



How School *Troubles* Come Home: The Impact of Homework on Families of Struggling Learners

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Homework is the focus of many versions of educational reform; yet research on the efficacy of homework as a means of raising student achievement is mixed at best. Even less certain is the impact of homework on the lives of families, particularly family relationships. This study used interviews to examine how a diverse group of parents whose children struggled academically perceived the effects of homework on their families. In general, the presence of homework had a disruptive effect on the lives of these families, reducing the time available for family activities and diminishing the quality of family interactions. In these families, homework was a *carrier* for school troubles, a means by which "school troubles" were transformed into "family troubles."

Every child . . . should be required to do at least two hours of homework a night, or they're being cheated for the rest of their lives. (Newt Gingrich, in Spring, 1997, p. 16)

A taken-for-granted assumption underlying current versions of educational reform is that "there should be a close and intimate relationship between families and education or between home and school in order to achieve effective . . . schooling" (David, 1993, p. 11). Recent federal legislation aims "to strengthen partnerships between parents and professionals in meeting the educational needs of children aged birth through 5 and the working relationship between home and school" (U.S. Department of Education, 1998, on-line) by requiring local school districts to develop written policies for involving parents in their children's education (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a, on-line). Federal and state governments have also sponsored a range of initiatives for encouraging parent involvement. *Home for the Holidays Reading Together*, a campaign to

encourage families to read with their children launched by U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige in December, 2001 (US Department of Education, 2001), is typical of a wide range of federal and state initiatives for promoting parent involvement in their children's schooling. Similar initiatives encouraging parent involvement in their children's schooling have been undertaken in Canada, Great Britain, Australia, and New Zealand (Whitty, Power, & Halpin, 1998).

The desire to "strengthen partnerships between parents and [school] professionals" is based on at least two assumptions: 1) parents "should be available both at home and in the school to work with their children in support of their education" (Standing, 1999, p. 57), and 2) student achievement rises when schools make a concerted effort to enlist parents' help in fostering children's learning (U.S. Department of Education, on-line, 1997). These assumptions about parent involvement are supported by a body of research indicating a strong, positive relationship between parent involvement and higher levels of school achievement, particularly in reading

(Balli, Demo, & Wedman, 1998; Green, 1995; Lareau, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987).

Perhaps the most common manifestation of parents' work in support of their children's education is homework,¹ which is "among the panaceas that policymakers have suggested for improving education" (Corno, 1996, p. 27). In a climate of fiscal restraint, increasing the volume of homework has been particularly attractive to politicians and educational policymakers who view the labor of parents as a cost-effective way to enhance learning time as a means of boosting student achievement (Keith, 1987; Smith, 1998). The U.S. Department of Education, for example, has made available a variety of materials to help parents with their children's homework as part of the "No Child Left Behind" legislation (U.S. Department of Education, 2002a, 2002b). Demands for more homework are bolstered by the conventional wisdom that homework has the power to foster discipline, responsibility, and initiative (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984). A publication from the U.S. Department of Education (1987) makes the additional claim that homework has the power to increase students' love of learning in and out of school.

Newt Gingrich's desire that "every child . . . do at least two hours of homework a night" (in Spring, 1997, p. 16) remains unfulfilled, but, since the early 1980s, there has been a significant increase in the amount of homework children do each evening. The amount of time six- to eight-year-old American school children spend doing homework has nearly tripled in the last twenty years from forty-four minutes to over two hours per week (Hofferth, 1998) and, in some school districts, even pre-kindergartners and kindergartners may have *at least* thirty minutes of homework each night (Loupe, 1999). The proliferation of books written to help parents cope with the demands of homework (e.g., Canter & Hausner, 1988; Rosemond, 1990) attests to the significance of homework in the lives of contemporary families.

The data on the efficacy of increasing homework as a means of improving student achievement are mixed, however. Numerous studies have been marshalled either to support (e.g., Black, 1996; Huntsinger, 1999; Keith, 1982, 1986) or to challenge (e.g., Cooper, 1989, 1999; Cooper, Lindsay, Nye, & Greathouse, 1998; Corno, 1996; Paschal, 1984) claims made about the benefits of homework. However, because of "the number and complexity of influences on the effectiveness of homework, no simple, general finding that proves or disproves the utility of homework has been forthcoming" (Cooper, 1989, p. 5). In the most comprehensive review of research on homework

undertaken to date, Harris Cooper (1989) concluded that the effect of homework on academic achievement is largely a function of grade level; that is, homework has the greatest effect on the academic achievement of high school-age students, but has only a minimal effect on elementary students.

