

**Submission  
No 6**

## **INQUIRY INTO THE APPROACHES TO HOMEWORK IN VICTORIAN SCHOOLS**

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January 29<sup>th</sup> 2014  
**Mr. Michael Baker, EO**  
**Education and Training Committee**  
**Parliament House**  
**Spring Street**  
**East Melbourne 3002**

Dear ETC Committee,

I am a registered teacher with the VIT currently work on films. You can find me at <http://www.handmadefilms.com.au>. I hope one day to do a documentary on how children learn and what they need from schools and governments...I have taught in Catholic and government primary schools; Adult literacy programs for Tafe and the Australian Catholic University; and worked with preservice teachers at RMIT. I have been the executive officer/president for the Victorian Council of School Organisations where I have contributed to policy, including homework policy. I have been on three school councils, secondary and primary. I have also been a co editor and program manager for the TLN, a not for profit journal and professional development organisation for teachers in the Catholic, Independent and Government sectors. My qualifications include a Diploma of Teaching (ACU formerly Mercy Teachers' College), Bachelor of Education and a Masters in Teaching (RMIT).

I have been passionate about the lack of intellectual rigor around many educational issues, including homework since I began my teaching career in 1983.

The following are some of my thoughts on homework including two chapters of a Masters thesis I did on homework. I have also included a list of references but if you only read one reference you should read – *The Homework Myth* by Alfie Kohn 2006. You will not find a more comprehensive book on the research and the ignorant things people say about homework.

From his introduction: “ After spending most of the day in school, children are typically given additional assignments to be completed at home. This is rather curious fact that few people ever stop to think about it. It’s worth asking not only whether there are good reasons to support the nearly universal practice of assigning

homework, but why that practice is **so often taken for granted-even by vast numbers of parents and teachers who are troubled by its impact on children.**”

Some other interesting quotes from books I have recently read- *Free to Learn: Why unleashing the Instinct to Play will Make Our Children Happier, More Self-Reliant, and Better Students for Life.*” By Peter Gray 2013. The school system has directly and indirectly, often unintentionally, fostered an attitude in society that children learn and progress primarily by doing tasks that are directed and evaluated by adults, and that children’s own activities are wasted time.” He goes on to explain in his book that as children’s free time has been increasingly eroded by adult organized and supervised activities, their anxiety levels have gone up alarmingly. While this does not show causality it does provide food for thought. “Children are biologically predisposed to take charge of their own education!”

And this from *Back to Normal: Why Ordinary Childhood Behavior is Mistaken for ADHD, Bipolar Disorder, and Autism Spectrum Disorder*” by Enrico Gnoulati. 2013 “ As the research demonstrates we do most boys a great disservice when we tie grades more and more to staying on top of homework and pleasing teachers with demonstrations of preparation and effort.”

Neither of these books are about homework but they have many interesting things to say about it because it causes anxiety in families – in particular for children.

## **Final Word**

It has been my experience that there is a lot of emotion around this topic and not many facts. And because of the emotion there is often not much thoughtful debate. Some parents and teachers just want homework because they think it makes a difference even though they often don’t have any real evidence for holding such a view. Sometimes they want it because it makes them feel like they are doing something to help their children/ students. Some people feel most comfortable when they have a script to follow and it is hard to persuade them otherwise. My suggestion is that what the community really needs is a contemporary understanding of

teaching and learning which seriously challenges our ill-conceived out of date ideas in relation to education.

Whilst in the short term perhaps vague policy will be as sufficient as it has been in the past to keep everyone relatively happy, what we really need is some serious time and resources dedicated to developing a comprehensive strategy to inform the Victorian community about what is truly effective teaching and learning. We owe it to our children and to the future of our state

I would be happy to discuss any of my comments with you further.

Cheers,

Jacinta Cashen



Life and learning.

“All our lives long, every day and every hour, we are engaged in the process of accommodating our changed and unchanged selves to changed and unchanged surroundings; living, in fact, is nothing else than this accommodation: when we fail in it a little we are stupid when we fail flagrantly we are mad, when we suspend it temporarily we sleep, when we give up the attempt altogether we die.”

## **NO TO HOMEWORK NOT NO TO LEARNING AT HOME –**

First a definition – **Homework, teacher generated activities to be done at home usually on your own.**

Before we discuss homework I need to make some points about the context in which it operates.

Schools as we know them largely today – one teacher disseminating content and providing a broad array of activities to develop particular skills, for a number of subjects, for a number of children who are roughly of the same age but usually varying abilities. This is usually carried out within the confines of a classroom and with limited resources. The main game being to provide children with the knowledge and skills to get a good job.

Yes there are many schools that don't quite match this description. I know because I taught in some of them but I think generally the community still thinks schools are largely as I have described them above.

The problem with this model of schools is that they evolved not out of any thoughtful scientific exploration of the way we learn but merely out of desire to share particular content and skills with large numbers of children who were meant to comply with whatever they were told by their elders. Homework is part of this outdated model.

**In order for this inquiry to be useful I think the first questions should be about learning.**

How do we learn and what do we need to learn?

What helps us with our learning?

What kind of education for what kind of world?

And for the sake of the argument let's say we agree on a how we learn, what we need to learn and when we learn but we still think Homework as it stands should be part of this then we need to look at a number of constraints.

Homework would look completely different for a child at the early stages of their literacy learning compared to students at VCE.

Homework is inevitable whilst we have VCE for students in Years 10-12 but it doesn't have to be the case for children in primary schools.

**Teachers don't have time.** If homework is to be meaningful for each student then teachers need time to plan for each student and then they will have to make sure they give back proper feedback when the student has completed the homework, which will also require time. I found as a teacher that to operate at a high professional level it required about 54 hours a week plus an additional week of time that you have to find when it is report writing time. How does anyone do this well without additional resources

**Parents don't have time.** Let's face it which would you rather do worry about your child's homework that may or may not be of any long term value at all or spend some time with them stress free, reading a book, playing a board game, visiting family, doing a chore together, talking?

**Children don't have time** – they should be playing, helping around the home, pursuing hobbies, **doing something active**, living their lives now. – Unless of course they are doing VCE

If we continue with the VCE model in Victoria then students from years 10 to year 12 have no choice about homework. Their results rely on their capacity to do additional work at home.

## Some homework myths: Practice and study skills

- What's the point of practice when you don't know what you are doing?
- What's the point of practice when you know what you are doing?
- *"When we drill ourselves in a certain skill so that it becomes second nature, "we may come to perform that skill "mindlessly". Practicing some skills until you can do them in your sleep can interfere with flexibility and innovation".*

## Practise

- When you practice you are really practicing the behaviour. Unless you are engaged there is no guarantee you are learning.
- Some recent neuroscientific research shows that if you do things mindlessly they do not develop long-term neural pathways usually associated with learning

## Homework myths :Responsible Independent learners

“Consider the idea that doing homework promotes “responsibility.” Such a claim might seem plausible until we stop to ask what is it, exactly, for which students are actually responsible. Almost never are they permitted to decide whether to have homework, or how much, or what kind. Instead, their choices are limited to such peripheral questions as when to do what they’ve been required to do. This is, it must be conceded, a rather pale version of responsibility”.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1 Introduction**

There is a wide range of literature to be found on homework including books, journal articles, newspaper reports and an increasing number of websites devoted to providing assistance to students and parents.

The purpose of this literature review is to explore the various aspects of homework research that contribute to an understanding of what parents', students' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs are about the value of homework in a primary school setting. A significant amount of the literature to be found in journals and books focuses on the following aspects of homework:

Historical Perspectives

Definitions of Homework

The Purpose of Homework

Homework Activities

The Politics of Homework

Parental Involvement in Homework

Research Studies Related to Homework

Homework and Students with Learning Disabilities

The Role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Homework

The Role of Students, Parents, Teachers, Policy Makers and Politicians in the Development of Homework Policy.

### **2.2 Historical Perspectives**

You would be forgiven for thinking that homework has always been considered a valuable part of a student's school life, however a look at the literature on the history of homework shows that at various times homework has been in and out of favour generally for political, economic, educational and cultural reasons. An understanding of the history of homework may shed some light on the way homework is currently perceived by parents, teachers and students. Much of the literature available on the history of homework relates to the history of homework in the United States of America and the United Kingdom.

Hallam (2004) notes that in the United Kingdom, during the latter half of the 19th Century, homework was used to supplement the curriculum. The amount of homework students were required to do increased at this time to supplement the curriculum because

academic qualifications, which had been largely based on passing tests, gave students access to particular professions which in the past had relied on patronage as a basis of entry into some professions.

At a similar time in America, according to an account by Kralovech and Buell (2000) many families were moving from farms to the cities where parents often worked for long hours in factories. Children were also caught up in this pattern of long hours and were often required to share the workload at home, assisting with household chores. This workload did not allow any spare time for children to do homework.

