to Know Selina***

The third destination was a visit with Selina, a single mother of one child, a son named Ozzy, who has just completed Grade 8. I met Selina over one year ago through my sister. Selina, who works out of her one story home, and who has her own counseling business, discusses the topic of homework and how it has affected her family in an open and honest way. Certainly, Selina's experiences are different. She put herself through school during the lowlights of Ozzy's education. At a time when Ozzy was struggling the most, at a time when Selina was trying to change her own direction in life, Selina encountered many homework issues.

Selina and Ozzy live in a bungalow in a middle class area of a city. Selina often talked of her home, and all of the remodeling that it 'needs.' But this is not an easy task when she is a single mother, a one income family, and sometimes, just winding down at the end of a very long day, is all the time she has for herself. Renovations have to wait.

### *Shared Stories with Selina*

The location where Selina and I met was different from the other participants, so I decided to pick up the coffee along the way. Selina had just moved into her new office building and was excited to show it to me. Once I had figured my way through the maze of hallways, I came to Selina, with coffee in hand, to discuss her parental voice on the topic of homework. Her office was comfortable with a sprawling couch that I quickly situated myself on. Selina sat across from me and, as we started our conversation on homework, I was expecting much of the same. This time ... at this destination ... on this evening ... in this new office building ... still with coffee in hand, it *was* different and it *was* the same. I was excited in this new terrain where both the positives and challenges of homework came to the forefront through Selina's stories. I became disoriented when the smooth path I traveled on became bumpy with stories of the challenges homework posed for Selina and her family. While I knew Selina was eager to share her stories of concern about homework, I wanted to inquire as to whether she saw some value in homework, before I headed down that uneven path. Although we veered away from the negative experiences, I knew it was a conversation I wanted to embark upon at a later time.

Through a second business at home, I was introduced to a woman who I characterize as strong. Selina has raised a son who has had academic difficulties, on her own, without Ozzy's father's help. She is strong because only recently did they discover why her son, Ozzy, struggled so much with the subjects at school, even though he flourished socially. Ozzy has persevered and is now looking towards his future in high school, while Selina has decided to prioritize and let some things go. "I have to focus my

energies on Ozzy and what is right for him and I can't really spend a lot of time worrying about the community and the school and the policies and that because I have to focus on what works for my child and that's a twenty four seven job" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

Selina refers to the struggles she had at school while she was growing up, including the pressures she felt to work extra hard to succeed academically. She wanted to ensure Ozzy didn't go through the same pressures. Instead of assigning and completing homework regularly, she has chosen a different route. "Sometimes I didn't make him do homework at all because he was so stressed and even the topic of homework freaked him out" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Selina's plan of limiting homework contrasts Rachelle's strategy of assigning more homework.

The image I gained of Selina is of a woman who is open to sharing her thoughts and opinions about what homework has meant to her and her family and where she hopes homework will take Ozzy in the future. Our conversations together were influential in having me look deeper at what homework means for families as well as teachers. Talking with Selina provided me with an expanded portrait of her position as a single parent.

### **Profound Effects of the Past**

Choosing to follow, or not follow, their own family's traditions was the basis for all of the parents' decisions on homework. We can determine that, according to Dewey (1938), most people would do the same.

Just as the individual has to draw in memory upon his own past to understand the conditions in which he individually finds himself, so the issues and problems of present *social* life are in such intimate and direct connection with the past that

students cannot be prepared to understand either these problems or the best way of dealing with them without delving into their roots in the past. (Dewey, 1938, p. 77)

All of my participants agreed their pasts had profound effects on how they have raised their children in relation to homework. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) refer to reaching into stories of the past as ‘narrative threads’ (p. 77). These threads, sometimes tender, pass through each of the participants, through each of their homes and are strongly bound.

Along my journey as a researcher, I realized the participants and I shared common threads. We all have children who have experienced homework, we all have questions and answers about homework to unearth, and we all made discoveries along the way. As the parents and I journeyed together, the experiences shared and the insights provided helped us to consider what the researchers say and what we believe it means for our families. I knew that it was important for me to “... [I]earn, but always learn with other people by [my] side. Don’t be alone in the search, because if [I] took a wrong step, [I’d] have no one there to help put [me] right” (Coelho, 1993, p. 122). As our conversations gained momentum, our understandings of what we believed about homework were challenged. Sometimes we experienced sudden jerks, which caused us to change our topics; smooth rolling hillsides, when we slowed down and spent quality time talking; fast and marvelous mountain slopes, when we got excited because we had experienced something similar; and once in awhile, there were bumps that sent us onto new and purposeful stories. Most importantly, we always got right back on track and continued our expedition. It was an eventful trip!

### **Analytic Considerations**

As I finished the last booked conversation with the participants, I moved from my field texts to my research texts. I felt like I was taking steps backwards as I removed myself from the close contact of the participants and delved into rereading and composing research texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 129). I was no longer living the stories as I shifted to retelling them. I began to search for meaning and social significance as I sorted through the myriad papers and documents, thankful that I had been thorough with coding and dates. As I discovered stories that weaved together and connected, I took note. When I came across gaps, tensions or discontinuities, I also took note. With all this in mind, I created a large visual map with roads linking, diverging and intersecting to create a detailed diagram of my journey while focusing on new meaning and significance of homework in relation to families. I cannot count how many times I have redrawn my visual road map, as I continued to return to my field texts whenever a new road was discovered.

### **Ethical Relationships**

Instead of moving my lens into the classrooms and traveling to familiar places, I took a glimpse into uncharted territory – into the homes and lives of the families from the parents’ perspective. My journey enabled me to visit three parents: Rachelle, Janelle and Selina. All three parents provided me with insights that, as a teacher, I had not previously acquired. The relationships I developed with the participants enabled me to provide a relationship with the words I have written on the following pages. My narrative is relational and has been exposed in writing our stories, throughout my journey from past to present.

I realized as a researcher, that when I asked the participants to spend time with me sharing their stories of homework and its impact on their families, I was asking for a gift of their time. The participants in this study were willing to open up their lives and I wanted to acknowledge this. When meeting with participants, I demonstrated reciprocity by offering to pick them up to travel together to our meeting place, and to provide or pay for coffee and snacks. Clandinin & Connelly (2000) say that as narrative inquirers "... we share our writing on a work-in-progress basis with response communities" (p.60). In between meetings, the participants became my response community. I brought and sent copies of our transcripts as well as my interim writing and asked for their input. I invited the participants to share their honest comments about the writing and we discussed their perceptions and interpretations. After further conversations, I clarified and rewrote the pieces we had discussed. We were in continual contact throughout the entire writing process and still continue to e-mail each other today, with plans of future connections. When the relational conversations based around the topic of homework were completed, I purchased a gift certificate to show my appreciation for the time the participants gave, as well as provided them with a copy of my completed thesis. It has always been part of who I am to believe that 'what goes around comes around.' Because of this belief, I ensured my participants felt valued and appreciated at all times.

### **Next Stop on Our Journey Together**

In Chapter 3, I share the parents' stories of how homework has affected their families, whether positively, negatively or both. I included the voices of the parents I had conversations with, to discuss the "... different interpretations of the purposes and requirements of homework" (Corno, 2000, p. 7). All of the participants raised both non-

academic benefits of homework as well as tensions that have occurred for them and their children. I continued my journey by asking the parents what they expected their children to learn from homework assignments. What did these parents believe about homework and what brought them to this knowledge? What do the studies show?

The following chapters provide a forum for the parents' voices to be heard, without constraint or fear of being judged. These are the voices other researchers are asking about. "I believe that parents have been increasingly denied input into their children's development in ways that go beyond questions of access to school bureaucracies" (Buell, 2004, p. 131). It is time to provide access to these uncharted voices of the parents. The voices of the parents bring an important perspective that hasn't been represented well or valued, for it is the parents who are most knowledgeable when it comes to their homes and their children. Just as Dewey links experience and education (1938), we want to use the experiences of parents to make better and more informed decisions about homework policies and practices. "Every experience is a moving force. Its value can be judged only on the ground of what it moves toward and into" (Dewey, 1938, p. 38). The parents brought insight into the possible and actual negative outcomes of homework; all stories did differ, some stories had conflict, and each story could be seen from my multiple vantage points as I put on my researcher's lens.

## Chapter 3

### Benefits and Disadvantages of Homework

*"There are only two lasting bequests we can hope to give our children.*

*One is roots; the other, wings."*

Hodding Carter

What do parents want from homework? Are they getting what they want?

Students are bringing home homework that ranges from work not completed during class time to weekly Spelling tests, Math review sheets, home-based projects, as well as a variety of other short and long term assignments. While the kinds of homework being assigned varies, so does the individual student, yet homework is rarely differentiated based on each student's abilities or needs. The time it takes to complete homework assignments varies also. Depending on a child's academic strengths or weaknesses, homework can become a job for the parents as some students are less capable of completing it on their own. The support some parents give, in order for their child to feel successful with homework, can be a strain on the family dynamic. The benefits and disadvantages of homework, then, are specific to each family and to each homework context.

For some families in this narrative inquiry, homework has been allotted a set time each day, and for others, homework gets fit into their busy schedules between the child's and parents' extra curricular activities, parent work schedules and basic family priorities, such as grocery shopping or caring for extended family members. Do parents want to set this time aside for homework? Does it add extra stress on them or other members of the family? How do they handle the stress?

I have read a great deal of literature on the topic of homework. While definitions of homework, provided in Chapter 2, summarize the essence of homework as being enacted by schools and teachers, Cooper et al. (2006) go further to list the instructional and non-instructional homework benefits homework has for both students and parents. Instructional benefits range from providing practice and review, prep assignments, introduction of new assignments, and extension homework to the transfer of learned skills and the integration of other learned skills and concepts. The non-instructional benefits listed by Cooper et al. are the establishment of better communication between the parent and child, the fulfillment of directives from school administrators and the linking of information between the parent and the school.

I began with the basic definition of homework and, from there, I read and re-read the work of researchers such as Harris Cooper (2001), Cooper et al. (2006), Erika Patall et al. (2006), and Lyn Corno (2000) to determine who the advocates of homework are and why. I didn't have to read far to find opponents of homework. Alfie Kohn (2006), Sarah Bennett and Nancy Kalish (2007), as well as John Buell (2004, 2005) and Etta Kralovec and Buell (2000) have all recently completed books which make visible the disadvantages of homework. I was fascinated to discover there are common threads in all of the writing that bind both supporters and detractors: the history of homework, achievement results, and areas most neglected within the research. Many researchers are asking the same questions about these neglected aspects of homework: Does homework instill character building traits? Is homework helpful to students and families in non-academic ways?

In this chapter, I examine the impact of homework on my three participants' families from their points of view. It was important for me to bring the parents' voices to the literature. As a researcher, while spending time with the parents, I couldn't limit my roles to separate contexts; instead I used my peripheral vision (Bateson, 1994) with my roles as parent, teacher and researcher to ensure that together, the parents and I could clarify what homework means from a parents' perspective. Although Bateson made a statement about women, when I substituted women for parents, I found that Bateson's words informed my attention to homework as parent, teacher and researcher.

[Parents] must be one thing to one person and another to another, and must see themselves through multiple eyes and in terms of different roles. [Parents] have had to learn to be attentive to multiple demands, to tolerate frequent interruptions, and to think about more than one thing at a time. This is a pattern of attention that leads to a kind of peripheral vision which, if you limit roles to separate contexts, you may not have. Sometimes this multiplicity can be confusing and painful, but it can also become a source of insight. (Bateson, 1994, p. 97)

The confusing and painful part of my journey was when I looked into my past mistakes as a teacher and as a parent, but the insights I gained from those experiences as well as from the experiences of my participants, led me to clearer landscapes.

### **Rachelle's Stories about Homework**

When Rachelle and I discussed how her children do their homework, she told me that after dinner, while she is washing the dishes, Channel and Thomas sit at the kitchen table with their father, Andre, who is their first source for homework assistance. Rachelle admitted she does do homework with her children when the extra help is needed, but

Andre takes on the initial role while Rachelle cleans up the kitchen. “Well, it’s interesting because when I do homework with the kids, I’m pretty cognizant of the time and I want it done NOW. Whereas, with Andre, he’s a little easier on them, and he tends to talk more, and they tend to want to do homework with him because... I think he’s easier on them” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Rachelle raised questions for me. She made me wonder... what happens when parents do not have the patience or the time to assist their children? What happens if it is a single parent family, like Selina’s, or if the parent works more than one job and has no extra time at the end of the day?

Rachelle also talked about the fact that even though both kids are accountable and conscientious there are significant differences between her two children in relation to the work they are asked to complete at home. “Thomas has got a whole different set of issues than Channel” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). She continued:

Channel is very responsible and she will do the work, and make sure it is done. If she doesn’t understand it, she will get one of us to help. Where Thomas is very needy. If we can sit there beside him, he will do the homework like crazy, but the minute we back off, he just slacks off. We have two totally different kids.

Channel and Thomas tackle homework differently, and Rachelle knows when it comes time to sit down with her kids to do homework, she must respect their individuality. “You can’t teach every child the same in my opinion. Your expectations have to be different because not everybody is great at everything, and every family dynamic is different” (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Not every parent can be good at helping their child with every subject they bring home to work on. Rachelle agreed when she said, “...

the difficult part of helping kids with homework is not realizing or knowing exactly what they need” (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

For Rachelle’s family, homework continues to have redeeming qualities but, even so, she admits “... [she] would much rather [Channel and Thomas] have the time during the day when they could have the teacher’s attention to do the work” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). Being able to finish work at school, and being able to individualize homework told me that Rachelle believes there is valuable homework and meaningless homework.

### **Janelle’s Stories about Homework**

While the kids sit at the table doing their homework, Janelle makes herself readily available, while she prepares dinner, just in case they have questions to ask her or they aren’t sure how to do the assignments. Both Max and Harold have brought work home that is unclear and they aren’t sure how to complete it, which meant Janelle had to be involved. Other times, they could complete it on their own. “It’s not that you’re sitting there, having to explain [homework], because they should know what they’re doing, if they’re being taught correctly. They should understand it.” Understanding all of the assignments has not always been the case. What happens when the kids don’t understand the homework and the parents aren’t able to help them?

The second time I met with Janelle, it should have been spring; warm weather, budding leaves with the smell of fresh lilac blooms. I was looking forward to seeing Janelle again but I was not looking forward to going out in the spring ‘chill.’ Again, Janelle and I arrived in the early evening, bundled up for the arctic spring weather, and ready for a toasty beverage. She had just wrapped up the school’s local fundraiser for

which she volunteered. We talked about how much work volunteering can be, but Janelle responded, “The kids really like it and it’s fun to do” (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

When we moved on from that discussion, I asked Janelle about how her family spent the rest of the day once both of her boys came home from school. She replied, “I think they would like to relax but I usually find when they come home from school the last thing they think about is wanting to do homework” (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Janelle knows that every school year is different and that every teacher has different expectations as far as homework is concerned. Some years have been better than others. Several years there has been little homework, and others, there has been excessive amounts. “...[B]ut it’s when they’re given assignment after assignment after assignment after assignment, and having to do that work at home...that’s where the bitterness or resentment of school comes in” (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

There have been times when homework has been a source of stress within Janelle’s home. She described how her kids feel when there is an abundance of homework. “[They] feel overwhelmed all the time. [Imagine] going to school and feeling like you’ve got so much to do, and you’ve got this assignment, and you’ve got the rough draft. You’re just struggling in the first place to get that done, and it’s frustrating” (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Janelle was referring to the assignments that her children receive at school and then, in addition, the assignments they are asked to bring home. The students are in school for over five hours, not counting lunch time or breaks, and then they come home to more work. “Taking into account the average seven-hour school day,

a middle schooler who does just one hour of homework each night is putting in a forty-hour work week” (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 15). Janelle remembered the years when there was too much homework coming home after school.