Research on homework has overwhelmingly focused on the positive effects of homework, usually in terms of academic achievement. Researchers have rarely considered the possibility that homework might have negative effects for children or their families. An exception is an ethnographic study by Varenne and McDermott (1999) which suggests that homework may force parents into unwanted roles that strain, at least temporarily, family relations (Varenne & McDermott, 1999). Other research suggests that homework may also trouble family relationships by reducing the time families have available for participating in leisure activities (Cooper, 1989; Kralovec & Buell, 2000; Samway, 1986). It is likely, however, that not all families experience homework in the same way accounting for the fact that while some parents demand more homework for their children (Strother, 1984) other parents view homework as a "curse put on parents" (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984, p. 391). The variation in parents' responses to homework may be obscured by the nearly exclusive reliance on quantitative methodology to study homework. Quantitative methods, with their emphasis on statistically constructed average parents, efface the meaning of parent involvement for *individual* mothers and fathers. Research and policy discourses on parental involvement, including homework, also suffer from a fixation on normative families. Smith (1998), for example, observed that, "schools, school curriculum, and the professional training of teachers orient to the idealized middle-class family of two parents, one of whom (understood usually to be the mother) does not work in paid employment and is available to support the schools her children attend" (p. 23). In general, parents' involvement in their children's homework has been presented as an "unproblematic, ungendered concept, free from class and cultural associations" (Standing, 1999, p. 57). It is clear, however, that the implications of parent involvement are not the same for all parents.

Homework may pose a special challenge for students who struggle academically, for example (Bursuck, 1994); therefore, homework may be particularly disruptive for their families (Lareau, 1989). Varenne and McDermott (1999) observed that homework is often a means by which children's role as people "not good at doing school" is imported into the home. If identities are constructed in the context of relationships organized around particular activities

(Gergen, 1990), then homework - by infusing the tensions of children's struggles in school into ordinary daily activities - provides the occasion for creating dysfunctional identities for both students and their families.

The research reported here addresses the effects of homework on families and family relations; specifically, how a diverse group of parents - each of whom had a child who struggled academically in school - perceived the effects of homework on their families. In general, the data presented here indicate that homework seriously disrupted the lives of the families interviewed for this study.

I begin by describing the research methods employed in this study including the sample, data collection procedures, and data analysis. I then summarize the findings of the study; specifically how the parents I interviewed perceived the effects of homework on their families and family relationships. This section is organized according to the major themes that emerged from the data analysis: 1) parents' perceptions of the demands of homework; 2) parents' involvement in children's homework; 3) parents' taking on the role of their children's teachers; and, 4) the effect of homework on family routines and relationships. I conclude by discussing the implications of this study for teachers and educational policy makers.

The Study

The purpose of this study was to better understand how parents of children for whom school is a struggle experience their children's homework. In other words, I was interested in parents' experiences with homework and how homework affected their lives and the lives of other family members. Interviewing is a particularly useful technique for "understanding the experience of other people and the meaning they make of that experience" (Seidman, 1998, p. 3). Therefore, I conducted twenty-three interviews with families who self-identified as having at least one child for whom school was a struggle. The interviews were open-ended and ranged from forty-five minutes to one hour and fifty minutes in length, averaging just over one hour for each interview. Sixteen of the families I interviewed lived in the Canadian province of Ontario and seven families resided in the mid-western United States. The participants included married couples and single mothers, although, even in two-parent families, some fathers were unable - or unwilling - to be interviewed. In all, I interviewed six single mothers; ten mothers from two-parent families; and, seven couples. Therefore, the findings presented here tend to favor the perspectives of mothers.

The sample included parents from a range of racial, socioeconomic, linguistic, and cultural

backgrounds. I interviewed Asian (2), Black (8), and White (13) parents. Five families I interviewed were immigrants to Canada. Two families were Mandarin speakers who did not speak English in their homes. Most of the parents interviewed were middle-class, but the interviewees included poor and working class families. Less than half of the parents I interviewed had completed college. Several parents indicated that they had not graduated from high school including a mother who completed only six years of schooling. Four of the parents I interviewed had graduate degrees.