*Family life now centred on work. For many immigrants from preindustrial cultures, school offered an effective means of disciplining students to the long working hours of an expanding market economy. But whether because school detracted from the time available for household labor or because it carried an implicit message regarding industrial work that some immigrant parents didn't want to hear, the relationship between school and many working –class parents was conflictive.*

*(Kralovech & Buell, 2000, p. 41)*

Parents at this time also believed that because children were working such long hours they needed to have some time to play in the fresh air. Some parents believed that playing in the fresh air prevented their children from getting ill (Kralovech & Buell, 2000). In the nineteen fifties in both the United States of America and the United Kingdom, and after a period characterized by health professionals and parents calling for limited or no homework for children because it was believed that homework undermined children's health and general well being, came a new cry for increasing the amount of homework given to students.

*With the 1957 launch of Sputnik the Russians "beat" us into space and permanently changed the educational landscape. The fifty-year trend towards less homework came to a sudden end when the country became obsessed with competing with the Russians; by 1961 the vast majority of educators and parents professed themselves in favor of homework.*

*(Kralovech & Buell, 2000. p. 47)*

Almost forty years on and in Australia the debate appears to have come full circle with a renewed call from some health professionals

and educators to reduce the amount of homework given to students or eradicate homework entirely because it can undermine the physical and mental wellbeing of children. For example, In 2005 at the Australian Council of State School Organization's Annual Conference in Canberra, (October, 2005) popular Adolescent Psychologist, Michael Carr-Greig expressed his concern at the lack of time adolescents were getting for sleep because of increases in the amount of homework. He argued that research indicated that students required at least nine of hours of sleep each night.

Australian principal and consultant on boys' education Ian Lillico (2004) also called for less teacher generated homework and more homework that relates to a wide range of activities which helps develop better interaction within families and allows children more time for relaxation, cultural and physical activity (see Appendix C, p. 93). One particular issue Lillico raises is that "in terms of information gathering, most people would agree that better, more relevant, better-presented information can now be obtained at home rather than school" (Lillico, 2004, p. 3). Lillico is referring here to students' access to the Internet. This of course assumes everyone has access to the Internet at home, which of course is not necessarily the case. He goes on to argue that there should be a greater balance between teacher generated homework and family/parent generated homework.

Recent reports in the media indicate that there is now more than ever a wide range of views about the importance of homework (see Appendix A, p. 84). Views include, homework does contribute to better academic results and prevents children from becoming couch potatoes, to one size homework does not fit all, homework does not contribute to academic success and it puts unnecessary stress on children when they are young.

### **2.3 Definitions of Homework**

In the literature there was not much dispute about the definition of homework as Hallam (2004) points out:

*While there has been much controversy about setting of homework, there is little controversy about its definition. Homework is usually taken to mean any work set by the school which is undertaken out of school hours for which the learner takes the primary responsibility.*

*(Hallam, 2004, p. 5)*

One of the most widely cited authors in the literature, Harris Cooper, a Professor and Chair of the Department of Psychological Science at the University of Missouri-Columbia who wrote several books, some of which explored literally hundreds of studies on homework, defines homework as, “tasks assigned to students by schoolteachers that are intended to be carried out during non – school hours (Cooper, 2001, p. 3). Cooper highlights the word *intended* because of the increasing number of children going to study groups after school hours or those children who complete their homework in Out of School Hours Care programs or indeed those children in high schools who choose to complete their homework during free or extra periods during the course of a normal school day.

While there is not much dispute about the definition of homework there is some debate about the purpose of homework, the type of homework, the amount of time spent on homework and who is primarily responsible for doing the homework.

A number of writers Cooper (2001), Hallam, (2004), and Kralovec and Buell (2000), acknowledge in the literature that homework is a complex issue that potentially has far reaching effects on students and their families. Cooper concludes that it can be both good and bad but reminds us in his opening pages of *The Battle Over Homework* that:

*Too often educators, parents, and students fall into ways of thinking that view schools and families as adversaries. Homework is a prime battleground in these conflicts. I firmly believe that the battle over homework can be avoided. Indeed, I view families as the first and principle site of learning and schools as extensions of families. When we keep these ideas in mind, homework becomes an opportunity for cooperation in learning.*  
(Cooper, 2001, p. xii).

## **2.4 The Purpose of Homework**

A number of purposes attributed to homework seem to be universal across the literature. They include contributing to a student’s academic performance, practising and developing generic skills, developing the partnership between home and school, supplementing the school curriculum and communicating what is being learnt at school.

Susan Hallam (2004) describes in detail what each of these purposes might include in the table following.

**Table 1**

*Purposes of homework (Hallam, 2004, p. 5-6)*

<p><b>Homework for promoting academic learning:</b>  <i>Practice and consolidation of work done in class</i>  <i>Preparation for future class work</i>  <i>Extend school learning</i>  <i>Encourage creativity.</i></p>
<p><b>Homework for the development of generic skills:</b>  <i>Provide opportunities for individualised work</i>  <i>Foster initiative and independence</i>  <i>Develop skills in using libraries and other learning resources</i>  <i>Train pupils in planning and organising time</i>  <i>Develop good habits and self-discipline</i>  <i>Encourage ownership and responsibility for learning</i></p>
<p><b>Homework that supplements the curriculum:</b>  <i>Ease time constraints on the curriculum</i>  <i>Enable particular examination demands to be managed</i>  <i>Allow assessment of pupils' progress and mastery of work covered</i>  <i>Exploit resources not available in school for learning of all kinds at home</i>  <i>Enable the punishment of children</i>  <i>Provide evidence for the evaluation of teaching</i>  <i>Fulfil the expectations of parents, pupil, teachers, politicians and the public</i>  <i>Enable accountability to external inspection agencies.</i></p>
<p><b>Homework which promotes home-school links:</b>  <i>Bring the school and home closer together</i>  <i>Inform parents about what is going on in the school</i>  <i>Create channels for home-school dialogue</i>  <i>Develop an effective partnership between the school and parents</i></p>
<p><b>Homework for promoting family communication:</b>  <i>Provide opportunities for establishing communication between parent and child</i>  <i>Provide opportunities for parental co-operation and support.</i></p>

What appears to be missing in the literature is a discussion of the purpose of homework and how it relates to the purpose of education as defined by the community. For example, is the purpose of education to train students for jobs so they can help maintain the economy of the day and provide themselves with an income which will help sustain them or is it partly to do with employment and partly to ensure we have well-informed conscientious citizens who understand that they live in a shared society? Or is it also about children having valuable learning experiences throughout their lives that help them make sense of the world?

Anecdotally it would appear that a significant number of parents and teachers believe that the primary purpose of education is to provide students with the credentials to get a good job in an environment that is highly competitive. If this is the case then it is easy to see why parents and teachers might believe it is imperative to spend a lot of time on homework. More homework might mean better student outcomes, which in turn might mean better job opportunities. However, if you believe that the purpose of education is broader than this and may include the development of good citizens then you might reject an over emphasis on homework and instead increase the emphasis on family life and its contribution to society.

On the other hand, if the purpose of education is to promote learning for life or lifelong learning, which is the deliberate and focused learning throughout a person's life (Kiley & Cannon, 2000), then there needs to be a discussion about whether or not homework is relevant.

The purpose of homework as defined in the homework policy of a school will also help define what type of homework students do. In some cases it was acknowledged in the literature that the alignment between the purpose of homework and the homework activities assigned to students was often weak. "Some kinds of homework are likely to be more effective than others in attaining particular educational aims. It would be useful for teachers to be able to identify which homework tasks would best satisfy particular needs." (Hallam, 2004, p. 35)

## **2.5 Homework Activities**

There is a wide range of homework activities depending on the age and ability of the students and the demands of the curriculum.

For example, most schools encourage students to read at home from an early age and encourage parents to help their children with basic skills such as spelling and learning the times tables. However, when children reach secondary school they are expected to do much more homework on their own and to do a wide range of tasks that usually cover the whole curriculum (Hallam, 2004).

While people like Lillico (2004) and Kralovec and Buell (2000) suggest homework should allow for tasks that families negotiate for themselves, the type of homework given in most schools is still largely teacher generated

## **2.6 The Politics of Homework**

A particularly interesting aspect of the politics of homework is the debate, in some quarters, about whether or not the school has any right to give students homework in the first place. It is seen by some as an intrusion into the private lives of students and their families (Kralovec & Buell, 2000). Should teachers and policy makers have any say about what students do at home?