But I have had years where it’s been just a battle of not wanting to do the homework and, despite of it, still getting the homework continuously. Then, you can just see it in them when they come home from school. Coming home and having homework and just being angry about it. (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

Janelle did not want her children to be frustrated when they got home from school and currently feels the way homework is managed could be done differently to ensure more positive experiences.

### **Selina’s Stories about Homework**

Although I had known Selina the least amount of time, visiting with her was like visiting with an old friend, like putting on those old comfortable shoes you can walk in for hours. We revisited our conversation that was started earlier, the one about the trials she and Ozzy have experienced in school with homework. I saw the shift in Selina’s body when she began to talk about Ozzy’s experiences; her body stiffened, she sat up straighter and a look of determination spread across her face. She was a parent with stories to tell, and she was prepared to share them with blunt honesty.

Selina had no qualms in admitting she made mistakes in some of the decisions she made for her son in relation to school, but I was quick to remind her that, as parents, most of us question our decisions and make mistakes. I shared my stories as liberally as she

did. When I asked Selina if she saw homework as a bonding time for her and Ozzy, she scoffed, "... it was a fight for me every day and I just thought... you know... there's more to life than homework" (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). I asked Selina if she could tell me what her home was like when they did do homework. Selina admitted she wanted both work skills and academics to come easily to Ozzy. "If all the pressure in the world could have made him smart, he would be a genius because I spent every evening... all the time... was spent fighting with him to get his homework done, and there was lots and lots and lots." It didn't matter how much homework got completed, Ozzy still struggled with academics and organization, despite Selina's hopes and interventions.

Some nights, he was expected to do three hours of homework, and I was disgusted with that, because after being in school all day what's the point of coming home and spending more time on [homework]? There was no time for activities; there was no time for just down time...

On other nights, I would have him sitting there for five hours, and we'd be yelling and screaming, and he'd be crying, and I'd be frustrated... and then it was like ten o'clock... "Go to bed. I've had enough of you." And he's so exhausted the next day from just the 'emotionalness' of it all. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

I know that as a teacher parent, when I come home from a full day's work, the last thing I want to do is engage with my children's homework. Selina has made a point of looking at the burden of homework from two different perspectives.

I've never met a parent who says, "I'm so glad my child gets homework every night!" What I hear is the frustration of having to deal with homework.

It's a job for the parents, right? I now have to go home and I have to clean the house and I have to make supper and get the children ready for bed and do everything around there that I have to do. But first, I have to put on my teacher hat and teach [Ozzy] how to do the homework that [he] doesn't know how to do.

It ruins your home life because you're constantly at odds about doing something, and I'm under pressure as a parent to be his teacher, and he's under pressure to learn something that he can't learn, and you're basically creating an atmosphere of hostility... every night... all the time. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

To Selina, school is a job for Ozzy but his time at home should not be.

Academically, Ozzy never fit into the "box" that Selina referred to. She mentioned the lack of differentiation often occurring within some schools when she said, "... he's fit into a box, all kids are fit into a box, and if you don't fit into that same box that all the other kids can fit into...there's something wrong with you" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Selina and Ozzy have both experienced academic obstacles and family issues that revolved around homework. She looked back at how the past has affected their lives,

...because we had such huge hurdles to try and get over. And knowing how we wanted to kill each other [while I was] trying to help him or support him [in] doing his homework, I told them at school, 'This isn't helping our family life you know... this homework and this, this pressure.' And I don't think [the teachers] understood because you know, you should fit in this box. [You're made to feel] it shouldn't be a big deal because other kids were doing it. (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

The hurdles Selina and Ozzy experienced occurred before they knew he had a learning disability, and after. Selina, as Ozzy's parent, feels she is the most knowledgeable in the awareness of how Ozzy functions best with homework. She held the clues or treasures to what Ozzy needed to help him be successful with homework, yet, sometimes, "... [w]hen you possess great treasures within you, and try to tell others of them, seldom are you believed" (Coelho, 2007, p. 133). Selina reiterated Coelho's sentiment when she said:

Before we knew what was wrong with him, it was being held against him.....and it made me angry because I didn't want to force him to be like everybody else. In the ways that he was different was the ways that he was so much greater, you know? So unique in his social abilities but academically he fell quite far behind. (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

Even after Selina discovered why Ozzy was having difficulties, and she explained it to the teachers, she still did not see any changes with the expectations of Ozzy's work habits at school or with the assigned homework. Selina shared her reflective thoughts when she said:

But you know what's really funny? He was not treated differently through all those years. He was treated as if he was lazy and I was treated as being a bad mother by making those choices of not making him do all of the homework. [Finally, when] we had a definitive 'this is what his problem is,' and I knew that there were difficulties, I would talk to the teacher[s] and I would explain, and I would ask for help and everything. It didn't matter because he was expected to do all of this [homework], even though he worked really hard on it at school.

Selina did not like the fact Ozzy was viewed as just being 'lazy.' She tried her best to get rid of those assumptions that befell him. I thought again about Selina's words, when she said, "If all the pressure in the world could have made him smart he would be a genius..." My heart went out to them because of all of the time that was spent on trying to make Ozzy conform to the same set of expectations, which in turn resulted in her feeling "less than" a good parent and Ozzy feeling "less than" a good student. While Ozzy was seen as being 'lazy,' Selina felt the other teachers saw her as the 'mother from hell.'

Remembering that Selina's son, Ozzy, does indeed have a learning disability, helps to raise a question about the importance of homework assignments being individualized, and about the possible rewards of differentiating homework. When I looked back into my memory box as an educator, I remembered the students who struggled with assignments, and the children who were expected to do other work at home to help the family, as well as certain parents who weren't able to be involved. What types of homework should these children have received? Was assigning every student the same homework acceptable because "... everyone else in the class is doing it..."?

After reading through Selina's comments, I felt surprised at how much homework Ozzy had, but then I remembered their story was very different from Rachelle's and Janelle's. First of all, Selina's son has a learning disability, which made the entire process of doing more work after a difficult day at school more trying for both parent and child. Secondly, Selina is a single parent, so she did not have the support of a spouse to help her with Ozzy's homework. I was still curious though about the types of homework Ozzy was bringing home because three hours did seem extreme. Selina told me, because of

Ozzy's learning disability, he wasn't often able to complete the work assigned in class, so he had to take that work home in addition to the work assigned 'just for homework.'

Selina reiterated:

...homework just for homework's sake... I don't think makes sense, and having four pages of math homework a night isn't going to make [Ozzy] successful. If you give him one page and he can complete it in class, he feels more success by doing that than by taking it home and not being able to get through the four pages. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Ozzy has had homework for as long as Selina can remember, but the overload began when he started in Grade 2, when he was 7 years old.

I don't think [homework's] teaching them things when they're that young. I think that [teachers] need to teach during the school day and then allow them to be kids when they go home, and if they don't get their work done during the day, then take it home...but don't assign homework that is just there for homework! That's the homework I had a problem with. (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

To add to our conversation, I began to talk about my son's loaded backpack and the math booklets that come home as 'extra' work, which have 30 questions on each page, to be completed each week. Selina was forthcoming with giving me examples of the 'homework just for homework sake' that often came home in Ozzy's backpack.

He wouldn't get 30 [questions], he'd get 100 math questions! It was this homework hell and sometimes I didn't make him do homework at all because he was so stressed that even the topic of homework freaked him out, and he was so

emotional and it created an anxiety ridden evening for him. So, I just went...

“Forget it.” (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Hearing Selina use the words ‘homework hell’ validated how I felt, on certain occasions, about homework with my children. Jonah could easily complete a page of math, and yet we would still be frustrated with having to complete an entire booklet of work that he already knew well. When I put myself in Selina’s shoes, I became even more frustrated and even puzzled because Ozzy has a learning difficulty, and a teacher asking the parent of this child to help him complete 100 questions seems unworkable. In fact, I could relate to most of what each of the parents said, in one way or another, but at different times throughout my family’s life. As far as Rachelle’s family, who believes homework is essential, I too have struggled with this belief as an educator and as a parent. While Janelle’s family has struggled to balance work, school, activities and homework, my sons are now getting to that stage as well, and it has become an insane balancing act in our home.

From the conversations with the parents, I learned that in both Janelle’s and Selina’s homes, the homework has taken time away from their sense of ‘family time’ and ‘community,’ and in Rachelle’s home, homework is their family time. All parents expressed a need for the amount and type of homework to balance out, so that families who want to participate in other types of activities are able to do so. In Janelle’s family, working on homework for 45 minutes in the evening, every evening, is too much, whereas in Rachelle’s family, 45 minutes is an expectation. For Selina and Ozzy, homework is a non-issue because it is just more of the same, work that Ozzy struggles with at school and is expected to struggle with at home. When I asked Rachelle what her

thoughts were on setting a reasonable amount of time for homework she replied, "... anything around 45 minutes a night is fair. Some nights there might be less but on average...I think the older they get the more they can handle, but I sure wouldn't push three hours of homework a night on a kid." There are obvious variations within each family presented here. As we continued our journey, we delved deeper to look at whether or not there were variations in the advantages and disadvantages homework can bring to a student and his/her family.

### **Advantages: What Works for These Parents?**

All three parents articulated the non academic benefits of homework as being the main reason they support it.

The most common nonacademic justification for homework is that it, like competition, has character building properties. Specifically, it's said to help students 'take responsibility for school work... to build 'study skills' through homework assignments, to develop students' perseverance, [the] ability to follow directions, neatness and completeness, and overall level of responsibility.' Others have asserted that homework promotes 'self discipline' as well as 'initiative' and 'independence.' (Kohn, 2006, pp. 51-52)

The idea of improving students' sense of self worth and efficiency was paramount to the parents so their children could be adequately prepared for future life endeavors, whatever they may be. Homework, for them, is a way to accomplish this.

Homework is a motivator for spending quality family time together in Rachelle's family. Rachelle agreed she would still provide homework because of its value and

lessons it teaches to her children, even if the teacher didn't assign any. "We try to get them to do more work or we'll find puzzles of countries on the internet and make the kids do that, and then it kind of becomes a game in a way..." (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007). It can be a great idea for those families who turn homework into a game. For others, as Corno (2000) articulates, "... homework is not supposed to be fun, although the right combination of challenge and skill can make it gratifying" (p. 2). It is important to Rachelle to demonstrate her belief about homework and learning and pass that on to her children. Goodman (2007) agrees with this aspect when she said, "Homework treated in this manner, as a time for families to bond, is valuable" (p. 17). Some of the research about homework tells us that if we can help students develop positive self concepts, then we can 'lead' them to 'want' to learn. By maintaining positive attitudes students can learn to be self motivated and eventually engage in self-regulation with homework. Teaching students who they are as learners, at school and at home, involves teaching them about themselves: developing character traits. "The more a student understands about her/himself, the more likely s/he will accept her/himself, and the more apt s/he is to be responsible in the classroom" (Martin & Potter, 1998, p. 551). Then, one can assume that once students achieve more success, their self-confidence grows and they can become more motivated and willing to take on new challenges with homework.

Rachelle, who also believes homework helps to develop good work habits, brought up this second benefit of having her children do homework consistently. Repetition, as part of study skills and work habits, helps both Rachelle and Andre to stay 'in tune' with what their children are learning.

I think the homework helps to reinforce the lessons that are taught during the day. If Channel only gets it once at class time and brings it home and isn't quite knowing how to deal with it, then there have been enough times when Andre and I have been able to just turn that light bulb on. So, homework definitely helps to clarify some things. (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

Rachelle and Andre see an opportunity as parents to support the work the teachers have initiated in school and to continue their link as parents to what work is being assigned in their children's classrooms.

Janelle mentioned that in order for their children to expand their sense of responsibility, the work they do in school and outside of school helps them to develop positive work habits. I asked Janelle what she meant by this.

As they're getting older, show them how to... number one... study for tests. Do you know how many kids come out of school and not have a sniff of how to study, how to break things down, how to do jot notes? (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

It was evident that what Janelle meant was she wanted her kids to be prepared for the future by developing good work habits. She believes homework is a means to establish these essential skills. We continued our dialogue about research skills as valuable homework and I couldn't help but wonder if most parents are comfortable teaching their children research skills. Would it be better to learn and complete research at school, guided by the teacher's expectations?

There are parents, like Janelle, who feel their involvement in their children's homework helps to keep their children motivated, which in turn, helps them to complete

assignments and feel the accomplishment of being ‘done.’ “ [P]arent involvement may promote the development of cognitive, affective, and behavioral strategies – including goal-setting, planning, and the management of time, materials, attentiveness and emotions—necessary to achieve academic goals” (Zimmerman, as cited in Patall et al., 2006, p. 8). For those students who lack self-regulatory skills, as in Selina’s family, or who are too young to master them, parents will be challenged to monitor and engage in homework with their child on a consistent basis and for a longer time. “Students engaged by their homework strengthen their capabilities to participate further in homework activities of similar and different types. They develop an aptitude for future homework from the regularities of homework ongoing” (Corno, 2000, p. 13). Continuing the development of those skills and role modeling them can reinforce the acquiring of future skills.

While Selina did have negative experiences from the expectations of homework assignments, she also discussed some redeeming qualities. Selina talked about the benefits of being organized as well as developing time management skills, all of which coincide with efficient work habits.

If [students] don’t get enough done in class or can’t get on the computer or get the information they need, then they need to realize that they have to work outside of class. That’s teaching them how to meet a deadline and they need to know that for work and especially for high school. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Selina believes in homework if it is helping to instill life skills that will help her son, Ozzy, in the future.

Selina also believes homework should include the teaching of basic life skills that could help her son to be able to cope in a future workplace that breeds competition. There was a time, at a certain school, where homework was never given. “I didn’t like the fact he didn’t have any homework at all because going into high school ...how does he transition into ...all of a sudden, he has to do homework...” (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008).

It is interesting how all of the parents see homework as a way to prepare their children for the future, whether it is as independent and responsible citizens, as contributing members of community, or as efficient and organized workers. Instilling these skills has the potential to create positive self-worth and perseverance in the present and in the future. As Rachelle restated, “[Homework] helps pave the way for a life long kind of learning. It doesn’t just stop at the classroom door. It can continue on” (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

### **Converging Stories**

My directional flow took me back to past memories as a parent, when my children started to bring their homework home. After saying a quick, “Hello, how was your day at school?” I promptly asked them if they had any homework. I then delved into the ‘abyss’ that was their backpacks, and sorted out the mass of papers to see what was indeed homework, what was recyclable and what was important information. Once the bulk of the material was organized, I set a time to sit at the table to help them with their homework. I reluctantly admit, that at times, I even bribed them by telling them they could do something fun, but only after they completed their homework. Perhaps I was the one being responsible, but even so, I was modeling what responsibility looks like and I

can only hope that real life role models, the visual cues, will be absorbed by my children. Is hoping good enough? When the parent or the teacher sets the agenda, organizes the homework and structures the reward, does doing homework teach students responsibility? My own experience causes me to wonder, if we want to teach children responsibility, is homework the right vehicle for this?