Potential interviewees for this study were identified with the help of university colleagues and school personnel although I knew three families before I undertook this study. For example, three families were identified with the assistance of a university-based sociologist whose work focuses on Black, urban communities. The two Mandarin-speaking mothers I interviewed were identified with the help of a multicultural consultant working in a large school board. Six families were identified with the help of the director of a university-affiliated reading clinic in southwestern Ohio. A woman who organizes tutoring services for families of students with learning disabilities in southern Ohio recommended two families to me. Several other families were located with the assistance of four principals working in southern Ontario schools. One family was located by placing an ad in a newsletter published by a private school in Ontario. Other families were identified through the use "snowball sampling" (that is, parents I interviewed sometimes suggested the names of other parents they thought I might be interested in interviewing).

The *struggling learners* discussed with parents included eight girls and fifteen boys ranging from eight to seventeen years of age. Most of these students attended public schools although two were being home-schooled and two others attended private schools. There were significant differences in the degree to which the children I discussed with parents struggled in school. The majority of the children did poorly in most school subjects and a few exhibited serious behaviour problems. Twelve of the children had been identified as learning disabled or language disordered and one child had been identified as gifted. One student was enrolled in an ESL program. Five students had never been formally labelled, but had received some type of remedial assistance during their school careers. What all the children had in common was their parents' *perceptions* that they were not doing well in school.

I relied on open-ended questions to get parents to talk about the nature of their children's struggles in school and how school troubles had

affected them and their families. When interviews bogged down I referred to an interview guide (Weiss, 1995) which indicated the general areas I was interested in talking about with parents, including, for example, queries about the effects of their child's struggles in school in general - and the effects of homework in particular - on family relationships and routines.

I read transcriptions of the audiotaped interviews several times before attempting to generate categories that would account for the interview data. As I read and re-read the data, these categories emerged as core themes from parents' accounts of their families' responses to school failure. These themes did not emerge from any *a priori* categories or theoretical frames. The data were then coded according to the themes that were then used as the basis of an analysis of how school troubles affected the lives of these families (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982; Weiss, 1995). Specifically, data were analyzed through a process Bogdan and Biklen (1982) call "modified analytic induction"; that is, data were collected and analyzed to develop a "loose descriptive theory" that encompassed all cases of the phenomena" (p. 66), in this case, how a diverse group of parents perceived the effects of homework on the lives of their families.

The Impact of Homework on Families of Struggling Learners

The parents interviewed for this study indicated that homework was a significant presence in their homes occupying the time of children and parents who monitored and supported children's homework, often taking on the role of their child's teacher. Parents indicated that homework frequently reduced time available for family leisure time activities and domestic chores. Overall, the demands of homework disrupted the lives of these families, frequently upsetting family relationships and denying parents and children many of the pleasures of family life. These themes are documented in the following sections.

The Demands of Homework

Homework is a "simple and well-accepted fact" (McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984, p. 391) in most homes, but its presence looms larger in some homes than others. Edna Bunker² the mother of an eighth-grade boy who struggled in school, commented, "[My son] spends hours and hours and hours on homework. All weekend long, all night long. It's dreadful. Just dreadful." She added, "There's more to life than homework." Mrs. Bunker frequently admonished her son to "hurry up so that we can do something else" but homework rarely left time for "something else." Betty Springs also complained that her ninth-grade son spent "two, three, and four hours

a night" on homework to "get just kind of passing grades." Betty's husband, Martin, added: "Sam wasn't sitting in front of the TV and watching television. He was doing his homework. . . . No student should be doing that much homework."

The Springs and Bunkers might have expected that homework assignments would occasionally intrude on their families' leisure time. Still, the demands of their sons' homework went beyond what these parents considered reasonable, a perspective shared by nearly all of the parents I interviewed.³ Sheila McIsaac, an Irish immigrant, commented on her son's first few years in school: "There was always homework. . . . There were hours of homework. In the evening sitting at the kitchen table just doing it over and over and over again. It was quite stressful." The intrusion of homework into their family life eventually led the McIsaac's to home-school their son.