*We believe that reform in homework practices is central to a politics of family and personal liberation. Taking back our home lives will allow us to begin the process of enriching our community lives. Drawing a clearer line between the school and the home may enable families to reconstitute themselves as families, and help parents pass on to their children something other than the exhaustion of endless work.*

*(Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p. xi)*

Hallam (2004) in her book, 'Homework, the Evidence', referred to an article, which appeared in the *Times Education Supplement* (TES, 19 January 1929) entitled "Is homework really necessary?" The article concluded that if it was it would need to be of a very high educational value to justify "the school extending its control into the home and encroaching on family life" (Hallam, 2004, p. 2). Kralovec and Buell (2000) contend that homework takes up time that families should be spending together. They also argue that, because some students have better access than others to the resources they require to complete their homework effectively, this can contribute to the already widening gap between those students who do well at school and those who do not. Buell and Kralovec (2000) also argue that politicians who are merely interested in

doing well politically and/ or gaining something economically are often the ones influencing the development of homework policy. *To the extent that our leaders are bent on confirming their view of work, economic growth, individual initiative, and market economies as not merely a reasonable way to organize life but the only way, they are likely to dismiss gripes about homework as little more than the loneliness of the long-distance runner. But if there are reasons to doubt both the centrality and the all-inclusive nature of such values, then homework is surely worth a second look.* (Kralovec & Buell, 2000 p. 53)

This point very clearly highlights the importance of the community, teachers, parents and students, working together to set the education policy for the school. Currently, this is being done in school communities in government schools in Victoria through school councils. In the Victorian DE&T's guidelines (see Appendix B, p. 88) for developing homework policy in Victorian schools it is stated. "School Councils, in partnership with the principals and teachers and after consultation with parents and students, are responsible for developing and publishing homework policy consistent with the Homework Habits" (2.23.1 Homework Guidelines, see Appendix B, p. 88).

## 2.7 Parental Involvement in Homework

Two aspects of the literature in regard to parental involvement in homework encompass the parents' role in assisting with their children's homework and the effect that this has on their child's academic results and how homework can provide a link between home and school.

According to Joyce Epstein, Director of the Centre on School Family and Community Partnerships at John Hopkins University in the United States (1997), homework provides an important link between home and school and is part of a framework she has developed for assisting schools in developing strong partnerships with students' families (Table 2). Epstein argues, "it is impossible to have a school that is excellent academically but ignores families" (Epstein in Fullan, 1997, p.176).

**Table 2**

*Epstein's Framework of Six Types of Involvement for Building School/Family/ Community Partnerships*

<b>Type 1 Parenting</b> Help all families establish home	<b>Type 2 Communicating</b> Design effective forms of
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<i>environment to support children as students</i>	<i>school-to-home and home-to-school communications about school programs and children's progress.</i>
<b>Type 3 Volunteering</b> <i>Recruit and organize parent help and support.</i>	<b>Type 4 Learning at Home</b> <i>Provide information and ideas to families about how to help students at home with homework and other curriculum related activities, decisions and planning.</i>
<b>Type 5 Decision Making</b> <i>Include parents in school decisions, developing parent leaders and representatives</i>	<b>Type 6 Collaborating with the Community</b> <i>Identify and integrate resources and services from community to strengthen school programs, family practices and student learning and development.</i>

(Fullan, 1997, p. 182-183)

Epstein's framework highlights that homework could be more broadly defined as learning at home. Disappointingly however, Epstein limits this aspect of her framework to the more traditional view of homework and doesn't talk about the kinds of activities done at home that contribute to both academic and non-academic learning and the two-way dialogue around the student's learning that could occur between home and school as a result.

There seems to be an absence of any research in the literature that provides clear evidence that homework provides parents with a much clearer picture of what students are learning at school and that this in itself is a valuable reason for doing homework and yet this was often referred to in some of the literature as a positive effect of homework.

An annotated bibliography commissioned by the British Office of Standards in Education (Ofsted) reviewing over 21 studies addressing parental involvement conducted between 1988 and 2001 (Sharp, Keys, Benefield, Flannagan, Sukhnandan, Mason, Hawker, Kimber, Kendall, & Hutchinson, 2001) found that "the effects of parental involvement may not only vary from child-to-child, but also from parent-to-parent. Parental involvement had different effects on student achievement depending on which

parent was providing the support “(Hancock, 2001, p. 12). Cooper (2001) also noted in his work, “research correlating parent involvement and student achievement suggests no simple relationship” (Cooper, 2001, p. 45). Cooper goes on to explain: *First, because these studies are correlational, they may be gauging a relationship that goes both ways. That is, it may be the case that both (a) increasing parent involvement causes improved student achievement and (b) poor achievement causes greater parent involvement.*

*(Cooper, 2001, p. 46)*

Despite these inconclusive results the literature on homework constantly stated that parents play an important role in assisting students with their homework provided they didn't help their children too much or inappropriately and undermine their independence or self esteem.

*Yes, parents should be involved in their children's education but not in ways that undermined their child's self confidence and interfere with the youngster's natural desire to make his homework his own accomplishment. One of the greatest gifts that parents can give their children is the opportunity to handle their own responsibilities.*

*(Cholden, Friedman & Tier sky, 1998, p .8).*

## **2.8 Research Studies**

While there have been hundreds of studies exploring the many facets of homework (Cooper 2001, Sharp et al, 2001 & Hallam, 2004) it has been identified that there have been a number of deficiencies in the studies. Including:

It is difficult to isolate homework's contribution to learning.

The reported amount of time spent on homework is unreliable – it depends who you ask (parent, pupil, teacher).

The quality or type of homework set is rarely taken into account.

Different measures of effectiveness are employed making comparisons difficult.

Researchers tend to concentrate on measurable, rather than affective, outcomes (Hallam, 2004).

Kralovec and Buell (2000) argue that some research studies are also questionable because of the limited perspective from which some researchers view homework.

*... researchers in a very different field, that of family studies, have begun to call for a closer look at the ecology of homework. They insist that homework must be examined in the context of how it*

affects the organization of the family and the family structure, as well as how its impact is felt across socio-economic lines. (Kralovec & Buell, 2000, p29)

The other difficulty with research in the area of homework is that both negative and positive effects for homework can appear together. For example, some homework activities can help students with developing good study habits while at the same time preventing them from doing other valuable activities like playing sport or household chores.

The following Table 3 provides a number of the positive and negative effects of homework.

**Table 3**

*Positive and Negative Effects of Homework (Cooper, 2001)*

<b>Positive Effects</b>	<b>Negative Effects</b>
<b>Immediate Achievement in learning</b> <i>Better retention of factual knowledge</i> <i>Increased understanding</i> <i>Better critical thinking, concept formation, and information processing</i> <i>Curriculum enrichment</i>	<b>Satiation</b> <i>Loss of interest in academic material</i> <i>Physical and emotional fatigue</i>
<b>Long-term academic</b> <i>Encourage learning during leisure time</i> <i>Improved attitude toward school</i> <i>Better study habits and skills</i>	<b>Denial of access to leisure time and activities in the community</b> <i>Parental influence</i> <i>Pressure to complete and perform well</i> <i>Confusion of instructional technique</i>
<b>Non-academic</b> <i>Greater self-direction</i> <i>Greater self-discipline</i> <i>Better time organization</i> <i>More inquisitiveness</i> <i>More independent problem solving</i>	<b>Cheating</b> <i>Copying from other students</i> <i>Help beyond tutoring</i>
<b>Greater parental appreciation of and involvement in schooling</b>	<b>Increased differences between low and high achievers</b>

## 2.9 Homework and Students with Learning Disabilities

There appears to be only a small number of studies directly related to students with learning disabilities. In the annotated bibliography by Sharp, et al (2001) they cite seven studies. They explain that some of the difficulty in exploring research and literature in this area is due to the various terms used to describe children with learning disabilities and the associated definitions. For example in the United Kingdom you are more likely to use the term *students with special needs* than students with learning difficulties. However, Cooper (2001) says that what is clear in the literature and research that is available is that, while students with learning disabilities can benefit from appropriate homework, it needs to be modified because these students generally find homework activities more difficult than their peers (Bryan, 2005; Cooper, 2001). For example, these students usually require shorter tasks focussed on generic skills, closer monitoring of the tasks by the teacher and greater involvement of the parent.

## **2.10 The role of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and Homework**

There was a limited amount of research in the area of the use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICT) and the Internet and the potential effects on homework. This seems to be still a relatively new area for most educators in primary school education. However, the following are some interesting aspects of this area that have been identified.

Hallam (2004) refers to the use of interactive computer programs to support student learning and notes that “Lee and Heyworth (2000) found no significant effect of using electronic homework on retention, although the particular system being used was reported by students to be slow” (Hallam, 2004, p. 86). In another example where a software program was developed from a preferred textbook it was found that students obtained higher test scores and were able to use the system as a learning tool (Hallam, 2004). The Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) (2001) takes the idea of the learning that can occur using computers and the Internet a step further in their e-book “Learning to Change: ICT in schools (2001). According to this book we still haven’t fully realised the potential of the efficient use of personal computers and the internet.