As our journey continued, we had reached a crossroad in which school and non-academic benefits met. I wondered how the benefits, as mentioned by the parent participants, were enacted through homework? Is it possible to gain a sense of responsibility, perseverance, self-discipline, independence and self esteem through homework? Are all students ready to understand these benefits? How then, can these non-academic benefits be taught so that each student is influenced appropriately, based on their own family's beliefs? Is this the job of the school, the parent or both? Is this the work of the hidden curriculum at play in schools and at home?

### **Hidden Curriculum**

In essence, there are two curriculums; one is official and the other is not. "Usually when educators refer to school curriculum, they have explicit, consciously planned course objectives in mind. In contrast to this didactic curriculum, students experience an "unwritten curriculum" characterized by informality and lack of conscious planning (Wren, 1999, p. 594). The unwritten curriculum is meant to instill values. Sedat Yuksel (2005) has summarized some of Lawrence Kohlberg's work on moral development and the unwritten curriculum within schools:

One of the functions of education is to teach both current values that exist and new values that are not present in the society and convey them to upcoming

generations. This function is expected to be fulfilled by administrators and teachers in line with educational curricula. Students are presented with various values that they are demanded to learn in schools through both the official curriculum and hidden curriculum...

The hidden curriculum does not exist in the form of a written document. It consists of the order and regulations of the school, its physical and psychological environment, and the non-official or implied messages that the administrators or teachers convey to students. (Yuksel, 2005, pp. 329-330)

There is a sense that the curriculum is neutral and that all children experience curriculum in the same way. The reality of the curriculum is that it is written by individuals with certain beliefs and values and their beliefs and values are embedded in that curriculum. The hidden curriculum then, represents a particular world view, and influences the students more than many anticipate.

According to Kohlberg, not only the formal curriculum, but also the hidden curriculum is effective in providing a ground for the moral development of students. Most of the time, students learn through the moral environment and atmosphere that is established by the way of hidden curriculums rather than textbooks and educational materials (Yuksel, 2005, p.330).

I've used the term 'hidden curriculum' because, as a teacher, in assigning homework, I am implementing a hidden curriculum which reflects my own beliefs and values. My beliefs and values about homework may be different from the teacher next door or from the parents of the children I teach. How do we decide if the values and beliefs that we

implement are the same values and beliefs that the parents hold true within their families?  
This is a conversation that needs to happen.

The non-academic benefits and skills of developing one's character and work habits is long term, therefore it cannot be achieved solely through completing daily homework assignments in the short term. The building of responsibility and independence, for example, occurs when a child's brain is ready to understand the consequences that can occur. "In addition, according to research, the frontal cortex of a child's brain, which controls organization and multitasking, doesn't develop fully until the late teens or early twenties" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 114). Therefore, is it logical to assume that by giving all students homework, we will be instilling those non-academic benefits? Does it make sense that homework assigned in the present will make a difference for those same students in the future?

Carla Rinaldi, who maintains the Reggio Emilia Philosophy, challenges this world view. Rinaldi (2006) believes that, as educators, we need to be more present oriented instead of future oriented.

Children are not only our future ... [t]hey are our present. The child is not a citizen of the future; he is a citizen from the very first moment of life and also the most important citizen, because he represents and brings the 'possible,' a statement that for me is completely without rhetoric. The child is a bearer, here and now, of rights, of values, of culture: the culture of childhood. HE is not only our knowledge about childhood, but childhood's knowledge of how to be and how to live. (p. 171)

Therefore, saying that we want to assign and do homework to develop our children's skills and qualities for their future goes against what Rinaldi believes we should be focusing on - their present. She is, in taking this stance, challenging the hidden curriculum of homework.

Kohn (2006) discussed the claims of the usefulness of homework as far as preparing for the future and the idea of the hidden curriculum within society. The problem is, "... less about what children need than about what their future employers need" (Kohn, 2006, p. 65). Corporations have similar criteria as far as practice and long working days are concerned. "Even if homework fails to produce smarter workers, it does help acclimatize them to what corporations want now; workers who are used to, and will not complain about, the long working day" (Buell, 2004, p. 53). As educators and parents, there is a distinction between 'complaining' and asking 'why something is important.' Kohn (2006) writes about what a student said about his first days of school. "... We are carefully instructed in what has been called the 'hidden curriculum'; how to do what we're told and stay out of trouble" (p. 88). Is being told what to do and following it leading our children to be independent?

For the parent participants, their experiences with their children have enabled them to sense non-academic benefits of homework. Some researchers in the field concur with their sense making. Others raise challenging questions about the hidden curriculum of homework, about being future rather than present oriented, and about the means and the magnitude of the investment to get such non-academic benefits. In some instances, homework can improve self esteem, can be a motivator, and can teach work habits. This is all possible if the parents are comfortable helping their child with homework, if the

parent has the time, if the parents want to be involved in this way. We hear in the stories and the research that supports the non-academic value of homework an adherence to a certain set of values. Given the discrepancies in families and in the values held between and among families, the questions we all need to ask are... Is what's right for Rachelle's family in regards to homework, right for Janelle's? Is what's right for Janelle's family, right for Selina's? Is it right to impose the same homework on all families? Should we assume that what one family sees as important homework is the same as what another family sees as important? We learned from the women in this study that past experiences and conversations with other parents helped to shape their sense of the worth of homework for them. Therefore, can we assume that if I talked with parents who are new Canadians, or parents of a different socioeconomic level or parents living in marginalized contexts, their sense of the worth of homework may be very different? Who does homework serve? And who does homework not serve? These are guiding questions for educators to ask themselves and reflect on as they design homework programs each year.

Even though parents cited similar benefits to homework, they all have different lives and different contexts that have formed their decisions. Ultimately, parents want their children to be successful. They want them to feel safe and secure but they also want them to learn skills that improve character traits, work habits, and relationship building so they can be proficient in their chosen careers and future life choices. From following traditions, looking into their own pasts, and listening to what other parents have to say, the parents' voices told me that homework is important because their children can learn non-academic skills.

### **Disadvantages: What Doesn't Work for These Parents?**

All parents have their own stories to tell about their children's experiences with homework. When I reviewed my field texts, I searched for the discrepancies, the tensions, and the participants' various points of view on the disadvantages of homework, just as I did with the advantages. I learned that "... [t]here will be diverse, untidy dreams. The perspectives will differ dramatically; and what they disclose will sometimes be in conflict .... The vantage points will never perfectly cohere..." (Greene, 1995, p. 552). The parents brought insight into the possible and actual negative outcomes of homework; all stories did differ, some stories had conflict, and each story could be seen from many vantage points as I put on my researcher's lens.

Rachelle did not share any disadvantages to homework because in her opinion, "... the teachers wouldn't assign it if it wasn't important" (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Rachelle and Andre have put their faith into the school system because they believe, as professionals, we should know about homework. Both Janelle and Selina saw disadvantages they wanted to share. Janelle talked about the negative side effects to excessive homework in her family, mostly reflecting lack of time, while Selina spoke to the stressors homework created for herself and for Ozzy. Together, both participants spoke about the lack of communication or knowledge about assignments that come home and how that, too, can affect the student and the family.

### ***Homework as a Negative Influence on Time***

Stepping back to a recent spring day, when I was sitting on my front porch relaxing, my neighbor asked me if he could have my professional opinion. It was about a project his son was asked to complete at home. He commented, "I don't know if I like the

idea of this project taking up so much family time.” Then he said, “If Nick is having difficulty with fractions, then tell me to practice with him at home for an hour a night for two weeks and I’ll do it. But what exactly is this project teaching him? I have other projects that I would rather do.” Did the teacher communicate his reasons for assigning the project? If the teacher did communicate his reasons for assigning the project, would the parents be more accepting of it?

There is a difference in time spent at school and the time spent at home. “In school, the day starts and stops by the clock. At home, it does not. Teachers plan their lessons using only the time they *have*. At night, the child is expected to devote to the work all the time he or she *needs*” (Goldberg, 2007, p. 7). Buell (2004) summarized time best when he said that, “The salience of homework reflects not merely pedagogical but long-standing battles about how much time parents and children have, how work time is compensated, how time is conceived, and who controls that time” (p. 52).

The value of teaching children how to manage their time with homework as the teaching tool is appealing, but making sure every child is busy every minute of the day could be instilling dependency on his/her environment. Buell (in Kohn, 2006) argues, “It means learning to manage freedom...gradually expanding opportunities ...to be responsible for free time” (p. 64). The value of ‘time’ seems to have taken on more significance. The time spent on homework in each of the participants’ homes varies.

On days where there was more homework than usual in Janelle’s home, the entire family felt aggravated. There were “... for sure battles because they would come home and they’d be frustrated, they’d be tired, depending on what kind of a day they had” (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). These days varied for Janelle. “Some days not a

problem, like I said, if it's a few questions... getting little tiny bits of homework done is [okay]. But, when it is spending 45 minutes or an hour and a half doing assignments..." (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Janelle mentioned in her family, homework overload has not occurred every year, so they have had a respite. The years that it does happen, she can see the difference it makes in her sons' attitudes towards school and the toll it takes on the family's time. What happens when lots of homework comes home consistently? I asked Janelle how homework affects her children's attitudes towards school, whether positively or negatively.

It's just a hard balance. That added pressure of homework is just... it's pressure for the family and those kids feel it. They feel the parents being pressured because the parents are [saying], "Get it done! Get it done! Let's get you [moving]! We gotta go here, gotta go there!", and everybody is anxious about the whole thing; the parents are anxious, the kids are anxious. (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

When you put time into something, it has to come out of something else; time is a finite resource. School sets the agenda for kids in the day, and some parents are resentful that the school sets the agenda for their kids at night too. Is it the school's right, with the assignment of homework, to take the children's and the family's time away?

### ***Homework as an Influence on Stress***

Being frustrated, angry, and discouraged with the homework that has come home in her son's backpack or with how homework has been managed is not an isolated event for Selina. Selina remembered when Ozzy showed signs of stress, due to the pressures he felt when the demands of homework increased. On many days, when he arrived at school,

with his homework incomplete, he would act out. His teachers would react by giving consequences. In Selina's words, in most cases,

...their punishment would be if [he] did something wrong, they would keep him in the classroom at recess. So they didn't let him go out and blow off steam. They forced him to sit in the classroom, and then you wonder why kids act out...

well... because they're already stressed. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

There were evenings when Ozzy didn't complete his work because he was just too exhausted. "Exhaustion is just part of the problem though. The psychological costs can be substantial for a [student] who not only is confused by a worksheet... but also finds it hard to accept the idea of sitting still after school to do more schoolwork" (Kohn, 2006, p. 11). Even though Selina had told Ozzy that it was 'okay to leave it,' the incomplete homework resulted in negative consequences once he arrived at school. "Ozzy gets accused of not trying and that's where his frustration comes in, because he really, really, really tries to do the best he can, and it's unfortunate that his best isn't good enough for the teacher." These mixed messages from Selina and the teacher added to Ozzy's confusion. On one hand, he had his mother, who was telling him that it was 'okay' to not complete all of his work because it was just 'too much.' On the other hand, he had his teachers who told him that 'everyone else was completing their homework.' She did not want Ozzy to feel the tension of homework so at some point she decided to make it easier and help him with the writing portion. She continued with that reflection of her past:

At one point I was writing out his work; he was telling it to me verbally and I was writing it out, and they marked me wrong for not writing the sentence correctly, and I'm sitting there going, 'I am a parent who works all day and I had two jobs at

the time and I'm coming home having to sit here and do my son's homework.' Granted, he was doing the work and I was writing it out, but still, it's a hundred percent of my time! And they have snotty little comments, and it just really upset me because you're not really supporting him [with his homework], and helping him to improve; you're criticizing any step that he takes. (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

For Selina and Ozzy, homework had a negative impact on how Ozzy viewed school, how Selina viewed some teachers and the school system, but most importantly, it affected how Ozzy felt about himself. It also affected Selina's self esteem because she was willing to help Ozzy, Ozzy was willing to do the work with Selina, and yet, they were both reprimanded from the comments given by the teacher. They both received the message, 'You are not doing well enough!'

### ***Homework Assignments: Is Different Helpful?***

Both Janelle and Selina brought up the fact that the way in which teachers teach new skills to students can be a problem when working at home with their children on homework assignments. Janelle spoke, "Yeah, it's a different way of doing it than when... than how we were taught" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). That can add confusion at home and also resentment from the children who are expecting to get the support they need from their parents. Selina added, "I don't understand how they want it done because if we have to go through it, I'm going to show [Ozzy] the easiest way to do it, but it's not the way they're teaching him in school, so I'm confusing the issue" (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). When Selina would try and help Ozzy with his homework, she had the hurdle of his learning difficulty teamed up with the hurdle of not

knowing how the teachers were instructing him. One of Selina's stories was when Ozzy informed her they had learned the new math skill differently at school and that she was teaching him the 'wrong' way. So, even when Ozzy was willing to sit and let Selina help him with homework, there were times that it wasn't the 'new' way the teachers were explaining which resulted in even more confusion for Ozzy. Some teachers are asking parents to help their children with work that is new and different from the way they learned it years before. This issue has me wondering how many parents are comfortable and confident enough to acknowledge their difficulty with some of the homework that is sent home?

Usually, having an education background has permitted me to more easily assist my children with the type of work sent home and, even if I did not know the answers, I was still confident enough to help them find solutions. Recently, Jonah brought home a math assignment that he wanted help with but I could not figure out what his teacher wanted us to do. It was a simple division question so I demonstrated to Jonah how I would do it. He was reluctant to write it down because he said his teacher wanted it done a different way. He continued by telling me that my way was the 'OLD' math that people did a 'LOOOONG' time ago. His work was the "NEW" math! Boy, did he put me in my place! (personal journal, January, 2008) Here I was, a mother and a teacher, and I was not able to help my son with his math work. It frustrated me and it made me wonder how other parents feel when they are not able to help their children with homework.

At one point during my conversation with Selina, she said, "You are sooooo lucky!" when I answered her question about how my children do in school. Even though my children do well in school, I shared with her that there were still many evenings when

our entire family became stressed with homework expectations. Later, when pondering over my field texts, I thought of Selina's statement. As a single parent with a child who has a learning disability, Selina exemplified the findings of a study by Levin (1997). "Levin and colleagues found that greater maternal help with homework was related to increased fatigue, frustration, and disappointment for the mother, and caused tension between mother and child particularly when the child was a low achiever" (Patall et al., 2007, p. 8). The guilt Selina felt coincides with the pressure schools and teachers place on parents when they are unable to meet their responsibility for homework because they are too tired or they don't have the time. In my case, it was because I didn't have the new knowledge. Although I couldn't help my son, I wondered how we know, as parents, where our role in homework begins and ends.

