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Helping with homework? Homework as a site of tension for parents and teenagers¹

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Abstract

The setting of homework is strongly encouraged by the DFEE on the assumption that support from parents, once gained, is unproblematic and useful. However, a number of researchers (Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Levin et al, 1997; Cowan et al, 1998) have observed the possibility of a negative impact of homework on families. This paper presents interview data from families with teenagers, in which homework was described as a significant site of parent-teenager tensions. For many parents, homework was invested with the opportunity for reparation for their own scholastic failures or lost opportunities. Others felt that they lacked the competence to help and were disenfranchised by homework demands. Parents' concerns about their children's futures create a climate of pressure to succeed as they support a homework agenda that is not necessarily their own and which they have little power to influence.

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Introduction

Homework plays a central role in relationships between many parents and teenagers. For some parents, it provides a way of 'keeping in touch' as school-home relationships become more distant than they were at primary school (MacBeath et al, 1986); for some it is an only point of contact between parent and child (Langford et al, 2001). Such contact may be a highly rewarding experience (Morgan & Richardson, 1997) but it is also a source of conflict (see, for example, Beresford & Hardie, 1996). As the work of Bastiani (1997), Bastiani & Wolfendale (1996), Wolfendale & Bastiani (2000) and Epstein (2001) shows, home-school relationships are fraught with difficulty, especially when children reach secondary school age; parents' roles are ill-defined and their potential to contribute is frequently misunderstood by teachers and parents alike. Nevertheless, schools are encouraged to set homework on the assumption that parents will provide the necessary support (OFSTED, 1995; DFEE, 1998). Indeed, the DFEE *Guidelines on Homework in Primary and Secondary Schools in England and Wales* (1998) suggests that parental commitment to homework is critical, and that schools should work towards '*A learning partnership with parents*' underpinned by written guidance on the ways in which parents and carers can support pupils' homework by providing an appropriate environment, encouragement and praise, and making it clear that they value homework and support the school. Furthermore, parents should be encouraged - with teacher guidance - to get actively involved in joint homework activities, although it is recognised that 'some parents may find supporting their children with homework or home activities difficult and schools may find it a challenge to enlist their help'. (DFEE 1998, p.15). Schools are invited to follow good practice examples described in the *Guidelines*, but the concentration on good home-school relations, leaflets for parents and whole school policies in model schools- does not fully acknowledge or explore the many reasons why parents might find supporting homework difficult, nor does it recognise that homework support is a complex issue which – although it can have clear positive outcomes - frequently leads to conflict and anxiety within the family.

Parental participation in homework

The assumption of an unequivocal benefit of homework is based on school survey reports such as OFSTED (1995). An important caveat, however, is that many such reports are only concerned with overall school effects rather than individual attainment, background or experience. A wider research trawl shows that relationships between homework and achievement are in fact complicated and difficult to assess. Such complexity is demonstrated by the considerable variation in focus of the available research: studies have investigated the relationship between the amount of time spent on homework and individual attainment (Holmes & Croll, 1989; Tymms & Fitzgibbon, 1992; Farrow et al, 1999); whole class attainment (Dudley & Shawver, 1991; Tymms & Fitzgibbon, 1992); perceived school effectiveness (Barber et al, 1997); and achievement of pupils from different social backgrounds (Holmes & Croll, 1989). Research has considered the effectiveness of different types of homework (Cooper, 1989), its impact on the development of independent study (Warton, 1997), gender differences in compliance with homework demands (Harris et al 1993; MacBeath & Turner, 1990), and pupil attitudes in general (Keys et al, 1995).