*ICT encourages – and ultimately requires – a rapprochement between formal education and the learning that takes place outside school. It brings impressive channels of communication between student, teachers, parents and the wider community, that must be purposefully developed and actively sustained. The most effective learning environment is one based on a dynamic partnership between home and school, formal and informal, teacher and taught. This underscores the seriousness of the situation for students who have inadequate home facilities, who are on the wrong side of the “digital divide” (OECD, 2001, p. 15).*

In other words if the potential of ICT was more fully understood and utilised effectively it would be a vital link between the learning that occurs at home and that which occurs at school. It would also highlight the need to ensure that all students had easy access to the technology.

### **2.11 The Role of Students, Parents, Teachers, Policy Makers and Politicians in the Development of Homework Policies**

Cooper (2001) notes that given the emphasis on homework in schools it was surprising to note that Roderique, Polloway, Cumblad, Epstein, and Bursuck (1994) conducted a national survey of school districts (in the United States of America) and found that only 35 percent of respondents had written homework policies (Cooper, 2001).

In the United Kingdom a survey conducted in 1999 showed that out of 323 schools that responded to the survey sixty-five percent said they had a homework policy (Birmingham, Keys & Lee in Sharp, 2001).

While there were a very limited number of studies directly related to developing homework policy there were some points made about the importance of aligning policy to the aims of homework and that schools had a responsibility to ensure that “the setting, monitoring and marking is undertaken in such a way as to optimise its effectiveness and enhance the learning of those undertaking it” (Hallam, 2001, p. 93).

Hallam also raises the question about how much control children should have over their daily lives and therefore how much say should they have about policy when it affects them directly. Considering current debates about children's rights, and

contrasting these debates with a prescriptive approach taken by the central government in the United Kingdom to the question of homework; and the absence of any recognition of children's role as active participants in key areas of their lives, such as schooling, you might conclude that if students are not involved in the development of policy that will affect them directly it is a serious oversight (Hallam, 2004).

## **2.12 Conclusion**

This literature review relies heavily on the work of Kralovec & Buell (2000), Cooper (2001), Hallam (2004) and Sharp et al (2001) because each of these writers has pulled together a wide range of studies related to homework and explored their relevance to a contemporary understanding of homework.

An examination of this available literature on homework shows the complexity of this phenomenon and its place in students' lives in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. It covers a wide range of issues from the academic effects of homework to the non-academic effects of homework.

It is clear from this study that there is still scope for further research particularly in the area of the relationship between homework and the purpose of education, the impact of homework on those that are disadvantaged through socio-economic factors, learning difficulties or disabilities and the impact of the Internet on homework. Less time appears to have been spent on the non-academic aspects of homework.

Whilst on the surface it may appear that homework is a fairly simple concept it is apparent that once you begin to examine the available research and literature on homework there are still many questions left unanswered. Real opportunities to discuss this further need to be created.

The purpose of this project is to explore some of these issues by asking parents, students and teachers what their perceptions and beliefs are about the value of homework at one Victorian primary school.

## CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the key themes that emerged as a result of eleven unstructured interviews conducted with parents, students and teachers at Bishop Falls Primary School in 2004. It also includes an analysis of Bishop Falls Homework policy document (see Appendix E, p. 112) and the Victorian DE&T's Homework Guidelines (see Appendix B, p. 88). In addition, it contains a general summary of each of the key informant groups' views, that is, the views of the parents, students and teachers. The key themes to emerge from the interviews and document analysis were:

Learning at home

Self directed activities

Similarities between parents' and students' views of homework

Homework policy

Homework activities

Extra curricular activities

Parental involvement

Transition to Secondary School

Time spent on homework.

### 4.2 Coding

For the purpose of protecting the identity of the school and all those interviewed each of the eleven informants and the school were given a pseudonym (Table 6).

**Table 6**

*Bishop Falls Informants Pseudonyms*

<i>Family</i>	<i>Adult informants</i>	<i>Student informants</i>
<b>Teacher</b>	<i>Don – teacher at Bishop Falls Primary School</i>	
<b>Eves</b>	<i>Julian – mother of Meryl</i>	<i>Meryl – Year three student</i>
<b>Rutherford</b>	<i>Angela – mother of Isabella</i>	<i>Isabella – Year six student</i>
<b>Stanley</b>	<i>Mark – father of Raffael &amp; Mia</i> <i>Rosemary – mother of Raffael &amp; Mia</i>	<i>Raffael – Year four student</i> <i>Mia – Year three student</i>
<b>Maher</b>	<i>Frances – Assistant principal at Bishop Falls and mother</i>	<i>Emma – Year three</i>

The eleven informants represented four families, the Eves family, the Rutherford family, the Stanley family and the Maher family. One of the informants was the classroom teacher Don.

### 4.3 Bishop Falls Primary School

Bishop Falls Primary School is an inner city school approximately five kilometres from the city. It has a population of around four hundred students. Most of the students have English as a first language. The Victorian DE&T describes the school as a like school one. In Victoria government schools have “been divided into nine groups based on the demographic background of their students. The groups are identified by “the proportion of students for whom the main language spoken at home is not English, and the proportion of students who receive the Education Maintenance Allowance (EMA) or Commonwealth Youth Allowance” DE&T, (2005, August, 18<sup>th</sup>), *School Improvement and Accountability – ‘Like’ school groups*. Retrieved October 5<sup>th</sup>, 2006 from DE&T website <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/Standards/improve/likesch.htm>

A like school grouping of one means that only a very small proportion of the student population is in receipt of the EMA and only a small number of students come from families where English is the second language spoken at home.

The teaching and learning philosophy of the school is based on an integrated curriculum. An integrated curriculum is about providing “a way of exploring concepts across subject boundaries. It enables students to make connections between their own experiences and the ever-changing world outside” (Tasmanian Education Department 2004, October 5<sup>th</sup>), *English Learning area – Integrating English*. Retrieved October 23<sup>rd</sup> 2006, from Tasmanian Department of Education.

<http://wwwfp.education.tas.gov.au/English/integrating.htm> )

Bishop Falls Primary School has a multi-aging class structure. Students at Bishop Falls Primary School are organised into classes that span up to four year levels. The school’s philosophy supports this organisational structure as it provides students with a wider range of social, emotional and intellectual experiences. At the time the data was collected Don was teaching a Year three to six class.

### 4.4 Interviews

All four families shared some common characteristics:

In each case all parents' first language was English  
All informants were born in Australia  
All had tertiary qualifications  
All parents were in paid work  
All parents had two or more children  
All children were from two parent households  
Three out of the four families were within walking distance of the school. (The Stanley family lived a number of kilometres away and passed a number of schools to get to Bishop Falls)  
All families generally indicated that they were happy with the school.

In total one father and four mothers were interviewed. Four of the interviewed students were female and one was male. Three of the female students interviewed were in Year three; one male student was in Year four and one female student was in Year six. It seemed from the interviews with parents and students that all students were doing well academically and socially at school. All the students were articulate and confident when they were interviewed. During the course of the interviews they indicated that they read on a regular basis and were involved in a wide range of activities including music and sport.

#### **4.5 Introduction to the Themes**

The following is a description of the general views of each of the student and adult informant groups followed by key themes that emerged as a result of these interviews. They relate to the research question: *What are parents', students' and teachers' perceptions and beliefs about the value of homework in a Victorian primary school setting?*

#### **4.6 The Teacher's view**

Don, the Year four to six teacher at Bishop Falls Primary School was interviewed during his release time from teaching. Don had very strong views about homework in particular he felt it was "onerous and has no meaning for me personally" (Don, 2004, p.1). Don felt that many of the homework tasks set for students were unnecessary in primary school. Don believed homework became more relevant when students reached Year seven. Don longed for a day when all learning was seen as important no matter where it occurred, at home or at school. Don believed there should be a more "seamless" movement between home and school environments in terms of the learning students are engaged in.

Don felt some frustration that whilst some parents often wanted homework for their children he wondered when children were going to be able to do their homework because they often had organized activities at least four nights a week. Don felt much of his work with parents was dealing with their perceptions about homework rather than working in partnership with them. However, Don did send students home with some homework, generally to 'involve parents' in the curriculum that was being covered in the classroom. Don also believed times tables, which most parents seem to identify as being useful for their children to know, were better suited to being learnt at home because they largely relied on rote learning. Don believed most parents felt confident assisting with this kind of activity and that under these circumstances it was a much better use of students' time to learn their tables at home so that there was more time available during class to cover curriculum which relied on the expertise of the teacher.