### **Doing Homework Blindly: An Old Way of Thinking**

Inwardly, as a parent teacher and as a teacher parent, I knew I should have hid my own aversion to homework to enable my son to have positive experiences. Although professionally I assigned homework to students in my class, I didn't understand the affect it could have on parents personally until my son's backpack came through the door. His backpack was filled with homework that required my time and my skill. It was not just homework for Jonah; it became homework for our entire family. How many times have I heard parents talking in the hallways or in parent teacher conferences about the homework *they* had last night? Hearing their words confirmed I was not alone on this journey.

My husband and I, as parents, are aware that when we help our children with their homework, we try to limit the amount of assistance they receive. Yet, I admit, when I

believed the homework to be ‘useless,’ I did more than my required share, just to get it done.

Cooper and colleagues (2000) found that two-thirds of parents reported engaging in some inappropriate form of involvement not expected to have a positive effect, including simply giving correct answers or completing assignments themselves. Consequently, overly-involved parents may impede learning during homework study and hinder the development of self-regulatory skills if students come to rely on their parents for correct answers or external regulation and motivation.

(Cooper et al., 2006, p. 9)

Janelle believes that, although parent involvement in homework is important, some parents are overly concerned and involved in their children’s homework which can have negative outcomes, just as parents who are not involved at all can garner negative outcomes. “... I guess getting [homework] in perspective, sometimes I think [parents] get a little too excited about things.” Parents who get too involved or anxious about the homework their children bring home can transfer those feelings to their children, much like my own experiences with Jonah’s homework.

While Rachelle believes teachers are trained in the handing out of homework, in fact, homework was not brought up in my teacher education program. I didn’t learn how much to assign or what kind of homework is ‘good’ homework. I took what I knew when I was a child, which was not having a choice in the kinds of homework that I did nor the amount, and transferred that information to my students. Was homework an expectation based on nothing? The acronym ‘BGUTI: Better Get Used To It,’ is used by Kohn (2006) and throughout his book *The Homework Myth*. It refers to, “[a] way of thinking [that]

pervades education and child rearing. It's a two edged sword that can be used to attack practices one opposes as well as to promote practices one prefers" (Kohn, 2006, p. 142). As a child I got used to homework and, as an educator, I assigned it because I did it as a child. That's just the way it was and I 'got used to it.'

All of the parent participants want their children to be successful and they believe homework helps their children to achieve success. Rachelle makes the decision to start her kids working on the next school year during the summer. "I don't want my kids at the bottom of the pack either. From the first of August we start reading, we start doing math. I make sure that they are kind of brought up to speed." Buell (2005) comments on the parental decisions on homework by saying, "... [h]omework becomes a vehicle to get ahead so that one can be sure to have enough income to be able to do what their parents either are doing or want to do" (Buell, 2005, p. 58). Buell's argument is rational because it demonstrates that it isn't the children or the students asking for it, but rather the parents and the teachers who believe it is the right thing to do. Kohn (2006) was blunt when he said, "The losers are the children straining like beasts of burden to pull the adults to glory" (p. 140). Yet, Kohn's statement should cause us to be reflective and to contemplate whether or not it is true within our own homes and classrooms. Does work at home become a means of achieving something that parents want their children to have?

### **Taking a Walk in Others' Shoes**

A short time ago, I met a friend of mine for an early coffee. She happens to be a teacher and a parent, so I decided to share my thesis with her. We had many discussions in common but one story is locked in my memory bank because she was sharing a story from her past about doing homework with her son. While they were doing homework

together, her son was becoming more and more agitated until finally he said, “I don’t want you to be my teacher...I want you to be my mom.” As a teacher who is also a parent, I related to her situation because I also want to be my children’s mom and not their school teacher. Teaching is what my profession is; it is what I was trained to do at work. When I arrive home after a long day of planning, organizing, guiding activities and correcting, the last thing I want to do is more of the same with my children at home. What I really want when I get home is to spend quality time with my children, none of which is doing homework. Family time to me is playing board games, playing activities outside, making dinner together, watching a funny show or reading books together. I used to think I felt this way because I am a teacher and a parent, but I now know differently. Rachelle used to believe that teachers were trained on the topic of homework but now she knows differently. Janelle used to feel that teachers always know best but now she questions that theory and Selina used to feel very alone amongst other parents who didn’t have issues with homework. She knows differently now too! The participants and I gave one another the opportunity to walk in each other’s shoes, by sharing our stories, listening to response and rethinking how we see homework in our own families.

### ***The Human Instinct to Blame***

As human beings, we seem to have a tendency to look for who is at fault or who is to blame when things do not go as planned. Within the parents’ negative stories, we could blame the teachers, blame the parents, blame the school systems or find blame within others. The key is to really listen to what the parents’ voices are telling us and to decide, again, what we can do about it as educators. Being aware of other parents’ stories, even if they are not our own, enables us to open our ears and our minds along this

journey, because perhaps, one day, we will be walking in those same shoes.

Remembering Coelho's (1993) words, "We are entering a new world in which we can choose to follow our own steps, not those that society forces us to take" (p. 229). While homework is intended to have a positive purpose, it gets translated in such a way that it has more benefit for some than for others. We can see from the parents' words the pieces that make homework problematic for some children and some families. When parents and children experience the stress of competition or the amount of time it takes to complete homework assignments, when they feel the time taken away from family is excessive, or when parents are made to be teachers of content they are unfamiliar with, homework can be a problem for some and a crisis for others. It is in the midst of this stress that the shaming and blaming often occurs. "To blame any of the victims here is to miss the structural issues, the forces that discourage us from asking whether homework is really desirable or inevitable" (Kohn, 2006, p. 23).

Looking back to Selina's family and the pressure she felt to ensure Ozzy was successful, Selina consistently put the onus on herself. She believes she is 100% responsible for Ozzy's success, and she holds the weight of that belief on her shoulders indefinitely. This was evident when she said, "I don't want him to ever accuse me of not caring and not doing enough" (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008).

When we look at the cycle of blame and hear how both parents and teachers feel the responsibility and the stress of homework, we begin to understand "[t]he problem starts with the system" (Goldman, 2007, p. 10). We are seeing that "... homework [is] not just a teacher problem but a 'systemic problem'" (p. 253). As Goodman (2007) noted, "The issue is not just the homework itself – it is also with the Departments of Education

who are structuring the system” (Goodman, 2007, p. 73). Blame potentially lies at every juncture; the stress of homework is causing every person and every part of the system to look elsewhere for both culpability and solutions. Homework is not an individual concern but rather a larger systemic issue shaped by a societal agenda of competition and accountability for higher achievement.

Throughout this chapter, it was my intent to explore the positive and negative effects homework had on the families, parents and children in this inquiry. I heard in the stories that parents have gained their knowledge of homework through conversations with others and through re-living their own past experiences of homework as students. All of these experiences, and the knowledge they have constructed from them, has influenced their beliefs about how to include homework in their children’s lives and their family’s life.

The amount and the type of homework deemed acceptable to these parents varied depending on the individuality of their children, and the individuality of their own families. The time factor, stressors, and the surge in the amount and types of homework sent home all affect their positions. These factors contribute to the complexity of understanding the impact of homework for children, parents and families.

### **Turning the Corner on My Journey**

My goal, in the next chapter of my narrative inquiry, as a parent, a teacher, and a researcher was to find ways of re-imagining homework and to find ways teachers and parents can work together to stop the systemic cycle of blame and create positive educational experiences for everyone involved.

It is my hope that being aware of these differences in parents' viewpoints and truly listening to what the parents' voices and literature tells us, educators, administrators and policy writers will develop a universal wisdom. The wisdom is that each story, each family, and each student has variations and one style of homework cannot answer to all of them. Listening to the stories may enable all parties to develop a sense of what is best for each individual student and family. I know I am not alone on this journey because the parents I had conversations with and the parents I read about during my research had similar stories to tell. We traveled together, because within all of us, we held a 'bedrock of wisdom' that is linked much like the lines on a map. We are all parents, we are all teachers to our children and we all come to the homework journey looking for ways to make homework manageable. But we must be cautious on our journey, because although we have similar stories to tell, we all come from different places and seek intersections that enable us to pass without collisions, each toward our own personal legends.

In Chapter 4, by focusing on the variations within children and families, I am sharing my personal belief that a new approach to homework is needed. Gifford and Gifford (2004) provide a picture of the current debate on homework that I lean towards.

Homework may be nothing new, but lately the vast amounts coming home in the book bags and backpacks of students of all ages seem to be leaving kids dazed and parents stressed. While proponents argue homework is necessary to improve achievement; proponents will argue that it takes away valuable time from family bonding. What is needed is a different approach to homework which provides social interaction for family and peers while providing meaningful learning beyond the classroom. (p. 279)

I am excited when I look forward to the possibilities homework can offer to the families of the children I teach, as well as my own family. By looking at the variations in Chapter 4, we can begin to form a picture of why some homework does not work with some children and their families. When we see the negative and positive implications homework can have on these children and families, we can begin to picture a new way of assigning work at home.

## Chapter 4

### Variations in Children and Families: Implications for Homework

*"We boil at different degrees."*

Ralph Waldo Emerson

Sharing our stories of homework within our own family settings enabled the parents and me to look beyond our own lives and to come to realize the differences within each family and how homework can affect those differences positively and negatively. As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) said, "Narrative unity gave us a way to think in a more detailed and informative way about the general construct of continuity in individuals' lives. Continuity became for us a narrative construction that opened up a floodgate of ideas and possibilities" (p. 3). Once we settled in, we listened to each others' stories and we attended to one another in the tellings so we could share in the new knowledge we were gaining. "This too is one of the things that narrative inquirers do in the field: they settle in, live and work alongside participants, and come to experience not only what can be seen and talked about directly but also the things not said and not done that shape the narrative structure of their observations and their talking" (p. 67). The new knowledge and possibilities enabled me, as a researcher and as a parent, to begin to re-imagine homework. There was never a quiet or dull moment.

My three participants offered different insights into the ways they contribute when they are involved with their children's homework. As the parents provided me with their stories, they also inquired as to the ideologies of teachers generally in regard to homework and in regard to the imposed curriculum. So, while I learned by gathering information as a parent, an educator, and a researcher, I can only hope I was able to give something back in these kind of reciprocal exchanges.

Throughout this chapter, I examined the three participants' roles as parents whose children engage with homework. From motivating their children to do homework, ensuring the homework is complete, to assisting their children with the work itself, all parents take on various tasks. Besides offering my own stories of the jobs I have assumed as a parent of homework, I securely positioned my researcher's lens to integrate the variations that occurred within these families and their children. I immersed myself in my field text to make sense of what the parents had shared with me. I thought about how we might begin to re-imagine homework by expanding our knowledge of the variations within these roles – the families', students', and teachers'. Lastly, I wondered how homework could be re-imagined if we brought the families' homes to school.

### **Trekking Along with Rachelle's Stories**

The waitress walked by and refilled our water glasses as I asked Rachelle if she would like another coffee or something to eat. "No, I'm fine," she replied graciously. We turned our conversation towards the roles both her and Andre maintain within the context of homework. Rachelle, who agrees with homework and the success it will hopefully bring her children, emphasized that parent knowledge and interest, being positive role models, and scheduling Channel's and Thomas's priorities and routines are all important parts of their parental engagement. Rachelle and her husband, Andre, are sincerely interested in what their children bring home for homework and their participation has become a set routine in their home; they are the taskmasters.

Rachelle's family's homework routine begins when Channel and Thomas get home from school; they wait for their father to arrive from his job to help them with their homework. Even the idea of changing their family's homework routine draws a wide

eyed look from Rachelle. “Now if we both got different jobs and all of a sudden we weren’t there every day at five o’clock to start supper and to start the homework, it would be disastrous with Channel and Thomas” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007).

Rachelle usually arrives home before Andre, so I asked her to describe what happens once she gets home.

[I] ask Channel and Thomas what homework they have and then we make supper...after dinner, we talk about what’s next and I literally start cleaning up stuff from supper and the homework starts. So, usually, I am in the kitchen, the table is full of homework, and Andre is going between the two kids.

When Rachelle is done with the dinner clean up, she comes to help out with the homework if it is needed.

In Rachelle’s and Andre’s home, ample workspace is provided, with lots of parental supervision. At times it can be distracting if one child has homework and the other doesn’t, or finishes early. Consistency in developing a regular routine is important to both Channel and Thomas. They depend on their parents, as Rachelle told me, “Well, every day we’re asking them about homework so I just think it’s just become such a routine that they are used to that” (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

Of course, Rachelle admits other family affairs do come up, and on some days they are not able to devote as much time to homework because “... life gets in the way and you don’t get to study five nights, you can only study three...” Even though life gets busy, Rachelle and Andre strive to show their children that school and homework is important to them; both parents care about how they do. I asked Rachelle if it is enough to show our children that we care about school. Will that make our children successful?

I still think they have to care, they have to have a goal to achieve and to know what that goal is whether it's the next math test, whether it's grade eleven or if it's graduating from grade twelve and I think that goes back to the family. (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

By showing they care about how Channel and Thomas do in school, by helping them with their homework, they believe they are exhibiting themselves as positive role models, and hoping their children will pick up on it. Rachelle concluded her thoughts nicely when she said:

I think it's a great big circle that starts at home with the parents and hopefully they can build the base and then the teachers can provide the information, the kids can absorb it and together they can complete that circle. (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

I liked Rachelle's visual circle, but it caused me to wonder, What happens if one part of that circle is incomplete? What happens if the home, the parent, the student or the teacher doesn't or cannot commit to making the circle complete?

Although homework is a nightly routine in Rachelle's house, she admitted they don't love the work itself, but they do love the time they spend together working on it. The roles of 'teacher' and 'monitor' are roles that Rachelle and Andre assume willingly, while other parents do not.

### **Trekking Along with Janelle's Stories**

The coffee shop was filling with people as the buzz of conversations resonated in the room. Janelle and I adjusted our chairs closer together so we could hear each other better. I asked Janelle to tell me about her roles with the homework her kids bring home.

Janelle informed me she really wants to relax after a day working, but she rarely gets the chance because her husband, Joe, often arrives home later than her. While she makes supper, both Max and Harold will sit at the kitchen table and do whatever work needs to be done for the next day. With the activities her kids are involved in, getting homework done can be hectic, especially if Joe is working late. Luckily, she has been able to rely on extended family so she can juggle both of the boys' activities and homework. Within the city, Janelle said her family has supportive grandparents. On several occasions, when they were going to Max's hockey game, Harold had homework that was due the next day. Janelle would quickly drop Harold off at Grandma's house "... so she could finish that assignment with him" (taped conversation, April 10<sup>th</sup>, 2008). It is helpful for some families to have that extra layer of support, to have someone else they can rely on. Having extra help for Janelle has been a necessity at times while she tried to balance the demands of a busy life.

Janelle reflected on her past when she remembered how it was a bit easier when she worked part time and was home whenever the kids were home. When looking at Statistics Canada, it shows there are fewer families that have one parent who stays home to attend to the family's needs, including homework (2008). Goodman (2007) agrees, "Women in the work force is a fact of modern society. However, we have not adjusted the structure of schooling to make allowance for this huge shift" (p. 40). Janelle, also, takes on the role of 'homework monitor.' "... I do feel like I am usually sitting down there making sure, either checking that they're doing the work right... whether it's spelling, or making sure they're getting it done..." (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008).

In this family, even though Janelle currently works full time, she continues to assume the primary role of monitoring Max and Harold's homework.