John Cooper had a similar perspective on his son's homework. "Peter was bringing home seven, eight, nine pages of [home]work a night. . . . I just thought it was ridiculous for a first grader to do so much [home]work . . . two, two and a half, three hours." Mrs. Cooper added, "It wasn't difficult work for him to complete. It just took all evening. And sometimes I was getting up in the morning, 'Okay, you didn't finish this page, you have to do it before you go to school.'"

Single mother Betty Blake offered a similar assessment of the heavy demands of homework when her son was in second grade. "Timmy was bringing home homework like he was in high school," she said. "I couldn't believe it. We'd get home and we'd be doing homework until ten o'clock at night."

Clearly, homework was a significant presence in the homes of the parents I interviewed³ and parents indicated that their children's learning difficulties were a significant factor in the amount of homework they had each night. The "hours" of homework Timmy Blake brought home each night, for example, was mostly work he had not completed in school because he spent so much time attending to "what was going on around him," as his mother put it. Parents also emphasized the effect academic difficulties had on the amount of time it took for their children to complete homework assignments. Children who struggled with reading, for example, had particular difficulty completing homework assignments. Mr. McIsaac observed that homework "would take so long [because] there were a lot of problems involved with reading. Math problems that involved a lot of reading would be so laborious that it would take forever. It would take hours to do homework."

Ralph Thorn recalled how his son Al's distractibility influenced the amount of time he spent working with Al's homework. "It would take us two, three hours, four hours every night," he told me, "to get through fifteen, twenty minutes worth of homework":

In a household where there are other outside noises going on and everything, the slightest little disruption . . . Al would focus on what was going on; it was just that Al was focussing on *everything* that was going on . . . It was a pretty difficult task for both of us.

Edna Bunker blamed her son's "perfectionism" for the amount of time it took him to complete his homework:

This year he had to do something for language arts and he was 98% finished, [but] because he is a perfectionist, it wasn't finished enough for him. He was ready to throw the whole thing away. I said, "Mike, just do the good copy, just hand it in as it is. . . . At least you will get a grade." But he was ready to dump the whole thing because he gets so frustrated if it's not the way he wants it. He spends hours and hours and hours on homework.

Poor organizational skills was another reason Mike had difficulty with his homework. Every afternoon Mrs. Bunker met her son at the door with a "big stop sign" which was her humorous way of asking her son to stop and think: "Do you know what homework you have tonight?" "Do you have what you need to complete your homework?" Often he did not.

In general, homework was a significant presence in the homes of the parents I interviewed that occupied the time of children *and* parents. In these families, if children had a lot of homework, then so did their parents.

Parents' Involvement in Children's Homework

Many educators recommend that parents find a quiet place for children to do homework away from the noise and distractions of family activities (Strother, 1984). Certainly, children will seek the help of parents with the spelling of a word, a difficult math problem, or confusing directions and teachers will occasionally assign projects that require the assistance of parents. Most parents will also assume responsibility for monitoring children's homework. But, it is often understood that homework is the *child's* responsibility, not the parents' (Keith, 1986).

The parents I interviewed indicated that, for their children, homework was rarely a solitary activity. Diane Riggs, for example, continually referred to her son's homework in our interview as "*our* homework" - and so it was for most of the parents I interviewed. In these families, homework was a collaborative activity involving children *and* parents. There were differences in the level of support children required and the kind of assistance parents were capable of providing, but, if homework made significant demands on the time of students who struggled in school, it made similar demands on their parents. Carol Dumay bemoaned the fact that when her daughter Georgina was in first and second grade she wasn't able to do her homework independently. "[Homework] was a problem. I had to sit right there with her. I couldn't leave her on her own . . . 'cause she didn't work independently. She always wanted you there, to help her."

Betty Blake indicated that her son Timmy required a high level of support with math problems. "I understand that I have to help with homework," she told me, "but the depth in which I have to help him with his homework is what frustrates me. Like, I don't understand how come he is not picking this up at school. He should be able to just come home and do the work." But, since Timmy could not "just come home and do the work," *his* homework was also his *mother's* homework.