To help students develop a more balanced view of where learning occurred Don gave each student in his class a copy of a timetable of the week's work (see Appendix F, p. 116). This weekly timetable had an additional column labelled "@ HOME" for students to write down their own homework for the week based on the work and goals they had set for themselves during the year and a suggested list of activities that Don provided them. Don said most of the students chose to do reading as their main homework activity. Don felt that this routine enabled students to reflect on aspects of their learning that would benefit from some practice at home. It also allowed students to add the kind of self directed or family activities they did at home that also contributed to their learning.

#### **4.7 The Parents' Views of Homework**

Three out of four of the parents referred to the homework policy at Bishop Falls Primary School and generally indicated that the school's policy was overall consistent with their own views of homework. The Stanley family said they chose the school partly because of the school's homework policy, "one of the questions we asked both of the schools we looked at, or (Sic) both of the principals we asked "What's the school's policy on homework? Do you insist on children doing homework?" (Mark, 2004, p. 1). The homework policy was particularly important to Mark because he had a traumatic experience with homework at Secondary school which he said "scarred" him.

*“But I had a geometry teacher in secondary school, in Year eight whose entire teaching method was to give you the homework, you do the homework overnight and you mark it the next day in class and you get identified and ridiculed if you don’t do your homework, and are made to feel like an idiot.”*

*(Mark, 2004, p. 4)*

All parents expressed a belief that their role in assisting their children with their homework was important. They were all able to confidently provide their children with a wide range of resources as well as providing advice and support.

#### **4.8 Students’ Views of Homework**

Three out of five of the students seemed generally ambivalent in their views of homework with the exception of Raffael and Meryl who had very strong views about the place of homework in their lives. They both felt that it was important to be in control of what you do at home.

*Meryl thought that “... you should be able to kind of have your home as a place where you get to make your own choices and you don’t have to do all this stuff that your teacher has set you already, like to do at home.. like to make you do work at home... Well actually it kind of depends what it is.”*

*(Meryl, 2004, p. 1)*

Raffael had this to say,

*“...in my opinion I think that homework isn’t actually very useful because home is usually a place where...it’s kind of like free time at school where you can basically do whatever you want within certain boundaries but doing work...homework, it just seems to force you to do stuff when you don’t really want to and .. and homework usually doesn’t help much because homework is actually usually just stuff where the teacher can’t actually explain...teachers aren’t really teachers they don’t do much, they just give you exercises and stuff to kind of... and you learn by yourself.”*

*(Raffael, 2004, p. 1)*

Raffael goes on to talk about how being told all the time what to do actually limits his learning.

Mia, Emma and Isabella indicated that they were happy to accept the status quo regarding homework. Most of these students indicated that they were happy to do what they were told.

Emma said that it was difficult for her to talk about homework because she hadn't thought about it much. In fact she expressed some exasperation at having to think about the topic at all. At one point she said "I don't know what I don't know" (Emma, 2004, p. 2). Overall all students indicated that they were fairly happy with the amount and type of homework they were getting from the school. Two of the students Isabella and Meryl explicitly mentioned the assistance they received from their parents and none of the students had anything negative to say about the assistance they received from their parents.

#### **4.9 Learning At Home**

Students, teachers and parents to varying degrees indicated that the learning that occurred at home and in the family was very important. Some of the Informants suggested that it was often underestimated.

Raffael's father thought that because Bishop Falls Primary School didn't over burden children with teacher generated learning it meant that students were able to generate their love of learning by developing their own homework.

*"I think that the fact that kids are generating their own homework kind of gives you the indication that they enjoy learning".*

*(Mark, 2004, p. 2)*

Mark says if there is a culture of enjoying learning then homework should come naturally and be generated by the learner.

*"It's more about a culture of enjoying finding stuff out and I think both the kids have that, and I think it's heavily influenced by the school that they go to you know, there's enjoyment in knowing"*

*(Mark, 2004, p. 3).*

#### **4.10 Self Directed Activities**

Three out of the four families mentioned that their children did some kind of self directed activity. The activities involved a wide range of activities including sewing, story writing and helping with household chores.

Frances, when talking about her daughter commented that Emma, who was in Year three, had very little homework if any but often developed her own activities. Frances noticed that one of the projects Emma set herself had appeared in her school Year Book. This impressed Frances because often teachers are inclined to dismiss what has been done at home or undervalue it.

*"I guess I felt pleased that her teacher has noticed that she did it and put it in her yearbook as an example of her work because I know that some teachers consider that what kids do at home somehow doesn't count and I've been witness to discussions where... about what should go in a yearbook and people have absolutely ruled out anything that they've done at home. Which I find a bit bizarre when the work at home isn't taken seriously as other work"*

*(Frances, 2004, p. 3)*

Emma said

*"... sometimes I use the computer so I learn more about computers sometimes at home... ."*

*(Emma, 2004, p5)*

#### **4.11 Similarities between Students and Parents within Families**

In all cases it appeared that there was general agreement between parents and students from the same family about homework. There weren't great differences in views amongst family members although all families did not have the same views.

Isabella, Angela's daughter in Year six had very similar views to her mother. Her mother believed that homework was fair enough when it helped students catch up on work that isn't finished, practice skills that are covered in class but require additional practice, for example spelling and developing good study habits.

*"...like if you don't finish off everything you should finish off at home like I really needed to work on spelling at the start of the year..."*

*(Isabella, 2004, p. 1)*

Mark, Rosemary, Mia and Raffael all had strong views. Mia's views about homework were less well developed compared to the views of the rest of the family but they were still complementary. Mia like her parents and brother also thought students should have some control over what they do at home "I don't think that children have to work, I reckon they should work if they want to but they don't have to" (Mia, 2004, p. 2).

#### **4.12 Homework Policy**

All four families were interested in talking about the homework policy.

Three out of the five parents interviewed had contributed in some way to the development of the homework policy. Angela had been on and off the Education Policy committee which had developed

the homework policy for twelve years. Frances was a member of the teaching staff who contributed to the development of the policy and Julian was the School Council president and School Council oversees the policy development in Victorian Government schools. Julian believed that one of the key things that came out of the development of the homework policy was an increased understanding of the curriculum that was being covered in the classroom. Julian believed that some of the anxiety for parents around homework previous to the homework policy being developed was because they were unsure of what was being taught in the classroom and therefore how to assist students.

*“...like I think it was after the homework policy discussion that the teachers started sending home what they call the term planner, at the beginning of every term to say what was being covered in the classroom.”*

*(Julian, 2004, p. 2)*

Julian believes this information was important because it relieved the anxiety some parents were experiencing in regard to homework and gave parents an opportunity to complement what was going on at school with family discussions and excursions. Angela felt there was a good match between her expectations of homework and what the school's homework policy stated. Angela felt that one key aspect of the policy was that the teachers at Bishop Falls Primary School didn't give homework "just for homework's sake" (Angela, 2004, p. 2). Frances and Angela made the same comment – that homework hasn't been an issue because there hasn't been that much of it.

It was Frances' experience in talking to her friends that had children at other schools that she felt parents judged how good the school was based on the emphasis they placed on homework.

*“...there is a lot of emotional baggage that goes with homework”*

*(Frances, 2004, p. 3).*

*“Homework goes with discipline and uniform and for some people that is a sign that it is a good school and why a parent might choose a school”.*

*(Frances, 2004, p. 4)*

Each year in Victorian government schools a random sample of parents are asked to fill out a survey about how they perceive the school is performing. Information about this survey can be found at <http://www.sofweb.vic.edu.au/blueprint/fs6/surveys.htm>

(Retrieved 27th, of November, 2006). The survey is a series of statements which they rate using the Leichart scale (see Appendix G, p. 117.). In 2004, when interviews in this research study took place there were two statements in the Victorian DE&T parent survey which related to academic rigour:

This school is meeting the academic needs of my child  
I am happy with the academic standards at this school.  
Frances, who was the assistant principal at the school, commented that while the school does very well overall on their parent opinion survey result, which is, parents generally report that they are very happy with how the school is performing, the school performs less well on the questions about academic rigor. Frances wondered out loud whether or not that was to do with an overall lingering perception that there was not enough homework at the school.

Frances talked about the development of the school's teaching and learning policy. When asked whether or not there might be a link between the teaching and learning policy and the school's homework policy she said that probably that is a good point.

*“And although it doesn't mention homework thus far you're making me think that maybe it should be very clear about the role of homework...well it talks about a partnership, it talks about a learning community but perhaps we need to be a little more explicit about ...that doesn't mean just homework...you know that work done at home can in many ways support what happens at school.”*  
(Frances, 2004, p. 6)

Meryl's mother Julian was the School Council president for a number of years at Bishop Falls Primary School. She was School Council president when the council oversaw the development and implementation of the homework policy.