Not all families are able to take on roles in relation to homework; the variations in work schedules, the nature of the work they do and the demands of their work out of regular job hours can all effect their ability to help with homework or make it a priority. Remembering when Janelle told us that "... [her kids have] always had [her]... prodding to get [homework] done..." reveals that Janelle takes her role as taskmaster and motivator seriously. She wants both Max and Harold to like school and love learning. Janelle looks forward to helping her boys with projects or assignments they are interested in because then she can be engaged with them in their learning without needing to be taskmaster and motivator.

### **Trekking Along with Selina's Stories**

The cell phone rang; it was Ozzy on the line wanting to know when Selina would be home. After their brief exchange, it was Selina's turn to let me into her world, and tell me what her main roles are in relation to homework.

Selina has gotten to the point where she tells her son he has to sit back and relax when he arrives home from school. "I don't think that coming home from school kids should immediately do schoolwork" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). As a parent who knows what her son needs, time off from the structured environment of a classroom gives Ozzy a chance to 'reboot' himself, so he can sit and focus on his homework later on. The best time for Ozzy to work on homework is after supper. In the past, Selina's home and her parent's home have both been spaces for Ozzy to complete assignments. Selina was often in school, preparing for her own classes, working on her own

homework, or studying for exams. As a single parent, Selina leaned on her parents for the extra support she needed to help Ozzy with his homework.

Selina later shared that being a ‘homework cop’ was not a position she applied for and being a ‘teacher’ was not a role she wanted. When I asked Selina if the roles have gotten easier over time, she responded, “... Oh god no, the teacher role I didn’t sign up for, I don’t want and I’m not good at and I can acknowledge that...” (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). Bateson (1994) agrees because “... [t]he problem of an outsider as teacher is to enrich students with new learning skills, not to replace the old ones” (p. 43). Selina believes that as a parent it is her job to teach her child, but not the same information he is learning in school.

Really, is it my job to teach him? ’Cause I teach him all the things he doesn’t learn in school; I teach him about the world and I teach him about current events and I teach him about nature and people and all kinds of stuff. Is it my job to teach him reading, writing and arithmetic because I’ve done the best I can in those areas? That’s not my specialty. (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

When we read the words of Bateson (1994), we can see her words affirm Selina’s position when she says, “Certainly schooling is part of the spectrum of learning in human lives, but it is not the model for all learning, only one of the many byways” (p. 196). For those parents who have not seen the benefits of homework with their own children, they may have an opinion similar to Kralovec (as cited in Bennett & Kalish, 2007) who said, “If parents are going to give up their life for homework, there should be evidence that it will produce something” (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 14). These parents, as well as Selina, are adamant that homework should not come into their homes unless they have

proof it will help their children and not harm their family in the long run. To this day, Selina and her son cannot do homework together. When I asked her how that makes her feel, she said she feels thankful they have moved on from the crying and fighting days. So now, Selina is not as involved in her son's homework and she is okay with that. Life does go on, whether the homework gets done or not.

Moving backwards, when Ozzy's homework had become an ongoing struggle, Selina's role shifted to concerned parent and advocate. When the fighting continued, Selina tried to get help to find out what their options were.

I'm calling meetings, I want to talk about this, I want an update, I want to know what's going on. So, either I phone them or I show up, and that's the way it's been all along. I was trying so hard, knowing that I wasn't doing a very good job as a parent teaching him at night but you know I was just desperately searching for some way to kind of pull him out of this kind of hell hole that he was falling into.... (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Sometimes Selina was met with new things to try, but most of the time she was left to figure out how to keep Ozzy interested in learning once he got home, and it wasn't easy for either of them. The arguments continued, the cajoling continued, so Selina went back to the teachers again. She told me, "I would be talking to them and say, 'You know I can't do anymore than we're doing, and if what we're doing isn't acceptable... well that's too bad, because I can't do anymore'" (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008).

Selina's aversion to homework is not isolated. As I've noted, I share Selina's sentiment as a parent; I dread most of the homework my children bring home, as well as having to be a teacher in my home with my own children.

## Excavating My Stories

Selina's story of being an advocate, reminds me of my own story, with one of my sons (personal journal, September, 2007). Every year, most schools will have a 'Meet the Teacher Night' where the parents go to their child's classrooms and listen to the teacher's academic plans for the school year. There isn't much time to visit with the teacher at all, so, before that night, I made a point of going to see my son's teacher to tell her how happy I was he was in her class. While we were talking, I told her I was reading some books on homework and she told me we would have to talk because she gives quite a bit of homework. It was at that moment I had a sense of dread. How was I going to deal with this? I have read so much literature on homework and I knew my biases conflicted with hers. Later, the anxiety began eating away at me so I stopped by the school again to have a quick chat. My son's teacher *seemed* to understand what I was saying. She *seemed* to understand how our family felt about homework. I was relieved... for a short time.

About one week later, my husband and I attended the 'Meet the Teacher' night. My son's teacher spent the first moments telling us how she didn't want to load the families down with homework, because she knows how busy we all are. Then, the next eighteen minutes were spent listing off all the homework the students were expected to do. Each parent received an eight page handout that included a schedule of homework to be completed each night. She quickly slipped in that there isn't enough time in the day to teach the entire curriculum, so parents would be expected to teach one of the subjects at home. When we left the room, we realized that not only did we have a schedule for our son but that would be our schedule, our homework, for the next school year as well.

All parents are keepers of knowledge; most know their children better than anyone else. Selina, when referring to the conversations she had about Ozzy's work habits, the type of work sent home, as well as the pressure to complete his assignments, said, "... I know what works for him and what doesn't." I relate to her words because I know who my children are, I know what my children are capable of. I need to be part of the decision-making around homework because it is work I will be involved in within my own home.

I am often reminded of a time in my past I would rather forget, yet it has taught me so much about homework. I was a teacher teaching 30 Grade 5 students who were all at a variety of academic levels and who lived in a variety of homes. One of the young girls in my class came from a single parent family where her mother worked two jobs. She never saw her father. During that time, my class was learning about the different forts found within Canada, so I decided to have each student build their 'assigned' fort at home. I motivated the students by telling them we would invite all of the parents to our 'open house' and serve snacks too! The day of the open house, I saw one of my students come through the front doors earlier than usual with a wide smile on her face, head held high and bright blue eyes sparkling. She was holding her fort, which was made out of a cardboard box, and she was very proud of her work. I congratulated her on it and told her where she could go place it, on a special table, in a designated room for our open house. It was obvious she had worked on her fort and did her best to make sure all of the required elements were included. As she walked into the designated room, her smile fell, her bright eyes drooped and she lowered her head. Displayed on the tables in front of her were forts that had been built with wooden frames, mortar and stones, mini-bricks, candy

lego and an entire fort built out of glued chocolate pieces. The forts were impressive and the children and parents seemed proud... all but one. It was evident the best forts had to have had parental involvement that far exceeded any expectations I gave along with this assignment. I didn't stop to consider the cost of the materials, or even putting a limit on the amount of materials or the expectation of time needed. This student I refer to was very bright and did follow the criteria, but she came from a household with only one parent, one who worked and did not have time to help her. I realize now, looking back, what I modeled for these students was segregation – the separating of the 'haves' and 'have-nots' – and it still breaks my heart today.

### **Unpacking the Conversations**

All of the parent participants shared how they use their supports to help with managing homework. From sending their kids to grandma's, to having one parent do the homework while the other stayed at work or did work around the home, all parents have relied on extra support at one time or another. As well, it seems their common space for doing homework for all families is at the kitchen table, close to the parents or with the parents sitting down at the table beside their children. Within two of these families, the children seem to be getting what they need to help make their homework at home possible, and the spaces the parents have provided are working for them, distractions and all.

While the parents I talked with have provided supports for their children to help them with their homework, there are other families who cannot rely on extended family members, spouses, or others. When these children are given homework, especially homework that will be compared in class with other students' work, we are setting them

up for failure. As teachers, we talk of inclusion, but the segregation I forced upon my student has taught me that not all homework is good and fair. In fact, some homework is harmful.

Parents have a difficult job. I know because I am one, and I believe I have only seen a small part of what this job entails. How, then, are parents to know if the decisions they are making regarding homework are the right ones for their children and their families? I have spent time talking about homework to friends who are teachers, friends who are not teachers, and to a range of acquaintances. In this mix, all of our children attend different schools, some of which have rigorous homework expectations and others which don't. "While the schools have to focus on children as students, we know that, as parents, we have to focus on them as whole human beings" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 155). This makes our job and our roles more difficult. While some of the parents I've talked with do not want their children to be inundated with homework, those same parents may question when their child doesn't have much or any work to bring home. Kohn (2006) talks about the differing opinions parents have on homework. It is viewing this picture closely, seeing all of the variations, all of the fine lines on the map, which may persuade all of us to take another look at the implications of homework on an integral part of our society, the family.

### ***Why Homework Doesn't Fit Everyone: One Size Doesn't Fit All***

The variations of homework are endless. There are different types of homework, methods of structuring homework, students doing homework, family structures accepting homework, parental beliefs about homework, economic backgrounds of families who do homework, and different time constraints within the schools assigning it and the families receiving it. Looking at the various needs of each student, parent and family, we see the

importance of adapting and attending to homework in more specific and particular ways.

Feldman, as cited in Bennett and Kalish (2007) said that:

... [e]ducators are not paying attention to the fact that until kids are eight or nine; they simply do not have a long enough attention span to handle anything academic past 3 or 4 in the afternoon. Some kids can. Most kids can't. So assigning homework to them is a waste of time because it's not going to accomplish better learning. If anything, it might impair learning for those kids who really can't focus in the late afternoon and early evening. (p. 114)

Ultimately, it is the teachers' and the parents' role to determine what works best for each individual child. We must remember that some children will not be ready to continue their learning at home.

There are families who have less money, fewer resources and less time to provide their children with the tools necessary to thrive in education (Goodman, 2007, p. 39). Some families do not have the materials – a computer, internet access, books, school supplies, a vehicle to get to the library – that help to make the task of completing homework easier, or even possible. Some parents may be working two or more jobs, and finding the time to help their child with homework could be burdensome. There are families who devote many hours to work or who work shift work who have little time to sit with their children and help with homework. There are families who choose to place their children in many activities to help enrich their lives rather than using that time for homework or assignments expected to be completed at home. The demands homework puts on families varies depending on the type of homework, the ability the students and parents have to do the homework, the material resources of the family and time. The

amount of time homework is allotted by families is dependent on the values those families place on the merit of homework itself.

The variety of family structures is endless; we have new Canadian families, we have homes where several families reside together, we have homes with grandparents raising children. While I can only speak for the participants I had conversations with, I would be amiss if I didn't acknowledge the great diversity in homes and families and the resulting implications assigned homework can have for them .

### ***Variations within Students***

Buell (2004) describes children best when he says, "Children, like all of us, are more than recipients of school knowledge. They are siblings and community members, budding artists, musicians, and athletes. They are natural inventors and scientists and spiritual beings" (p. 27). Along my journey, I revisited my journal notes and field texts to come to know better the participants' children. It had been a while since I had spoken to the parents and I was feeling the need to be close to their words. What variances did Max and Harold have as compared to Channel and Thomas, and how are they different or the same as Ozzy? Rachelle and Janelle provided insights into the variances they see within their own children, so I took my field texts with me to a quiet place and reread them, making new notes along the way.

Rachelle made several references to her children, Channel and Thomas, having different learning styles and preferences.

Channel is very responsible and she will do the homework, and make sure it is done; if she doesn't understand it, she will get one of us to help, whereas Thomas is very needy, and he needs us to sit beside him. If we can sit beside him, he will

do the homework like crazy, but the minute we back off... he slacks off. (taped conversation, October 16<sup>th</sup>, 2007)

Rachelle and Andre are aware, that as parents, it is important to determine how, when, and where each child learns best.

Rachelle has found the "... older they get the more they can handle."

Max and Harold, Janelle's children, are much more alike when it comes to homework than Rachelle's children. Janelle noted that when her boys developed relationships with their teachers, doing homework was less of a battle. As Max entered high school, Janelle noticed that he became much more independent and self reliant with his homework assignments. After revisiting the children's similarities and differences, I scribbled my wonder on my field notes, 'Why do some children handle homework better than others?' Stories of Max and Harold, and Channel and Thomas, make visible the complexity of homework. Their parents and I see a number of things at play: relationships with teachers, maturation, individual personalities, and cognitive development. These complexities can add to the frustrations parents feel when trying to figure out how best to help their children become more successful with homework.

Later, I was reviewing my field texts from my conversations with Selina and her response to my question about Ozzy's characteristics in relation to school.

I don't find him that organized, but he is a child, and how many of us were very organized when we were young? But you have to find a way that works for you and I don't think that he has figured that out. He needs to find a way to help him be organized so that he can get his homework done on time.

Selina shared a story of talking with a teacher about the differences between students. While Selina shared her reading about gender differences in the learning of boys and girls, the teacher refuted it, saying in her 20 years experience she had not observed such differences. Selina also spoke about how the teacher felt Ozzy had ADD and needed to be put on medication. When she took him to a specialist, the specialist disagreed both with the diagnosis and the need for medication. Selina was aware Ozzy needed help but she was caught in a place where her beliefs and perceptions, and those of the medical specialist, the teacher, and the educational system were in conflict.

When I contemplated the participants' stories of their five children, I recognized how different each individual child is. How the parents structure and monitor homework for each one of the five shifts, then, depending on the nature of their child. Even within such a small group, the variations were obvious.

### ***Variations within Teachers***

It became time for me along my journey to answer some of the questions the parent participants asked me. They were curious about why teachers do the things they do, for example, how teachers choose their assignments. I was aware that...

“[e]veryone's looking for the perfect teacher, but although their teachings might be divine, teachers are all too human, and that's something people find hard to accept” (Coelho, 2007, p. 11). The parents weren't looking to criticize; they were just curious.

Rachelle and Janelle believe teachers are taught what they need to know about homework to ensure each child is successful. Janelle inquired about homework and the curriculum by asking, “Where do [teachers] come up with what is taught to the kids, and what has to be covered in the year?” (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008) She wanted to

know because being the homework motivator can be exhausting. Janelle mentioned that if her kids are truly interested in a topic, they are happy to work on it on their own which, in turn, gives her a break as the homework monitor and motivator. Before answering her, I reflected on my role as teacher, then I explained to Janelle and Rachelle that I was never taught about homework when I went to university, and it was my belief that teachers are still not taught a philosophy or sound practices related to homework in current teacher education programs. I informed them that when I went to university, the word 'homework' was not mentioned by any of my professors, and the reason I assigned homework when I started teaching was because everyone else was doing it and I had to do it when I was going to school. "Teachers receive little training in devising truly educational and meaningful assignments, and many of them are not even required to be certified in their subjects" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 121). Both of these participants found it difficult to believe teachers are not instructed on homework. They "... assume[d] that teachers have studied how best to design worthwhile assignments that will truly promote learning. [They] assume[d] that [teachers] wouldn't waste [their] family's limited time with anything less" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 37). These parents believe teachers know what they are doing with homework when, in actuality, it is my belief that many teachers have not been formally educated about homework and the research to date does not provide clear evidence of homework's educational benefits for children.