Many parents of elementary school children, like Carol Dumay and Betty Blake, told me that their children needed constant support while they did homework, but even parents of older students indicated that their daughters and sons often insisted that a parent sit with them while they did homework. Edna Bunker spoke of her thirteen-year-old son Mike's need for her to "be there" while he did his homework:

Mike wants someone to sit one-on-one with him [while he does his homework]. And so I'll do that for a while. But I get frustrated too because it goes on and on and on. It's not like he can just sit there and get the stuff done quickly. It goes on and on . . . and so it's frustrating.

Diane Riggs also talked about the demands of supporting her son's homework:

Every night there's always something. . . . His math he's very good at so I don't have to worry about that, unless it comes out with word problems, then I have to read it for him. . . . And if it's grammar I have to read through it. . . . Or it might be a book report or

something like that and I have to help him with his spelling [and] trying to figure out what he wants to say. So I'm doing a lot of the work.

Tanya Wallace recalled how she and her husband supported their daughter's writing assignments by helping her to edit her written work. "We used to help Catherine a lot with editing her writing because of her spelling. . . . In seventh and eighth grade we would edit for her. We tried everything. But then rewriting took so long." And, as other parents told me, the time homework took was stressful and frustrating for Tanya, her husband, and Catherine.

If *all* the parents didn't feel that they needed to sit with their children *all* the time they were doing homework, nearly all the parents I interviewed discussed the amount of time they had to spend monitoring children's homework and helping them to organize their school work. Parents generally felt that without careful monitoring their children would have difficulty even beginning their homework. "Mike is so disorganized," Mrs. Bunker told me. "He comes home for lunch and he comes home at the end of the day and you're [always] monitoring." Monitoring included making sure Mike knew what homework he had been assigned; seeing that he had all the resources and materials needed to complete his assignments; and, checking to see that his homework had been completed. Mike was among many children who, their parents told me, often failed to write down assignments or left assignments at school. Catherine Connor's description of her son, Max, who was in fourth grade at the time of our interview, echoed a common theme among the parents I interviewed. "Typically, Max does not bring home the textbook that's got the homework he needs. He always forgets that." Edna Bunker often drove her son back to the school to collect materials he needed for his homework, something other parents I interviewed only threatened to do.

If parents felt that they needed to monitor their children's homework, "nagging" may have been the principal means parents used to make sure their children's homework was completed. Single mother, Elma Kinkead, described what she said was a typical interaction between her and her teenage daughter over homework. "Every day I go in and ask Andrea: 'Have you done your homework?' 'What are you doing?' 'What kind of marks are you getting?'" Diane Riggs shared a similar story. "I'm badgering my son every night for his homework," she said. "You know, he loves the computer, so he's on the computer. 'Roger, come on, let's do *our* homework.'" Edna Bunker spoke for many parents when she told me,

"It's always: 'Do you have it done?' All day long. If you would hear us, that's all we're saying. Hurry up and get it done."

The parents I interviewed expended considerable time and emotional energy getting children to complete homework assignments. But, feeling the pressure for their children to do well at school, parents frequently took on roles that went beyond either monitoring homework or helping children with homework assignments.

Taking on the Role of Teacher

When Tiffany Scott was in second grade, Tiffany's teacher told her mother that Tiffany "wasn't up to her level." When Ms. Scott asked what she should do, Tiffany's teacher suggested that she "work with Tiffany at home." Like Maria Scott, many of the parents I interviewed took up the challenge to "work with" their children at home. Betty Lau spent up to two hours each night doing what she called "mom's homework" with her daughter. "Mom's homework" focussed on an age-graded "super workbook," full of drills and exercises in math, reading, writing, and spelling, which, according to Mrs. Lau, was frequently used by other parents in the Chinese community. Mrs. Lau was convinced that these efforts were helping her daughter. "In Bonnie's school," she told me, "they are only teaching them two digit addition and subtraction. . . . But now my daughter can do multiplication."

Like Betty Lau, many of the parents I interviewed took a direct role in teaching their children school-related skills. The Moores attempted to strengthen their son Archie's math skills by "drilling him on his math facts," as they put it. The Thorns often "got jars of pennies out on the table and tried to show [their son] the concept of numbers and subtraction and multiplication." Carol Dumay supported her daughter by "letting Georgina read to me [and] I read to her constantly." Carol also offered Georgina more explicit support by drawing on strategies she had learned from the staff at a university reading clinic. Celine Street saw her efforts to teach her son to read as a means of overcoming what she believed were the shortcomings of her son's teacher(s):

I read to him, he would read to me. We would read a book together. It started with the Disney baby characters. You get a story and you read some words and there's a character. The character will tell you what that word is. So I would read and he would tell me what the character was. Or I would read and then we would switch it around. He would read and I would do the

character. Within two months, I had Michael reading.