Julian said the discussion around the development of this policy was as much about the teachers clarifying what was going on in the classroom as working out what activities might be appropriate for homework. Julian indicated that parents were unsure about how to help reinforce what was going on at school when parents generally didn't know what was being taught in the classroom. This lack of clarity amongst parents resulted in teachers communicating much more effectively what content was being covered at school. Parents could then choose how this might be reinforced at home.

Julian thought this was a key aspect of the homework policy and without a clear message from the school about what was being taught during the day she felt the teachers ran the risk of alienating parents or making them anxious. Julian also felt it was important for the homework policy to reflect the teachers' understanding of teaching and learning.

#### **4.13 Homework Activities**

Parents and students mentioned finishing work, reading and practice of generic skills as the major forms of homework that they did and that these forms of homework were generally acceptable. All the parents said that whatever the activity was it must have a real purpose and not just be about filling in time.

#### **4.14 Reading at Home**

One parent explicitly mentioned reading as an activity for homework. It seemed for the other parents that it was a given, possibly because it was apparent that all families valued reading whether it was mandated by the school as a homework activity or not.

Angela points out that she has always done reading at home with her children until they were in Year six regardless of what the school required. She read to them, with them and they read to her and she continued to do this until her children were old enough to read to themselves or wanted to read independently (Angela, 2004, p. 3).

Julian also talks about the importance of learning some things off by heart, like tables, but as part of family life for example, in the bath etc.

Angela also felt that it was fair enough to spend time on practising skills that there might not be enough time to spend on at school "like my daughter hasn't been strong in spelling so with Don we sort of do extra spelling" (Angela, 2004, p. 1).

#### **4.15 Study Habits.**

Of the four families two parents mentioned study habits, Angel and Mark. Angela felt study habits were worth focusing on a couple of times a year.

*"I think it's a good idea sometimes for them to have more homework than that just so they can establish the discipline and the sense of achievement, fitting in with the requirements, fitting in*

*with timelines... and I think that's a whole skill that they need to develop in it. I certainly don't think that they should have homework for homework's sake every afternoon; I don't see much point in that."*

*(Angela, 2004, p. 1)*

Angela went on to say that you would only need to practice a couple of times a term and that she generally felt that homework in primary school wasn't necessary every night.

Mark, on the other hand, questioned the way in which we help students develop the kind of discipline that would assist them in their learning.

*"I know we're talking about homework and everything but I think that's often...you know people hold homework up as saying it's about discipline and people... and I think discipline comes through something a little bit more complex than giving somebody a sheet of paper and saying "Go home and fill this in."*

*(Mark, 2004, p. 6)*

#### **4.16 Projects**

In comparing the homework experiences of her three children Angela concluded that different kinds of homework can work for different children. On the one hand, Angela felt her daughter Isabella, needed to practise her spelling and maths often and needed additional support from her. On the other hand, her elder son loved projects. "My middle child thoroughly enjoyed doing homework and still when he was in grade five...the kids had a choice of three projects to do and he did them all" (Angela, 2004, p. 2).

#### **4.17 Extra Curricular Activities**

All students were involved in extra curricular activities which included learning a musical instrument, playing a sport and in one case extra tuition for spelling and mathematics. In most cases students were involved in each of these activities three or four times a week.

Most of the students seemed unaware of the amount of extra curricular activities they were involved in. It was interesting to note that several of the student informants didn't initially recognize the wide range of activities they did outside of school. Both Emma and Isabella said that they didn't do that much after school but watch

television but when they were questioned further it turned out that both students had at least three or four nights of activities a week. Angela said all her children were involved in some kind of sport, music and at least one night a week they were involved in cooking the family meal. Angela saw cooking as a particularly important skill for the children to learn.

*“By grade six they could all cook a three course meal”*  
(Angela, 2004, p. 3).

#### **4.18 Parental Involvement in Homework**

All parents interviewed thought they had a role to play in either supporting their children with actual homework tasks, assisting them more generally with their learning by going to museums and libraries etc., helping them practice generic skills or providing them with additional support for specific perceived gaps in their academic learning.

Angela believed it was a key role for her as a parent to help her children with their homework. This sometimes meant asking the teacher to provide additional homework activities for her daughter Isabella which Angela would guide her through at home. These activities provided Isabella with practice in spelling and the learning of times tables. Angela said she knew her children better than anyone else and therefore felt it her responsibility to assist them as best she could in their learning.

Julian raised an interesting point in this regard. While Angela felt assisting her children with academic areas that they found difficult was appropriate, Julian questioned whether this was in fact homework or something else.

*“...if my children were having difficulty in the classroom I’d have a very different view, I’d be...but then again that’s not about homework that’s about how you can support your child and what you do at home when your child’s got, you know not reading in a way that they should be for their age or whatever. I think that would be really, have you spoken to parents who have got children like that? Learning difficulties.”*

(Julian, 2004, p. 8)

Julian also talked about a time for paying attention to the richness of life:

*“...again it goes back to things like , from a very early age that you do those things as a family like bushwalking, museums, galleries,*

*concerts, competitions, if that becomes part of your life so you've got this culture in your family and an embracing of you know, the life of the mind kind of thing just everything you do, rather than... and showing that there's a value in valuing it through the kinds of things that you do so not just the talk."*

*(Julian, 2004, p. 9)*

Julian also discussed how schools could ensure that the kind of help parents provided their children at home was relevant to what was being learnt at school. Julian described an initiative that the teachers had adopted at Bishop Falls primary school, where they provided parents with term planners which described what was being taught in the classroom.

*"Yes the term planners which showed what the topic for the term was, what the maths activities were, so that gives families a chance to understand what was meant to be happening so... I mean I like the idea of that but if you know what the topic is then you can explore your own aspects of it at home, you know you might take the children to the museum to look at something ..."*

*(Julian, 2004, p. 5)*

Only one parent, Frances mentioned that parents could help too much with children's homework.

*"...some of my friends confessed that they would turn the computer back on after their kids went to bed and re-do their children's homework because they weren't satisfied with the grammar or the spelling or the layout. One very close friend confessed that regularly she does that with her kids."*

*(Frances, 2004, p. 1)*

#### **4.19 Transition to Secondary School and Homework**

While the purpose of this case study was to look at homework in a primary school setting both Don and Frances raised the issue of too much homework and the impact on students' attitudes to schooling in secondary school. In both cases excessive amounts of homework were seen as detrimental to students' attitudes to school. In Don's case he attributed it to putting his son off school. Both Don and Frances mentioned the excessive amount of homework their sons got in Year seven. "Year seven was a big year for homework when he started at secondary school, the first probably two terms when they were obviously trying to impress

upon the parents and some of the kids that it is what was expected” (Frances, 2004, p. 1).

#### **4.20 Time Spent on Homework**

Mark felt it was dangerous not to give children time to relax. He talked about the blurring of the boundaries between work and home.

*“Even now you see in grown-ups, you know the ‘work home divide’ isn’t there anymore, people continue to work at home and I think that’s an awful kind of culture, and I know homework’s been around for a long time, but it’s an awful culture to kind of breed into children, this idea that you always have to be working”*  
(Mark, 2004, p. 2).

Rafael’s mother said “I think six hours to spend thinking about school, five days a week is enough when you’re talking about preps through to Year six” (Rosemary, 2004, p. 1).

#### **4.21 Document Discussion**

Two documents that relate to the research question, What are parents’, teachers’ and students’ beliefs and perceptions about the value of homework in a Victorian public primary school? are the Victorian DE&T’s guidelines on homework known as Homework Guidelines and the Bishop Falls Primary School Homework Policy (see Appendix B, p. 88 & E, p. 112).

#### **4.22 The Victorian DE&T’s Homework Guidelines**

In April 2001, after a public consultation with the Victorian education community and various key stakeholders including parent and school council organisations, principal associations and the Victorian Branch of the Australian Education Union, the Victorian DE&T produced a brochure outlining homework guidelines for government schools. The brochure was distributed to every government school in the state of Victoria in 2001 (see Appendix B, p. 88). Originally this document was one of a number of initiatives related to what the Victorian DE&T calls the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM). The AIM was meant to provide a suite of tools to help monitor and enhance student learning, it included:

- Classroom Assessment
- Comprehensive Reporting
- Homework Guidelines
- Learning Improvement

## State-wide Testing.

The AIM now only refers to the state-wide Mathematics and English testing that occurs in years three, five, seven and nine. According to the Victorian Curriculum and Assessment Authority (VCAA) “the Achievement Improvement Monitor (AIM) is a statewide assessment and reporting program in English and Mathematics for students in Years 3, 5, 7 and 9” (Retrieved November 27<sup>th</sup>, 2006,

from <http://www.vcaa.vic.edu.au/prep10/aim/parents/faqs.html> .