While Janelle and I discussed the varying amounts of homework sent home, she commented, "... I don't know .... why [or] how some other teachers can have so much more homework than others. Some years teachers really believe in it .... lots and lots of homework, and it depends on their teaching style and things like that." When Selina

asked the teacher why Ozzy had to do so much homework, she was told, "... to prepare him for high school." She didn't want to buy into the high school preparation reasoning, not when Ozzy was in Grade 5. She shared her disagreements with me. "So, if you're trying to force [students] into doing something to prepare them for high school I think [Grade] 7 and 8 makes more sense than 5 and 6, cause even Grade 6.... they're still pretty young" (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). A teacher who treats students as individuals and differentiates the homework assignments, and takes the time to mark the assignments themselves, is an expectation for Selina now.

If you're going to make the kids work on it, then you have to give them enough respect to look at what they've done. It has to be important enough for the teacher to review it and mark it, otherwise what's the point? And they're not, because the problem that I would have is they would hand the homework to the kid in front of them or behind them and then you're just giving the child an opportunity to pick on my son because of how badly he does his work and I would say, "You cannot do that!"

Selina's experiences vary from the other participants because she has had to advocate for her son, and advocating has met with resistance from the other side.

Given Selina's passion about the need for differentiation, I asked Rachelle her thoughts. She affirmed Selina's sentiment when she said, "You can't teach every child the same in my opinion, your expectations have to be different because not everybody is great at everything and every family dynamic is different..." (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). I wondered, if every family is different, every child is different, and most

teachers teach differently, what happens to those students who receive the exact same homework as everybody else?

As teachers, we all have different perceptions of what homework means to us and why. I'm learning from the parents' stories how important it is to share these perceptions explicitly with our students and their parents, to invite them to share their own sets of perceptions, and then, together, devise a homework plan that will honor the best interests of the student and the family. Just because we see things one way, doesn't mean the parents see it the same way; therefore, we need to be clear with our perceptions of homework. What the parents do not want is for us to impose our own perceptions and beliefs on their families, if their beliefs do not concur.

... [T]he story of some of us who become owners of a professional power and a professional vocabulary is the familiar one of moral thoughtlessness. We brandish our authority in a ceaseless effort to reassure ourselves about our importance, and we forget to look at our own warts and blemishes, so busy are we cataloguing those in others. (Coles, 1989, p. 18)

Some teachers, according to Janelle, have become 'jaded'; they have become used to doing it one way and one way only. As a teacher, it can be difficult to remove yourself from the path you know so well, whether it is leading to the right destination or not. As Coles (1989) talked about, we must make it our business to try hard to read those signs that children, parents and families provide us because teaching is our chosen profession and the students and families we teach deserve that.

## **What Do Children Need?**

Both Rachelle and Janelle told me homework has gotten easier as their children have surpassed middle school and headed to high school, so I decided to take a closer look at literature on homework in relation to children's developmental stages. Arguments such as 'play as homework' (Seal, as cited in Buell, 2004), the child's changing cognitive structures, learning styles, lifestyle preferences, attention span and learning preferences are all used by educational researchers, psychologists, and pediatricians as deterrents to doing too much homework.

When my children play, they often take on other roles or characters that are much older than they are; whether they are action heroes or parents, they assume adult roles and portray adult characteristics. Remembering storied moments of my past, when Jonah would go for 'coffee' with his dad and they would read their own books, is another example of the child learning and displaying adult characteristics which, I believe, benefits my child. Seal (as cited in Buell, 2004) talked about Vygotsky, a learning theorist, who affirmed that play allows children to act beyond their age. Vygotsky:

... argues that 'when kids play, they are free to experiment and to learn from their experiences without worrying about how well they're performing.... That's important, because research has shown decisively that when children study because they enjoy it, their learning is deeper, richer and longer-lasting. (Buell, 2004, p. 23)

Bennett and Kalish (2007) looked at homework and play another way. "Paradoxically, children who give up time at the playground to study might also be giving up a proven opportunity to improve their cognitive functioning – as well as their grades and test

scores, especially in math and reading” (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 89). Vygotsky (as cited in Buell, 2004) stated:

...play creates a zone of proximal development in the child. In play, the child always behaves beyond his actual age, above his daily behavior; in play, it is as though he were a head taller than himself. As in the focus of a magnifying glass, play contains all developmental tendencies in a condensed form and is itself a major source of development. (p. 111)

Within my own family, my husband and I need play time and we are grown adults. Why do we expect more of our kids? For six and one half hours, children are asked to sit still, raise their hands when they want to talk, get up, or just go to the bathroom. When homework is assigned, teachers are asking parents to expect their children to repeat this same constrained activity at home. If my children are sitting in a desk for hours at school, and then at the kitchen table when they get home, when do they run around and play? When do they have the opportunity to promote their own learning through simulating experiences that enable them to reach beyond their current developmental zone? Is homework healthy when it replaces play?

Let’s remember the statistics Bennett & Kalish (2007) gave us in Chapter 1. “Since 1980, the time children spend on homework has ballooned by 51 percent” (pp. 11, 81). They also cite Melina Sothorn, a pediatric obesity expert, as saying, “... Giving children hours of homework when they should be outside playing can lead – and probably has led – to the obesity epidemic” (p. 86). Being sedentary at school and then again at home is not going to help our children be physically healthy, in fact it could become a considerable societal issue in the future.

Thinking about whether homework is healthy, from another perspective, both Janelle and Selina spoke of the health issue of stress that affects their families when there is too much homework. “A study published in 2002 found a direct relationship between how much time high school students spent on homework and the levels of anxiety, depression, anger, and other mood disturbances they experienced” (Kohn, 2006, p. 11). Bennett and Kalish (2007) go one step further and report on the results of mental health issues that are occurring more and more with our children.

We think it’s no coincidence that as such academic pressures have increased, so have the number of children with mental health issues. Consider these statistics: According to researchers at Stanford University School of Medicine, the number of seven-to-seventeen-year-olds who visited the doctor for depression more than doubled from 1995 to 2002, when a staggering 3.22 million kids were treated. A 1999 Surgeon General’s Report found that 13 percent of kids aged nine to seventeen suffer from anxiety disorders.... (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 113)

These statistics are frightening, yet we cannot assume the results are related to homework issues; we need to look at the whole picture, with all of the variances, but still acknowledge that homework could be a factor.

The differences in learning styles from teacher to child and from parent to child are yet another reason for variation. “When children learn in a different style than their parents and teachers, they often have difficulty in school and often have conflict at home” (Maring & Magelky, 1990, p. 549). Those variations can be as distinct as a fingerprint.

Listening to the parents’ stories, laying them alongside my own, and reading the literature in the field has made me aware of the demands on children. How does

homework fit into the mix of a child's life, with school, family, friends, activities, play or leisure time, and rest? "If children need one hour of exercise each day and ten to eleven hours of sleep each night, yet are burdened with several hours of homework, something has to give" (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 97). Because families are left to decide how to juggle these multiple demands, it is important that families have a say in whether homework makes up part of the mix, and if so, how much homework and what kinds.

### ***Homework: Bringing Home to School***

Bateson (1994) invites us to travel a step further by imagining how schools and homes can be intertwined in new ways. "[T]he contrast between home and school is illuminating and offers an open door to a world that is wider but not necessarily separate..." (p.197). To look forward to the future, to designing homework that will benefit all children, Janelle's words bring forward a possibility. Janelle spoke about projects her son, Harold, had worked on with friends, and how Harold enjoyed those homework assignments much more than the daily spelling or math questions that typically comprised his homework (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Janelle spoke about assignments her children were given that particularly addressed the development of community. These service learning assignments focused on serving others to help make a better community. Janelle likes it:

... [w]hen students learn life skills too. Even [students] going out and working at different places like the food bank or seniors homes. I think it's so good for them to see life and stuff around them other than reading, writing and arithmetic which are very important.

You need to also know about interacting with people, respect... that there are different people, different economic backgrounds, there's people that have money, people that don't have money, people that have food, people that you know... and I think [developing community] is so important. I think that's good because kids need to learn about community, they need to learn about volunteerism. (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008)

Instead of doing drill and practice for homework, Janelle would like to see community projects as homework, with the idea being to provide a service to others within their community. What could students learn from these types of homework assignments? What values might they learn? Might they learn responsibility and independence? Might they learn work habits and skills? It is an interesting homework premise to contemplate, where schooling and education combine, where home and community are brought to schooling rather than schoolwork being brought home.

Corno (2000) speaks to this broader rethinking of homework. "A new conceptualization of homework is not just an academic task but one that infiltrates family and peer dynamics and the nature of teaching in community organizations as well as in school" (p. 2). Thus, Corno believes group assignments are positive when they help build community. She believes homework can be reimagined to play a unique role in providing opportunities for social communication and contact among peers that fosters a deeper sense of community. With societies increase of two working parents in a household, homework 'buddies' can provide a safe support for the child who is alone after school (p. 5). Janelle spoke of a time when Harold had to work on a Science Fair assignment with a friend in his class. She remembered how excited he was to plan it out and to organize the

dates when they could get together to do the experiment. Not only did Harold choose who he was working with, but they also chose what they would be testing and how they would display their information. It was one of the few times that Harold looked forward to doing his homework.

Other more specific skills can be developed within collaborative project-based homework, according to Corno. Planning for meetings and setting up times to prepare and work on assignments involves the formation of partnerships, and the development of organizational skills. Collaboration is an important skill that develops in the process of learning to work with others. “Much as when adults collaborate successfully, some children will share complementary ideas so well that the experience of working together on a school project can generate feelings of flow. Homework then becomes anything but a grind” (Corno, 2000, p. 5). Janelle’s emphasis on service learning affirms this has been true for her children; these types of assignments are the ones her children are most excited about.

Besides working on peer group assignments at home, libraries, youth centers and homework assistance facilities, as part of a greater societal community, can also provide places of peace and quiet where students can work collaboratively. Where I live, there is a school that has worked to provide a meeting place in the evenings where families gather. The focus is on developing community by teaching new families about the city, about the school, and to answer questions in a comfortable setting.

When I searched the internet for places that provide homework assistance, besides links to libraries and tutor world sites, settlement agencies were listed as places for immigrant students to receive homework help. In addition, there are literacy programs

that recruit volunteers to work with learners for one-on-one tutoring within the local schools. These programs will also supply volunteers to work in small groups for drop-in homework help sessions. Other variations include Homework Clubs such as the Junior Chefs program, Reading Circles and Acting for Life which also focus on developing literacy. Large cities often have Community Resource Centers where students can be assisted with homework, study skills and test preparation by volunteer tutors. Last year, I received a letter from my children's school informing parents that a 'homework club' was starting during the noon-hour. It was a welcomed sign of new practices schools can embrace as a means to redefining homework, yet when looking at many of the places offering support, it is evident all children are not included.

While some students receive extra help within these buildings, we need to rethink the premise of learning to encompass the community; all children can learn from community. Reimagining places where all students can complete assignments with support would offer students a way to work together; a way of making the homework experience community based.

While it is a shift to move to community based homework, it acknowledges the ways in which children learn from a range of sources. Further, integrating community projects that develop life skills as well as the skills delineated with the written curriculum and that are based on the family's and student's strengths, interests, contexts and desires, would foster purpose and motivation for the project. Corno (2000) summarizes how this type of homework bridges the gap between the written curriculum and the hidden curriculum.

Homework is a bridge for knowledge to travel back and forth between school and home. Hill (2006) speaks of the opportunity provided when work of the home is brought into school, rather than the other way around. Fishing trips, soccer games, community service projects, and church suppers are all experiences that children can apply to school lessons. The idea is to start with the child's own interests, thus eliminating the need for enticements from a teacher. From planning a meal for 100 to comprehending the signs of domestic abuse, from scorekeeping on a spreadsheet to memorizing Latin names for saltwater fish, children learn things outside school that teachers would almost always applaud. Yet too rarely do teachers assign homework such as this. There is no good reason for a one-way homework bridge. (Corno, 2000, p.4)

Understanding how families respond to homework is integral to understanding how to reimagine homework if we want it to have a positive impact for children, parents and families. Newman (1995) posed an important question. While we know the family is "... the child's first teacher, and we talk about the need for homes and schools to work together ... do we really understand each other in order to make a connection that will benefit all concerned?" (p. 296) Bringing home and community to the learning in school can only serve to make homework a more positive and beneficial experience for everyone involved. Ideas such as service learning and meaningful group projects help us to see there are new ways of conceptualizing homework. We see that the unidirectional traveling we have been doing, with schoolwork moving into the home, and with no sense of a reciprocal exchange of learning, is not necessarily the best way. If there is going to be homework, it "... should be designed to promote two things: high quality learning and

the desire to keep learning” (Newman, 1995, p. 18). What we do not want to continue is anti-intellectual homework.

### **Heading Into a New Direction**

In the participants’ stories of homework, I heard both their willingness at times to assume the roles assigned to them by teachers in regard to their children’s homework and their resentment toward those roles at other times. Hearing their stories of the impact homework can and does have on their families at times, I wonder, who am I, as a teacher, to tell parents how they are supposed to spend their time with their children outside of school hours?

Including the parents, the family and the students in a discussion of what homework could look like, what knowledge is most important to them, is an integral part of building a successful homework program. “If you give [students and families] more responsibility and ownership for their own education, let them have choices about how they’re going to do it, they rise to the occasion. Jamming homework down their throats isn’t part of it” (Kohn, 2006, p. 188). Inviting parents, families, teachers, and schools to come together develops a sense of community; it forms a group of people who collectively decide what works and doesn’t work as far as the children’s homework program is concerned. We learn from listening to one another.

Reliving my participants’ stories, my own stories and considering the literature and research on homework, my overlapping lenses of parent, teacher and researcher have progressively become clearer. While homework can and does work for some parents and their children, it can indeed be harmful in others. How, then, can we reimagine homework differently in ways that work for everyone?

In sum, this chapter has exposed some of the variances occurring between students, homes and families, and within certain contexts. It must be noted there are no concrete answers about homework that will work for every student; therefore, we must look to shape a system of education that promotes inquiry into families' lives. In Chapter 5, I look at what it will take to imagine homework differently. I believe it is possible through a respectful acknowledgement of the variances within the families' lives, a commitment to teacher education in which how to design homework in relationship with children and families becomes an integral element of the curriculum, and a call for continued research to support the required changes.

## Chapter 5

### What Will It Take? Re-Imagining Homework

*So when you are listening to somebody, completely, attentively, then you are listening not only to the words,  
but also to the feeling of what is being conveyed,  
to the whole of it, not part of it."*

Jiddu Krishnamurti

Looking backwards and looking forwards, I am able to assimilate how I have arrived at my final destination by looking at the whole of my narrative journey. I began by immersing myself in the story of homework within my personal and professional life. I have taken the time to gaze back at my writing and the chapters that have come to fruition. In Chapter 1, I shared why I chose to inquire into parents' experiences of homework alongside their children and families. I included an overview of the questions I was pondering about homework and what current research suggests. In Chapter 2, I planned out my research journey, alongside the participants' voices, with vivid descriptions of my plans. In Chapter 3, I shared how the parents I spoke with made sense of homework, what homework means to them based on their own personal knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995), and I explored their notions of how schools are run in relation to homework. In Chapter 4, I traveled farther to bring to light the multitude of variances that clearly affect parents' perceptions of homework and the idea that blaming parents or educators is not the answer to implementing homework that is valuable to each family. While in Chapter 4 I introduced the lack of teacher education on homework, in Chapter 5 I explore this discussion further in regard to practices of possibility because the parents expressed their concerns and their 'want' to have teachers, as professionals, educated on the pros and cons of homework. I also explore the parents'

desire for an extension of the communication that currently exists about homework between classroom teachers and themselves. From there, as a researcher, I question the implementation of homework policies by schools and school boards and the pros and cons that can occur with this type of prescribed agenda. Lastly, I look to future research that may uncover new roads to carry families, teachers and researchers to fulfilling homework destinations.