Betty Springs, a former teacher, taught her son strategies for writing term papers. Similarly, Alice Mandel took advantage of the knowledge she had acquired during her graduate training in education to help her daughter learn specific skills Alice believed her daughter needed to overcome her "learning disability":

Before exams I spent hours and hours with her . . . showing her how to study, how to make herself ask questions. When I ask her questions, she writes them out. And then we review them. Help her remember things. Give her mnemonics, that kind of thing.

Overall, the parents I interviewed emphasized their feeling that homework ate up significant chunks of time for them and their children. A few parents saw value in the school work their children brought home. Mr. and Mrs. McIsaac, for example, told me that, although they resented the intrusion of homework in their family life, it was "mostly time we enjoyed." But, overwhelmingly, the parents I interviewed were ambivalent about homework. Still, most parents would likely have agreed with Diane Riggs about the importance of helping children with their homework:

I have to make sure that Roger's got his homework done. If I don't, then he gets behind and the teacher gets cross with him and . . . he starts feeling badly about himself. If he can keep up and at least have his homework done, then he's all right. It's when he gets behind that he gets panicky and starts feeling badly about himself.

The cost of letting homework slide can be high, as Mrs. Riggs suggests. But the toll of homework on household routines and family relationships was also high for the families I interviewed.

Writing about her relationship to her son's homework, educator Katherine Samway (1986) lamented that homework had harmed her "emotional well-being as a parent ... There have been too many evenings when I have allowed teacher-imposed obligations to supercede . . . family needs and interests" (p. 352). The sense that "teacher-imposed obligations" - in the form of homework - often interfered with family needs was emphasized by nearly all of the parents I interviewed. Parents indicated that the demands of homework reduced the time available for domestic chores and diminished

the pleasure they were able to derive from family relationships.

"Fussing and Fighting [over Homework]"

Homework demanded that parents spend significant amounts of time with children on schoolwork, but these interactions were frequently tense and frustrating for both parents and their children. "School affected my relationship with Robert," Mrs. McIsaac told me. Tension over homework was one of the reasons she and her husband decided to remove Robert from school in favour of home schooling:

I think if I had kept Robert in school it would have caused a barrier between us. There was always homework. There were hours of homework. In the evening sitting at the kitchen table just it doing over and over and over again. So it was quite stressful. So when we took him out of school [for home schooling], it removed the third party.... There was like the pressure off all the time. Having him out [of school] is easier. I think it could have only gotten worse.

Maria Scott recalled similarly stressful interactions around homework with her daughter:

I'd say, Tiffany, "Okay, let's read. I'll read one page and you read a page." So I'd read a page and she'd listen to me read and then, when it's time for her to read, she'd get frustrated when she got stuck on a word. . . . She just sat there and got so upset. And sometimes she would make me upset and I would say, "Tiffany, you know this word. Start with the first letter and sound it out." And she'd get upset so we're both sitting there trying to figure out this word. I'd get so frustrated. [Sometimes] I would yell, "Well just go! Just leave me alone!" And she'd get upset and started to cry.

Ms. Scott believed that homework did neither her nor her daughter much good: "It damaged my daughter as well as our relationship," she said. "Whenever we did homework we were *fussing and fighting*."

Betty Blake also worried that fights over homework had harmed her relationship with her son. "I tend to yell a lot," she told me:

I don't spank him, but I yell. I know that's not good for him. . . . I try not to yell, but I don't know what else

to do. . . . I get so frustrated. I don't even know what to say any more. I'll spend half a day showing him how to do something and he'll know how to do it as long as I'm sitting here. But if I move and say do it on your own, all of a sudden it's like, "What?" He gets very upset when I yell at him to the point where he cries... I think the fact that I get frustrated, it might have affected our relationship

Molly Reeves also recalled tense interactions over homework:

It was one day last week. It was some of his spelling words: fast-faster, tall-taller. Just add "-er," you know. And there was a little story he had to read that had some of his spelling words. And "fast," he got it, but every time we got to "faster," he didn't get it. And there was no difference, except the ending. We just kept arguing over it. And finally I said, "All right, just let it go, forget it. Go on." And he went into his room.