At the beginning of this research project these guidelines were available at [www.sofweb.vic.edu/assess/homework](http://www.sofweb.vic.edu/assess/homework) however in 2006 the Victorian DE&T updated their website and as a result the guidelines can now be found

at <http://www.education.vic.gov.au/aboutschool/lifeatschool/homework.htm> (retrieved September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006). The content on this site is similar to what was available in the original homework brochure but there is no longer any reference to the AIM as it was originally defined in 2001. You can also find the guidelines at [www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/referenceguide/curric/3\\_23.htm](http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/referenceguide/curric/3_23.htm) (retrieved September 15<sup>th</sup>, 2006).

This site provides information to schools around governance, management and curriculum with specific reference to relevant legislation, regulations and guidelines which cover these areas. The Homework Guidelines contain the following headings and content:

Homework habits

Principles

Successful practice

Types of homework

Expectations

Helping your child.

Under the title *Successful Practice* the guidelines make recommendations about what homework activities are suitable for the Early Years (Prep- 4) the Middle Years (Years 5 to 9) and the Later Years (Year 10 -12). This section also includes the recommended time each year level should be spending on homework.

*Helping your child* provides advice to parents about how they might support their children with their homework. This advice to parents includes ensuring their children have a balance between homework and recreational activities and encouraging them to read regularly.

#### **4.23 Bishop Falls Primary School Homework & Home Activities Policy**

The Bishop Falls Primary School policy document (see Appendix D, p. 94) starts with an acknowledgement of the important role students' families play in their learning, "Once the students begin school, the home continues to have a most important role in learning." (Appendix D, p. 94) It is highlighted throughout the document that in order for students to succeed at school they need parents and teachers to work together. This requires high quality communication between parents and teachers.

This document is divided into two sections – Homework and Home Activities. Each section includes a definition, a list of principles and goals, examples of recommended activities and recommended communication between home and school. The recommendations for homework activities section is divided into 'Lower School' and 'Upper School' activities. These sections outline activities that directly relate to the curriculum being taught at the school. For example, reading and maths activities are recommended at every year level.

The recommended activities for the 'home' section of the policy includes things that also relate to literacy and numeracy but are more focussed on taking advantage of the opportunity to explore things like literacy and numeracy in the context of typical family activities. For example writing shopping lists and reading recipes and cooking. These activities are not divided into year levels.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

### **5.1 Introduction**

The following chapter is an analysis of the results. It includes discussion of the key themes that emerged from the interviews with parents, teachers and students and an analysis of the Victorian DE&T guidelines and the homework policy at Bishop Falls primary school. It also includes a discussion of the relationship between this case study and the current research and literature in relation to homework.

### **5.2 Homework Definition**

There was no dispute in the literature, or in the interviews with parents, about what was homework. "Homework is usually taken to mean any work set by the school which is undertaken out of school hours for which the learner takes primary responsibility" (Hallam, 2004, p. 5). It is therefore interesting to note that the Victorian DE&T guidelines for homework do not provide a definition. This is a minor criticism of the Victorian DE&T's guidelines but it seems unsatisfactory if the purpose of the document is to assist school communities in developing their own policies.

Alternatively Bishop Falls Primary School policy document does provide a useful definition of homework (see Appendix E, p. 112). In fact, Bishop Falls provides two definitions in their policy document, one definition which relates to homework and one relates to 'home activities'. These definitions highlight that the Bishop Falls community acknowledges that both teacher generated activities and family activities contribute to students' learning as well as supplement the school curriculum. It also highlights the need for schools to go beyond a definition of homework that just refers to 'work set by the school' and look at what families do to contribute to a student's learning.

It would be useful in future studies to explore a broader definition of homework that encompasses all the activities that families do that can contribute to a students' learning. This definition might also highlight both the non-academic and academic nature of these activities .

### **5.3 Research Evidence**

It is unclear looking at the Victorian DE&T's guidelines whether or not the Victorian DE&T in developing the guidelines made any use

of the research available in the area of homework. If they did they do not supply a bibliography or a reference list or attribute anything they wrote to the research. Consequentially, there are many unsubstantiated claims in the guidelines. For example, "Homework helps them develop organisational skills, self discipline, skills in using out-of-school resources and personal responsibility for learning "(DE&T, [2005, June]. *Homework Guidelines*. Retrieved October 30<sup>th</sup>, 2006 from Victorian Schools Reference Guide:

<http://www.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edulibrary/public/curricman/support/3-23.pdf>)

According to Hallam (2004) and others there is no firm research evidence to support the idea that homework helps students become independent and responsible learners although people generally believe this is the case.

Other unsubstantiated claims in the Victorian DE&T's document include:

Homework helps complement and reinforce classroom learning

Homework fosters lifelong learning

Homework fosters study habits.

(DE&T, 2005, 3.23.1)

Bishop Falls policy document also did not refer to any research in the area of homework nor did any of the parents or teachers interviewed.

#### **5.4 Homework Policy**

It was clear from the interviews that all parents believed that a homework policy that reflected their values was an important element of homework. Mark and Rosemary said that they chose Bishop Falls Primary School because it had a good homework policy. Angela said she had been part of the homework committee on and off for twelve years and both Francis and Julian had been on the Bishop Falls school council when the policy was developed. It would appear from the general acceptance of the homework policy at Bishop Falls Primary School and the fairly active participation of the parents interviewed in developing this policy that parents value being part of policy development and that their participation in developing policy provides them with an opportunity to address any concerns they may have and any views they wish to share.

Except for advising that school councils, in consultation with their school communities, are responsible for developing the homework

policy there is no advice in the DE&T's guidelines about how school councils might go about developing the policy or how they might engage their school communities in a discussion about homework given the potential for a wide range of views in any school community.

This has implications for schools when they develop policy. In the first instance it would seem that having good policy actually attracts families to a school as in the case of Mark and Rosemary who travel past several schools to get to Bishop Falls Primary School because they thought the homework policy matched their own values regarding homework. Whilst this was not the only reason Mark and Rosemary chose the school it was a significant reason.

In the second instance, it seems that involvement in the policy development provided parents with high levels of satisfaction regarding the homework practice and policy at Bishop Falls primary school.

Whilst people like Cooper (2001) highlighted the need for a homework policy there was little discussion about the impact of policy development on practice in schools around homework or educational outcomes for students. This is potentially an area for further study.

### **5.5 Students with Learning Disabilities**

Whilst there was evidence in the literature that students with learning disabilities do require a different approach to their homework which includes designing different homework activities and more involvement from the parents for these students (Cooper, 2001), neither the Victorian DE&T's homework guidelines referred to such children and only one of the parent informants mentioned it. This appears to be an area of serious oversight for both the Victorian DE&T and Bishop Falls Primary School and one that needs to be addressed.

### **The Role of Tutors and Tutoring Schools**

Angela's daughter Isabella was sent to Kumon for assistance with her homework. Kumon is one of a number of private tutoring schools or businesses that provide additional assistance to students experiencing difficulties with their learning. Whilst none of the other families used this service or other tutoring services, it

seems that this was something that was not addressed in either the Victorian DE&T's guidelines for homework or in Bishop Falls Primary School's policy document or in the research.

The use of tutors for students whose parents and or teachers feel they are not doing particularly well raises some questions about the effectiveness of homework activities for these students and the effectiveness of the teaching that is occurring during school time.

Some interesting questions might be considered in this regard.

What responsibilities do teachers and principals have to parents who feel that their children need this kind of additional help? Do these children have learning difficulties that could be addressed by the school and by their parents? If parents and teachers are doing their jobs well should that mean no one would need these tutoring services after hours? If there is a place for these businesses what impact does this have on homework policy?

### **Homework Activities and Learning**

What does help students with their learning? What should they do at home? Is there a difference between what you learn at home and what you learn at school? Are some things best learnt at home and some things best learnt at school? A study exploring these questions might help schools in working out the most appropriate homework activities for students to do at home.

Don gave each student a copy of a timetable, in a grid format, which was an overview of the week's activities (see Appendix F, p. 116). Don used this timetable grid to get students to think about what learning they might be doing and what they needed to do to assist themselves in their learning for the week. This included Don providing some suggestions about how they might enhance their learning at home and at school. After students were given some time to reflect on what they needed to do they added their ideas to the grid which also included a column to write home activities.

Don's reason for reflection on the week's activities in this way was to show students that they had some responsibility for their learning and that learning occurred both at home and school.

This process raises some interesting questions that could be explored further such as; at what age would students be independent enough to be able to assess what homework they need to do? Should students be setting their homework? What activities are appropriate at home and what activities are appropriate at school?