As my temporal flow shifted to the present, I began writing Chapter 5 by traversing forwards and backwards to develop and link the paths that have been traveled in previous chapters. The interconnections between communication about homework, homework policy and homework reform became apparent. Knowing the strengths and challenges homework can create in students' and families' lives helped me, as a researcher, to see new possibilities.

Keeping myself present as a parent, teacher and researcher was a critical component of my narrative thesis. When recalling a portion of my past as a beginning teacher, I remember starting my journey as an educator who gave homework, then as a parent who dutifully helped my son to complete his homework. I began my research with strong wonders about whether young children should have homework, concerned that homework was harming my family's time together. After reading some of the literature, my thoughts about homework became stronger, convinced even that a 'No Homework Policy' was in order.

As I continued my research and spent time having conversations with parents about homework, my views changed. Hearing how these parents believed in its non-academic benefits caused me to rethink the hidden curriculum of homework. I pondered

whether it is up to me, as an educator, to decide if homework is or is not suitable for all families. The multiplicity of my experiences, combined with the parents' stories and the literature, opened up new possibilities for imagining how homework might look in schools and in homes. I believe including parents in the decisions of what kind of homework would work best for their children and their families' lives is a step in the right direction. The way to do this is by developing relationships with the students and the families to get to know and understand them better. For me, the key is to consistently listen to parents' voices and give back to them the power to choose what is right for their families outside of school hours. It is about flattening the hierarchies that exist in schools.

### **Seeing Through the Haze**

Through my tellings and retellings, the lines between parent and teacher became blurred. My temporal flow brought me to my past when I didn't know how to cross that blurred line, or even if I should. My story begins several years ago, while I was taking one day off a week to volunteer at my kids' school to show my children I believed in their education. One of my awkward moments happened as I was preparing the class's homework books for the following day. When I was almost finished my task, I realized one child's homework book was missing so I asked the teacher where the 'missing' book was. She commented confidently, "Her mother refuses to do homework at home with her daughter so we don't send any. Can you believe it? And her mother is a teacher too!" At the time, I agreed with her within my positioning as parent and teacher; I was complacent in my acceptance of homework.

Later on that day and continuing forward to the present, I found myself asking questions. Was this homework meaningful? It was too much for my son, and I assumed

for the girl whose parent refused homework. How many other parents felt the same way? How many parents felt they could speak up about it? I know I didn't speak up... and I am a teacher as well as a parent. My lenses were hazy and I didn't know where to stand. I needed to learn how to communicate with my children's teachers without coming across as a 'know it all.' I wanted to make the situation better for my son and to advocate for the children who struggled with the homework assignments. It took some practice and a lot of reflection, and I am still searching... always reflecting... always questioning the most beneficial and respectful way to communicate. Blending my own stories with the parent participants' stories has helped me to form a clearer picture of how parents and teachers could be positioned differently when discussing and planning for homework.

### **Filling in the Cracks: Repositioning of Parents**

In imagining a repositioning of parents and educators, a common message expressed by the parents is a desire for reciprocal communication, different types of communication and frequent contact between home and school. They felt the need for communication about modifying expectations for homework to give consideration to the variances in students, parents and families in a classroom.

Communication between teachers and families is dynamic and we see from the stories of the participants in this narrative inquiry how each family is unique in their context, their family structure, their hopes and desires for their children and their families. It makes sense then that "[t]he educator-parent relationship ... has to vary according to family profile... (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 38). It is when we listen to their stories, when we stop long enough to "hear their voices" (Fine & Weiss, 2003, p. 69), we can negotiate a homework plan that will be positive for both the child and the family.

Each parent discussed the different types of contact she desired between home and school. Rachelle, in reflecting on an experience she had with one teacher, said, “Give [parents] a little questionnaire, because *that* I found, was really helpful, and I thought, ‘This teacher cares about what my kid did or [what he/she] is all about.’ That’s what I got. The message was excellent...” (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Asking parents what they feel their child’s interests are, how they view their child’s work and study habits, what homework is like in their house, as well as what areas they would like the teacher to focus on are questions that Rachelle likes to answer early on in the school year. Rachelle continued, “... I would appreciate a phone call from the teacher saying, ‘You know what? Your kid is really strong here, and she’s doing really well here, but if she just did a little bit more on her multiplication tables, she could just zoom right to the top’” (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Rachelle also wishes that “... homework would [be] more defined...” so that both she and Andre could help their children figure out how to do the work more quickly.

Janelle speaks to the need for clearer communication about assigned homework as well. She feels when her children come home from school, they shouldn’t have many questions about their homework, as long as the assignments were explained clearly and the teacher has checked for understanding. “One thing I would ask the teachers is, if they hand out some sort of assignment, [be more specific with] their details” (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008). When Janelle’s children bring lots of homework, she wants to know the reasons for it – perhaps they don’t understand the concepts or perhaps there are ways to help them at home. “There’s got to be different factors you know for why they’re bringing that stuff home....” In Janelle’s mind, less homework means her

children are using their time wisely at school and are most likely understanding the content. In these instances, she relies on what she infers from her children's light homework, given there is not a corresponding communication from the teacher.

Selina, like the other two parents, wanted more communication about homework from Ozzy's teachers. Trying to figure the homework out at home, with few, if any instructions or understanding of how teachers wanted it to be completed was a challenge for Selina. She compared the idea of completing work with no directions as being "... a foreign language..." she couldn't decipher. Selina got tired of going into the school on most days to have the same conversations with teachers, so she started to send notes with Ozzy for the teachers to read. "Then I would find that the teachers would write snotty little comments like, 'Could have done better,' and I'm thinking, 'No... he couldn't!' because I had to help him get to that point" (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). Writing notes back and forth was sometimes a misleading way to communicate. What one meant when they wrote something down, was sometimes interpreted in a completely different way. Selina commented:

It makes me question the ability of the teacher, the professionalism of that person because if... if I am unsatisfied [with what] the parent has done, I shouldn't take it out on the child, and lots of times, if Ozzy doesn't get his homework done, he gets into trouble... even if I write a note! (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Through the parents' stories, we see how traversing the communication boundary has been a challenge at times. They see new possibilities for communication through parent questionnaires, frequent phone calls and more thorough directions to students in class and to parents to accompany the homework home.

In suggesting such changes, the parents were asking for both more frequent communication and communication in less formal ways, outside of structures such as Meet the Teacher nights and the regular report cards. They believe waiting for up to three months to discuss the areas their children are having success or difficulties with is far too long. At Rachelle's school, "Meet the Teacher" night focuses on the teachers' plans rather than on the children. During that time, "... you can't really get into the issues, if there is an issue..." (taped conversation, April 16<sup>th</sup>, 2008). Selina shared that she liked communicating with teachers often because, then, if she had a difficult night dealing with homework issues, she could inform the teacher right away in hopes they could help to relieve some of the pressure she was feeling.

The parents I spoke with encourage any communication that comes from school, whether it is from the teacher, their children or both. After listening to the parents' voices about communication, I continued to pull forward my own memories as an educator about forms of communication I used. I have corresponded with parents in various ways, but was it effective communication? How often did I phone parents to figure out ways to address their child's difficulties rather than just sending homework home? Could I have used class time differently by having students bring shared materials to use for projects to be done together in school rather than alone at home? Could I have used the precious time I invested in making monthly newsletters to focus instead on more personal contact with the parents through home visits, phone calls or conferences? I realize now I was good at sending home monthly newsletters detailing what we were learning in class, when their assignments were due or when they were having tests. I was good at making sure the students completed their work in a timely manner. I was not so good at asking

for parental input or decision-making in regard to these matters. It is only now, in hearing the stories of parents, and in learning how much they know and can contribute in regard to homework, that I realize the importance of fostering an equitable parent teacher/teacher parent relationship.

### **My Journals: Looking Backwards**

Looking back through my field text and the stories the three parents shared, I took note that most positive experiences with homework occurred for the families when the parents did not question the teacher's judgment or decisions. Two of the participants, Rachelle and Janelle, parents who do not want to question the work their children's teachers assign, are the two parents who have had positive relationships with their children's teachers. Selina, who has called her son's teachers, gone to the school to speak to them, requested meetings, and written notes to accompany Ozzy's homework upon its return to school, has not always had these same positive relationships. It seems fair to say, then, there is a hierarchy that exists between most parents and their children's teachers that can limit effective communication.

In reviewing my field text, I see that Rachelle views the teacher as the expert, and she has had positive communication exchanges. Janelle, who also sees the teacher as the expert, and who has been very involved within the functioning of the school, has also had positive exchanges. Selina, who believes she is the expert with her child, has not had many positive exchanges and, when she did, she felt it was because the teacher listened to her suggestions and made an effort to develop a relationship with Ozzy.

I have talked with the teacher about what type of homework is not only acceptable but what is workable for Ozzy and I call meetings at the school at the beginning

of the year, and I make sure that they totally understand where I'm coming from... I believe you need to know where the kids come from to be able to understand what they can achieve, and so I make sure and I've been very vocal.  
(taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008)

Communicating with teachers became successful for both Selina and Ozzy when teachers listened, believed, and tried Selina's suggestions. When communication was reciprocal, rather than hierarchical, Ozzy began to respond to school and homework and the stressful impact of homework on Selina's family was relieved.

### ***Changing the Flow of Conversations***

I have lived through many stories of homework as a teacher and as a parent, even though my children are still young. The teacher and I were usually each situated within our own positions with reluctance to step into the other's 'shoes.' Why did I respond to my son's homework demands with defeat? I am a teacher myself, yet I ask, "What right do teachers have to decide how *my* family should spend *our* time outside of school?" How can parents and teachers work as a team and come to some sort of agreement on what is best for each individual child and family?

Janelle acknowledged there are more parents that talk amongst one another than go to their children's teachers because, "... parents are more comfortable with other parents" (taped conversation, April 30<sup>th</sup>, 2008). If Janelle is unsure of how to help her children, she opts to call other parents about the homework. When I asked Janelle why parents don't feel comfortable talking to teachers, she replied, "... not every teacher you have a relationship with... where you can talk to them, or feel comfortable talking to them. Some [teachers] are more approachable than others." Through my own personal

encounters as a parent, professional encounters as a teacher and through conversations as a researcher, I can confirm that the idea of parents contributing their perspectives and ideas freely with teachers was, and continues to be, uncharted territory for the majority.

Solitary conversations among parents and among teachers do not provide an answer to the current homework debate. “Thus, it is the *intimacy* ...that is ... key” (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 14). The building of relationships between teachers and parents – a give and take quest that requires a reciprocal, non-judgmental, open approach – is essential to repositioning parents as central in the story of homework. There are so many “... opportunities for learning about the range of human potential, if only we look with open eyes” (Bateson, 1994, p. 22). Opening our eyes and our hearts to parents’ stories, and accepting what we hear through their stories, will provide us with common ground from which to make sense of each child’s and family’s homework journey.

### **Expeditions Towards Homework Policies**

In the current literature, it is clear that some researchers and educators like the idea of a ‘No Homework Policy’ while others believe that assigning homework does help slightly with academics (Kohn, 2006: Bennett & Kalish, 2007). If we look to the participants’ families, we can imagine how a defined policy would affect them. Rachele admits that on some nights, completing homework is difficult because ‘life gets in the way.’ Janelle has a set time for homework that works for her family, but what if the policy did not support the conscious decisions they have made for their family? Selina admits that doing homework with Ozzy in the evenings is a ‘fight,’ and she is the only one at home to deal with the repercussions. If there was to be a set policy with defined

homework times and limits, would it suit all families? We are called to ask how we can rethink policy in new ways.

Parents have a voice regarding what their children learn outside of school. From choosing time with family and friends, to cultivating interests and responsibilities, to having the child learn music, dance or an athletic skill, parents have been able to influence how their children spend their out of school time, except for homework. Goldberg (2007) puts into perspective the interference of homework in family life.

Homework is an anomaly that traverses the boundary between family and school. It is a standard created at school for behavior to take place in the home. There is no other area in a child's life where an authority outside the parent has so much influence on policies and practices in the home. (p. 2)

How do we stay awake to the possibility of giving greater choice to parents about homework, to equalizing power between parents and teachers, and helping to develop a sense of community within a group of people with a vested interest in children? How can we rethink the establishment of policies with parents in ways that they become part of the solution?

As a teacher with many years experience, I am aware of the local school division's statements written into the school handbooks all students receive at the beginning of the year. The paragraph on homework is vague and allows every teacher to make their own decisions on the type and amount of homework sent home. When I look through samples of the types of statements in different schools' handbooks, the words 'expect,' 'will need to know,' and 'must support' are common in many.<sup>4</sup> From being

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<sup>4</sup> In order to protect the anonymity of the schools, I have chosen not to cite my specific sources. Instead, I see these statements as representative of the range of statements one finds in school handbooks. It is not my intention to name any school in particular, but to

expected to provide an atmosphere which is conducive to learning in their home, assigning passwords for parents to search for homework assignments, to being told to support their child's learning, most handbooks require parents to be actively involved. A school in the Toronto area has a five page printable document on "Homework Policy and Expectations." Within this policy, the amount of time per day and days per week students are "expected" to spend on homework is documented for each grade. I am drawn to wonder who has the right to determine this expectation for teachers? Who has the right to determine this expectation for parents? On what basis does the school form its policy and expectations?

In my search for policy on homework, I came across Toronto District School Board's "Homework Foundation Statement" (Policy P.036 Cur., 1999). An excerpt follows:

The Toronto District School Board believes that homework is a partnership, a co-operative effort between home and school involving parents, teachers, and students. Homework provides both an expression of the school's seriousness of purpose and a window into each student's daily life at school.

The Toronto District School Board is committed to strengthening the partnership between home and school, and to working openly with staff, students, parents, and the community to create the conditions that allow all students to succeed....

The foundation statement is intended for use by administrators and schools in

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point out the systemic issue of homework policies more globally. Document analysis was done on over 10 handbooks and publicized school division statements across Canada.

their review and development of local school homework guidelines. While the policy uses the words of partnership and cooperation, it only talks about the school's agenda – the school's seriousness towards learning and the child's life while at school. It does not attend to the reciprocal seriousness of the home, or the child's life at home. This policy also stipulates its use for administrators and schools and neglects the incorporation for use by parents and families. It's about the school's agenda, the school's decisions, and the school's imposition of homework on the home. This policy has nothing to do with partnership or cooperation. Instead, it is about parents doing what the school tells them to do; it is "schoolcentric" (Lawson, 2003).

While continuing my search, I came across few schools who were taking the time to survey or meet with parents to collectively form homework policies. Surveying parents and then forming the policies on our own is not cooperation. If we are really going to work together, the policy needs to be developed together and enacted together.