Fussing, fighting, and arguing over homework was a theme common to most of my interviews. Like Betty Blake, parents believed that "education was important" which meant that homework was important, too. "Working with" their children was also a way to help their children do better in school or, at least, keep from falling further behind. Perhaps this is why parents of children who receive average or below average grades may be especially likely to desire more homework for their children (Cooper, 1989). Still, the parents interviewed for this study also acknowledged that the costs of getting children to complete their homework - monitoring, encouraging, nagging, driving back to school to retrieve materials, and "fighting, fussing, and arguing" - was also high. For some of these parents, the aggravation and tension over homework outweighed the benefits of getting it done. "It's not worth it," as one parent told me. This may have accounted for the willingness of the Moores and the Thibaults to accept their children's claims that they "didn't have any homework." They probably knew differently, but to accept the claim their children had "no homework" was easier than fighting over homework. David Thibault put it well:

You fear that if your kid doesn't do well in school then their life is going to be hell. What they have to do is take school seriously and

always do better at it. But in trying to push your kid to do better at school . . . you end up ruining the relationship that you have with your kid. When school is over you want to have a good relationship with your children and the school gets in the way.

Homework may be important, but, if the cost of doing homework includes strained relationships with family members, then it may not be "worth it."

Conclusion

Most current versions of education reform emphasize parent involvement as a key to academic success. Although broadly conceived, parent involvement most often takes the form of supporting children's homework. The assertion that homework increases academic achievement directly by increasing "time on task" and, indirectly, by promoting personal qualities essential for future academic success (e.g., persistence, diligence, the ability to delay gratification [Bempechat 1998]) has achieved the status of *common sense* even if little research can be marshalled to support these claims (Cooper, 1989).

Whatever the *benefits* of homework, public debates over homework have given little attention to its potential *costs*, especially the potential violence homework can do to family routines and relationships. My interviews indicate that for some parents, in this case a group parents whose children struggled in school, homework can be a nearly intolerable burden. The parents I interviewed indicated that the amount of time children devoted to homework limited opportunities for other family activities and created resentment among parents and children. The time parents spent on their children's schoolwork frequently disrupted domestic routines and undermined relationships between parents and children and between spouses. The parents interviewed for this study also offered powerful evidence that stressful interactions over homework threatened long-term relationships between mothers and fathers and their children. In these families, homework was a *carrier* for school troubles, a means for transforming "school troubles" into "family troubles."

Educational policy makers, politicians, and others demanding more homework as a means of boosting academic achievement must balance the (limited) academic benefits of homework (Cooper, 1989) against the potential social costs of increasing children's homework burden. As one of the mothers I interviewed put it, "there's more to life than homework and school." The intensification of

schooling through homework denies many parents and children the pleasures of family life and, as the data collected for this study indicate, the costs of homework are especially high for families that include children for whom school is a struggle, punishing parents for having children who do not fit the structures of schooling as well as other children.

I am not recommending that schools suspend homework merely out of consideration of families like those I interviewed for this study. Whatever the academic benefits, homework is a well-entrenched practice in our schools that is not going to go away anytime soon. Indeed, teachers who do not routinely assign homework may be liable to severe criticism that they are failing to promote high academic standards. Rather, the challenge is for parents, teachers, and school administrators to work together to create homework policies that are considerate of the range of ways families are constituted (e.g., two working parents, one working parent and a stay-at-home parent, single parent), the different ways families live their lives, and the need for schools to maintain "high standards." Such policies must also be considerate of the findings of this study that, for some families, particularly families that include children who struggle in school, homework is a heavy burden that, from the parents' perspective at least, is simply "not worth it."

Endnotes

1. For purposes of this paper, homework includes all school-initiated work children are expected to complete outside of normal school hours, usually at home and often with the support of their parents.
2. To protect the identities of the parents interviewed for this study pseudonyms are used throughout.
3. The disruptive effects of homework on family life were emphasized in eighteen of the twenty-three interviews I conducted.

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How school troubles come home: The impact of homework on families of struggling learners

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