Emma, who was in Year three, had this to say about activities she did at home that might assist her learning:

*“But sewing doesn’t exactly help you learn at school or something. Using the computer sort of does but...and playing cricket, we do sport at school so ...”*

*(Emma, 2004. p. 4)*

It seems from this quote that Emma was unsure about what learning she did at home. She seemed to view learning largely as something that relates to her experiences at school. Nonetheless she was able to engage in a discussion about what learning occurred at home and what learning occurred at school. It would be interesting to explore not only the views of students about homework but what they understand about learning and how what they do at home helps them with their learning at school.

### **The Role of ICT in Homework**

There was little if any explicit mention of the use of personal computers or the Internet to complete homework tasks. Given the increasing use of this technology at work, school and in the home it would appear there is enormous scope to explore this further.

### **Work Life Balance**

A number of informants and some of the literature mentioned the importance of establishing a balance between work and family life in regards to homework and they questioned whether lots of time spent on homework was just another way to get students prepared to work long hours when they joined workforce. Although this may be seen as a somewhat cynical view of homework it may be worthy of further investigation. How do we assess what is a reasonable amount of time to be spent ‘working’ even if it is providing some academic benefits?

### **Homework and Transition to Secondary School**

While this case study was located at a primary school two of the informants, a teacher and a parent, mentioned that their children’s transition to secondary school meant that they had an enormous amount of homework which they were not use to. Both informants felt the secondary school seemed to be sending a message to the students that they now would had to work very hard if they were to do well. In one case this had a negative effect on the student’s attitude to school.

According to Cooper (2001) the relationship between homework and achievement reached a point of diminishing return in Years five to nine. In reviewing nine studies that reported on levels of achievement and time spent on homework Cooper concluded that *“...we could explore the idea that homework had a positive effect on achievement up to a point, but when time spent on homework passed this point, it either resulted in no more improvement or started to have negative effects.”* (Cooper, 2001, p. 31)

It seems therefore that it might be very important that teachers working in the Middle Years (Years five to nine in Victoria) are aware of the curvilinear relation between the time students spend on homework and achievement (Cooper, 2001). This may also require that primary schools and secondary schools are aware of each school's homework policy.

### **Parental Involvement**

The parent informants in this study overwhelmingly indicated that they had an important contribution to make and they needed to play an active role in their children's learning either through assisting them with their homework activities or by providing them with additional resources and support in areas where their children may have been experiencing some difficulty. It was apparent in the interviews that parents had high levels of confidence in this regard and when they weren't sure about how they should support their children they were able to approach teachers for assistance. This may not be the case for all parents in all schools. It is clear in the literature (Kralovec & Buell, 2000) that not all families are able to provide a wide range of resources to their children, nor are all parents confident when dealing with teachers. According to Hallam (2004) and Cooper (2001), the research around what benefits are attributed to parental involvement in homework are inconclusive. Some studies indicated that effective parental involvement depended on the skills, resources, time and economic circumstances of the parents as well as the age of the child. The research indicates that students in the early years benefit more from parental involvement than do older students

### **Limits of the Study**

Although this study does provide insights into the attitudes and beliefs of parents, students and teachers at a Victorian government primary school, it is limited in some ways, most

particularly because of the homogeneity of the informants and the sample size. The sample size of this study is small. Broad generalizations therefore cannot be made from this case study. The informants come from relatively similar backgrounds. It would be useful to conduct similar research using a wider range of informants particularly those who experience difficulties with homework in their families and or have children with learning difficulties or disabilities.

However, despite the small sample size, this case study does provide insights into how various members of Bishop Falls Primary School view homework. These views about the value of homework at Bishop Falls Primary School could be used to develop guidelines for the development of effective homework policies in other primary schools. This data could also be used to develop surveys and questionnaires to be conducted in other schools or used in focus groups where people are keen to tease out the many issues related to homework.

## **CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSION**

### **6.1 Introduction**

This study covered a significant amount of the literature on homework and through interviews, non participant observations and document analysis examined in some detail the views and beliefs of parents, teachers and students at one Victorian primary school. The following is a summary of some of the main issues and themes that emerged as a result of this study and some of the themes and issues which might be explored further in future studies.

### **6.2 Homework Policy**

The parent informants in this study largely found the homework practice and policy at Bishop Falls Primary School matched what they believed was useful to support their children's learning. This in part can perhaps be attributed to the fact that three out of the five parents played an active role in the development of the homework policy and the remaining two parents said one of the reasons they chose to send their children to Bishop Falls Primary School was because the school's homework policy reflected their views of homework. Although Don was not at the school at the time the homework policy was developed his own professional practice complemented the policy and provided the students in his class with an opportunity to set their own homework so that it supported their learning and complemented the curriculum. Also, Don felt that if parents did not understand the homework policy or disagreed with it then it was his job to provide parents with information that would help them appreciate that the policy was relevant for their children.

School councils in Victorian government schools are responsible for developing the education policy of the school, this includes the homework policy. It seems from this study that if policy is well developed it has the potential to provide through the processes of its development valuable forums for parents and teachers to look at the research about homework and the theories around how people learn. This will in turn assist school communities to make informed decisions about what will underpin good practice at the school and truly assist their children in their learning whether it be at school or in the home.

### **6.3 Parental Involvement**

Parents in this study also felt that, whilst homework might be useful for students learning, it could only be useful if it was meaningful and in some way complementing the school curriculum, either through the reinforcement of specific skills like spelling or times tables or the further development of ideas and content related to the curriculum. Parents also demonstrated throughout their interviews that they believed it was necessary for them to play a significant role in not only supporting their children with completion of their homework but also monitoring the relevance of the homework. Thus ensuring that their children were engaged in family activities like chores and excursions and other extra curricular activities, as Angela said this was particularly important because she knew her children best.

Mark took the reasons for parental involvement one step further. He believed that parents also had a role to play in ensuring that homework was not some kind of tool used to get children working long hours or having no freedom to make decisions about their time. These ideas were also reinforced in the literature by Kralovech and Buell (2000) and Hallam (2004).

The student informants appeared generally happy with the practice of homework at the school with two of the Year three students indicating that they “did not have much homework at all”. All the students indicated that they did not need any more homework and two of the students were quite vocal about the need to choose what they did for at least some of their time.

### **6.4 Gaps in the Research**

In the context of lifelong and life wide learning many more people are appreciating that schools are an artificial learning environment which was constructed over a century ago to meet the needs of a society that was vastly different to the world of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. For some the lives they live outside of schools provide them with a much more powerful learning environment, primarily because the activities and experiences they engage in are more authentic. School homework is another aspect of this artificiality and therefore there needs to be greater discussion around the relationship between school and home.

There are opportunities for teachers to use the development and revision of homework policy as a way of building better

understandings of pedagogy and greater collaboration between parents, teachers and students. This could be achieved more explicitly by teachers sharing their professional knowledge about how children learn with parents and therefore what would enhance their learning at home. It would be useful if there was research in this area.

## **6.5 The Purpose of Homework**

Before we can talk about the purpose of homework we need to talk about the purpose of education as defined by all interested parties – students, teachers, parents, bureaucrats, academics, researchers and other interested citizens. Unless we have an agreed purpose, or purposes, for our education system then we will not be able to develop relevant homework policy.

Schools will need to be really clear about the purpose of homework, clear about their understanding of how children learn and be able to share that knowledge with the wider community. They will also need to seriously monitor and review any homework policy they have.

In the primary years, homework should be focussed very explicitly on what gains there will be for children's learning if they do the homework set by the school.

Schools would be better off providing a framework for real dialogue within the school and within the home. A dialogue that can achieve a

*“common understanding through structured and cumulative questioning and discussion which guide and prompt, reduce choices, minimise risk and error, and expedite ‘handover’ of concepts and principles.*

*Language and thought are intimately related, and the extent and manner of children's cognitive development depend to a considerable degree on the forms and contexts of language which they have encountered and used.”*

*(Alexander, 2006, p. 38)*

There is not enough discussion in our community about what teaching and learning is especially in relation to lifelong and lifewide learning. How can we promote a culture of lifelong learning when as a community we haven't had a discussion about what this means? How can parents and teachers work in partnership when these relationships have never clearly been defined?

In examining the literature and reviewing some of the research it is clear that there is still scope for further research particularly in the area of the relationship between homework and the purpose of education. Further research could examine the impact of the Internet on homework and teaching and learning practices. In addition, the impact of homework on those with learning difficulties or disabilities is also a neglected area of research in this field.

*Perceptions of the importance of homework are highly influenced by the economic, political, social and educational circumstances pertaining at the time. The relative advantages and disadvantages of homework ... take on lesser or greater importance depending on these circumstances.*

*(Hallam, 2004. p. 81)*

What the researcher has come to conclude from this study is that we need to move away from a dialogue about whether or not our children in primary schools need homework to a more explicit discussion about how parents, teachers and students can work together to assist students in their learning whether it be at school or in the home.

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