### ***Challenges with Effective Homework Policies***

Rethinking policies is not just for policy makers, but includes teachers and parents. Fine and Weis (2003) invite educators to alter the way policies are created and ask educators to take a stand.

In some ways it is easy for teachers to assume that these are questions for policy makers.... – just not for teachers.... We believe that the future of public education, as an intellectual project of serious, critical engagement, lies in the hands of educators, working with students, parents, community activists, policy makers, and others to re-imagine what could be, and what must be, in those spaces we call schools. (p. 1)

Alongside the teachers is a road that runs parallel, involving parents. Noddings (1998) commented, "... Dewey would likely respond by saying that, in a democracy, all those who have a stake in the outcome must share in deliberation" (p. 487). Parents are recipients of the policies enacted on homework from the board level to the classrooms their children are part of. Therefore, as schools plan to develop or rethink their homework policies, the inclusion of all affected recipients in continued and consistent policy reform is required to ensure positive homework experiences for all families.

By redefining policy through the inclusion of input from teachers and parents, we are creating an educational practice that will provide students with optimal growth. Fine and Weis (2003) summarized well when they said, "For too long, policy and practice have been separated. And the price we pay is that policy all but legislates out good educational practice" (p. 3). Effective homework policy "... demands an equitable, interactive relationship between parents and professionals. The message to educators is clear. There still remain a number of parents for whom this spirit is not being translated into practice" (Garriott et al., 2000, p. 47).

Greene (1991) speaks of a "language of compassion" (p.553) which is in stark contrast to the 'foreign language' of educators which Selina spoke of earlier. Greene referred to the fortunate ability of humans to have the skill of language. In being human, we have the power to use words and in using our words (which requires practice), we develop skill. The skills we develop enable us to practice cooperation, to practice working together, which allows us as humans to learn compassion for the differences in humanity. Greene reflected on our differences and standards in education:

When we relate all this to the acknowledgement of the newcomers in our country, our cities, our classrooms, we come to realize (or ought to come to realize) that there cannot be a single standard of humanness or attainment or propriety when it comes to taking a perspective on the world. There can only be an ongoing, collaborative decoding of many texts. (Greene, 1991, p.212)

I am suggesting that schools and school divisions do not set a written policy in stone but instead invite educators to set up individual policies within their classrooms with each student and each family as decision makers, and recognize that the policy can and most likely will change throughout the year. Fine and Weis (2003) ask all teachers:

... to respond to the voice that “called” you to education; the slice of yourself that seeks to reach the child few have reached, to create a space in a classroom in which difference is interesting, not hierarchical, to imagine that your work as a teacher lies in creating brilliance in the classroom and sanity in the halls of policy making. (p. 3)

These changes are not easy but, “... the call to teachers rings urgent and passionate. It demands courage” (Fine & Weis, 2003, p. 177).

When I left on my journey as a researcher, I carried a backpack that weighed my shoulders down with the heaviness of the homework burden. I was in search of answers, for me as an educator, for my children and for my family. I found that the ‘language of compassion,’ as spoken by Greene (1991), has served me well. Talking with the participants, reading about homework, conversing with colleagues and other academics, the language of compassion has taught me there is no right answer to ‘how much’ homework is enough or ‘what type’ of homework is best. What I found was a river with

many streams branching in and out of it; the river, constantly moving, constantly on a journey to somewhere new, always inviting other streams to join with it and flow along. By traveling together, my partners were able to lift part of the load I carried, and we were able to carry each other to new destinations along the way. As Greene (1991) shares,

... We will be outside the law until we find our language of compassion; and then we will write our new maps and keep exploring, gorge after untapped gorge. And there will be norms we can agree on, principles we can freely make our own in a sphere of compassion, a sphere of care. We will be inside; and we will be challenging. The enterprise will be shared. (Greene, 1991, p. 553)

When as parents, teachers, and policy makers, we rid ourselves of the foreign language of homework and we share a language of compassion, we can go forth on our journey together towards homework reform. The participants and I continue to ride the river together... we are not alone.

### **Toll Roads: What Will it Take to Imagine Homework Differently?**

It is time to consider homework in a new way; the literature argues there is a need for homework reform. Bateson, (1994) reminds us that "... [i]t is a mistake to try and reform the educational system without revising our sense of ourselves as learning beings, following a path from birth to death that is longer and more unpredictable than ever before" (p. 212). We cannot tell teachers or children that things will always be the way they are. We know it must change. The type of reform needed involves a change of thinking, a commitment to teacher education, and a call for supporting research. As parents, teachers or researchers, when we offer a respectful acknowledgement of the

variances within families' lives, we offer a new way of providing positive homework experiences.

When Rachelle and I were nearing the end of one of our conversations, she asked me, "How do we know *what* homework will benefit our kids?" We discussed this for awhile and concluded it would be different for each child and each family. "Homework may indeed 'work' with one set of students but fail to work with another because of the varying sets of expectations and experiences brought to that homework" (Buell, 2004, p. 11). Homework is not an issue in some homes, but it is an issue in others.

One student I taught had a gymnastics commitment that took upwards of 30 hours a week, yet, at the time I still believed that all the other students were doing the homework, and so should she. I never even fathomed the differentiating of homework assignments. I never even thought of homework as an area that needed reform.

### ***Passing the First Toll: Teacher Education***

Teaching teachers about communication, educating them about families, and demonstrating what responsive homework can look like, if agreed upon with the parents, can help to ensure that we are not marginalizing parents in relation to their children's schooling, we are not affecting students' self esteem negatively, we are not imposing our own agendas into the families' homes, and we are not conforming to an unquestioned status quo. What we are doing is opening doors to future educative endeavors by helping to develop a love for learning in the context of schooling and in the broader context of education, for which the home is responsible.

As a formally educated elementary school teacher, the focus in my teacher education program seemed to be about learning the content of subject matter rather than

the process of facilitating learning. I had courses on social studies, science, reading and more, but I did not have courses on homework or communicating with parents, both of which are essential for successful teachers. It is interesting to note I am not alone, because "... the overwhelming majority of teachers have never taken a course in homework... (Bennett & Kalish, 2007, p. 3). Hong et al. (2004) describe what the education of teachers in regards to homework and communicating would look like:

Teacher training is a critical aspect of homework intervention programs. It focuses on the role of the teacher as he/she assigns and receives homework from students. Teacher training may include lessons about adaptive instructions; how to provide adaptive homework assignments; advantages and disadvantages; when to change instructional strategies for students with homework difficulties; and understanding, assessing, and interpreting students' as well as their own learning preference profiles. (p. 5)

During one of my conversations with Selina, she questioned me on the education teachers receive on homework (taped conversation, April 9<sup>th</sup>, 2008). I shared my own experiences with Selina, and then she commented, "I think that teachers are not getting the education that they need. There is homework that disturbs me. The [fact that] homework is not even discussed [bothers me] because it totally can ruin a family's life for a whole year..." (taped conversation, April 23<sup>rd</sup>, 2008). Ozzy is a good example of a child who did struggle, who did act out, and who did believe that some teachers didn't care because of the issues his family had over homework. How many parents are aware that many teachers have not received formal education on homework: what it is, how it may be assigned, what makes for a good homework assignment, for what age is

homework most valuable? As parents, teachers and researchers, the question Bennett & Kalish (2007) ask is one we should all be asking, “Why aren’t our teachers getting the training they need before they set foot into a classroom?”(p. 53)

Another area of teacher education could include learning about children’s brain development. This knowledge will help teachers to understand the some of the differences between students in their classroom. In the need for teachers to have formal education about homework, more informed methods to design homework in relation to other aspects of children’s development and in relation to holistic education are all important. As far as homework is concerned, all parents agreed that treating children fairly means not treating them equally.

### ***Passing the Second Toll: Learning as “Coming Home”***

Being attentive of the knowledge that families possess, the contributions they can give, and the variations that can add to or detract from their children’s success in school are all essential in providing thoughtful education in today’s society. One way to rethink homework is to embrace that, as a society, we are all responsible for each child’s success and the parents are the true knowledge keepers of that success. Mary Catherine Bateson (1994) refers to a model of learning as ‘coming home’ (p. 203) in which schools become places that focus on blending the home, play, and parents’ knowledge.

Virtually all the learning that proceeds schooling – walking, talking, bye-bye and peekaboo, the intricate rhythms of life within a household – is learning as homecoming. It proceeds at dazzling speed compared with school learning, yet it is underestimated nearly everywhere. (p. 199)

Learning as coming home can inform schooling if we are willing to recognize differences as strengths that can "... build toward an understanding and a capacity to participate in a complex social and biological world..." (Bateson, 1993, p. 203). Whether we follow Buell, Bateson, or other researchers, by reconceptualizing teaching as much more than subjects, classroom management, or instructional strategies, it can enable us to move forward with homework reform.

### **Future Travels: The Power to Choose**

The inclusion of parents in homework decisions, how much and what kind of homework is beneficial, as well as any in depth studies on the benefits of homework beyond academics, are all areas that are minimal or missing in the research.

As people embark on a journey, often, they find new places they want to unearth, and new ideas they want to learn. My own journey has positioned my researcher's lens toward new destinations, or to new areas that are ripe to be explored. Therefore, I have made a list of the future landscapes to which I would like researchers to consider as they embark on their own travels.

### ***Giving a Voice to Students***

I have discussed looking through various lenses in order to grant different perspectives on how people see homework, but I have not researched homework from students' perspectives. Esquith (2007) says "... when teaching or parenting, you must always try to see things from the child's point of view" (p. 6). Kohn (2006), too, suggests we look at what homework feels like from the child's point of view, knowing that "[c]hildren cannot be made to acquire skills" (p. 117). Noddings (1998), when referring to Dewey, is quoted as saying:

Dewey was not interested in the mere acquisition of information. He was concerned with its intelligent application. Therefore, students were to be involved intelligently from start to finish in the work they undertake in school: in the construction of objectives, in the choice of means, in evaluating the results, in generalizing for future learning. (Noddings, 1998, p. 484)

We should not stop at involving students in our discussions on homework assignments, but extend the invitation to include in the research how they feel about the demands of homework outside of regular school hours. “To get new ideas, to move ahead, we – as educators – should listen to our children and students. When we listen to them, we learn what they are going through, and this knowledge can be used to shape what we do in teaching...” (Noddings, 2004, p. 154). When we learn what motivates students or how they feel about the current homework paradigm, we can develop homework programs that are better suited to meet their needs. Conducting research that involves student voice is an important future direction for reforming homework.

### *Extending Qualitative Research*

Rachelle, Janelle and Selina are families with support systems whether they be personal and/or financial. Not all families have the same level of support, therefore they live in contexts somewhat marginalized from the mainstream. Given the diverse experiences parents are living, it is equally important to have a wide range of voices represented in the research on homework – for example, parents who are new Canadians, parents who are living in various socioeconomic conditions, parents who are living in various family structures, and parents who are living in rural and urban geographical

regions. This would provide another qualitative window into the effects homework can have on various family structures.

### ***Narrative Inquiry Within a School***

Designing a narrative inquiry in which researchers work alongside teachers and families who are implementing positive homework changes would be an integral part to future research on homework. What this kind of research would do would give us the opportunity to generate alternative homework practices that currently do not exist.

The researcher could be situated in a classroom for an extended period of time, perhaps up to one year, so s/he could be immersed within the school and community setting. By being immersed, the researcher could develop deeper relationships with the teacher, with the students and with the parents of the children who are member's of the designated class. The researcher would need to find a teacher who is currently planning, willing and eager, to instigate homework changes, so that s/he could be a part of the process from the beginning. From the teacher's explanation of the process to the administration and colleagues, from inviting the parents in to discuss and design the changes, to implementing the changes in homework policy and practice within her/his classroom and alongside parents, it would be crucial for the researcher to be a part of each step. Talking with the teacher, the students, the parents and other school personnel about how the changes have affected them would be advantageous to all parties involved in the current homework debate.

### **A Reflective Turn: Opening up Possibilities, Traveling on New Roads**

As I gathered my belongings, said my goodbyes, and headed for the last door, I paused, believing my journey was nearing completion. I discovered what homework

meant to these parents and their families, based on their own personal knowledge landscapes (Clandinin & Connelly, 1995). I discovered what brought them to that knowledge and was told stories about how parents make sense of homework. I pondered what the conversations had revealed to me, and what was left to be revealed.

As I traveled onward, I realized I had heard more than I was prepared for. When I listened to the voices, with an open head and open heart, I heard many things. Through the parent voices I heard that character education and the development of work habits are important motivators for doing homework. Terms such as values, independence, responsibility, and work habits make visible the ‘hidden curriculum’ of homework for parents and for teachers. The parents also believe these skills will help to ensure success in their children’s lives and, as a result, are important to develop within their children’s education.

Even though the parents I had conversations with cited similar benefits to homework, we must remember they all have different lives and different contexts that have shaped their decisions. Ultimately, the participants want their children to be successful. They want them to feel safe and secure but they also want them to learn skills that improve character traits, work habits, and relationship building, so they can be proficient in their chosen careers and future life choices. From following traditions, looking into their own pasts, and listening to what other parents have to say, the parents’ voices told me homework is important to them, despite what the research says, because their children can learn non-academic skills from doing it. Gaining these abilities is perceived to be learned progressively and is a priority to these parents to ensure their children’s future successes. However, the parents have listened to what the research is

telling them, what the other parents are thinking and, as well, to my own personal and professional stories about homework. All stories and information have provided us with the ability to challenge, think and rethink our positions. “Parenthood is not a state of being but of becoming. The same, it should be added, is true for being an educator” (Rinaldi, 2006, p. 35). Just as I have changed how I viewed homework several times throughout my journey, so have the parents I was in conversation with. We are all in a state of ‘becoming’ and will continue to be so.

Just as Rinaldi (2006) compares parents to educators, I too have separated and combined my roles throughout my journey. Now at the end of this narrative inquiry, I find myself still in the process of ‘becoming’ an educator, a trip that has taken many years, and yet, I am aware, will continue for many more as there is so much yet to learn, so many roads not yet traveled. When I began my researcher’s journey to discover parents’ perceptions of homework and its effects on them, their children and their families, I was aware I chose that road because of who I was as a teacher and who I was as a parent at that moment in time. I was aware of my internal struggles with how I assigned homework and how my child was receiving it. I realized I was not alone with my struggles as a parent, but I did feel alone with them as a teacher. Conversations among educators or between educators and parents did not readily open themselves up to the topic of homework; homework was and is a taken-for-granted part of schooling and a taken-for-granted part of life. My struggles, though, told me it was an area worth exploring, worth giving voice to. I knew that “... [f]or narrative inquirers, it is crucial to be able to articulate a relationship between one’s personal interests and sense of significance and larger social concerns expressed in the works and lives of others”

(Clandinin & Connelly, 2000, p. 122). Just as I was searching for conversation to make sense of homework, the literature was revealing how complex and conflicted the experiences of homework can be for many families. I have encountered curves, intersections and bumps on the road, but I have always had my destination – the understanding of parents’ experiences with homework on a deeper level – within my reach. The parents and I continue to want to make positive changes with homework and the relationships that exist between the schools and the homes. As Coelho (1993) said, “We make a lot of detours, but we are always heading for the same destination” (p. 77). In traveling toward this destination, we gain more wisdom, more treasure to share, in the hopes of developing a universal wisdom, one in which we can all share, regarding homework.

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