Policy makers have also seen homework as an important bridge between home and school, as the DFEE guidelines illustrate. Such policy recommendations make two major assumptions, however: 1] that all parents are similarly positioned in educational, economic and cultural terms with respect to schools; and 2] that support, when it is given, is unproblematic in terms of its impact on parent-child relationships. A wide range of research suggests that at least the first of these assumptions should be questioned. Lareau

(1987, 1989) identifies educational and cultural mis-matches between middle class and working class parents in their dealings with schools, while Edwards & Warin's (1999) work in areas of high parental alienation from school and significant ethnic minority populations demonstrates that school strategies for parental involvement were based on assumed parental deficits which did not match with the parents' own concerns for their children's welfare. Similarly, Cairney (2000) and Bastiani (1997) have argued that schools need to respond to the diverse cultural resources of families rather than attempting to simply transmit school knowledge to them. Research has identified a number of obstacles in the way of genuine partnerships as far as homework is concerned: Brown (1993) observes that the necessary dialogue is problematic, while many, including Timperley et al (1992), Berresford & Hardie (1996) and MacBeath (2000) note that teachers may be unwilling to involve parents in developing homework policies and do not believe in their capacity to really help with homework. Parental roles are frequently limited to support only, thus ensuring the teacher's retention of educational power (McNaughton, 1995) while parents' particular skills go unacknowledged (MacBeath, 2000). Some parents experience difficulties from the point of view that they feel unable to deal with the academic demands of homework (MacBeath & Turner, 1990) and, equally, demands on their time (Hoover-Dempsey et al, 1995), especially if they are single parents (Reay, 1998) and mothers (MacLachlan, 1996). Working class parents find that school practices exclude them (Crozier, 1997; Reay, 1998), as do parents from minority ethnic groups (Bastiani, 1997).

As this overview shows, while there is considerable research on the difficulties associated with parental involvement in schooling and the potential for its positive development within programmes such as IMPACT (see, for example Merttens & Newland, 1996) and SHARE (for example, Capper, 2000), the emphasis of such work tends to be on the need for good communication, the genuine recognition and use of parents' skills - particularly in multicultural settings - and an avoidance of the 'colonisation' of home by school observed by Edwards & Warin (1999). Although a number of studies (for example, MacBeath et al, 1986; Coleman, 1998) look more closely at the family dynamics of homework support within the context of home-school relationships, work which considers in detail the emotional climate in which doing homework occurs is less easy to find despite Epstein's (1990:122) call for the integration of 'the sociologies of education and the family to understand schools and families as institutions and to understand the roles and relationships of the individuals that share responsibility for children'. Still less evident is an integration of the sociology of childhood and a recognition of the part played by children themselves in home-school relations, as Edwards & Alldred (2000) observe. McNamara et al's (2000) account of the ways in which teachers, parents, schools *and* pupils mobilise and demobilise in an interactive matrix of home-school relations is rare. The result may be that we are overlooking issues which challenge the second policy assumption of unproblematic parent-child relationships concerning homework and which may be important mediators in the impact of homework on pupils' educational attainments.

Although the current climate of school accountability has apparently led some parents to feel that it is the school's job to raise achievement rather than their own (Elliot et al, 2001), research indicates that many parents believe that partnership with schools in terms of homework support is an important factor in achievement (Levin et al, 1997) and in wider applications such as the development of good study habits, general knowledge and broadening of interests (MacBeath & Turner, 1990). Parents in the same study identified a range of perceived general family-based benefits of homework including the promotion of family communication, increased family interaction and keeping parents in touch. Many researchers (for example, MacBeath, 2000) have observed that home learning can be more effective and richer than school learning. However, parental involvement is not necessarily advantageous: a number of families experience considerable conflict over homework

(Goodnow & Collins, 1990; Hoover-Dempsey et al, 1995; Levin et al, 1997; Cowan et al, 1998). Both Goodnow & Collins (1990) and Hoover-Dempsey et al (1995) report that parents' theories about their children's abilities play a part in their handling of homework, often with detrimental results - parents are quoted by Hoover-Dempsey et al for instance as having strong negative emotions which are likely to actively disable, rather than support, their children as learners. Similarly, Cowan et al (1998) note that parents construct views of their children with reference to their own aptitudes and interests and the perceived qualities of individual children; harmonious relationships enable beneficial homework support, but homework can equally heighten tensions already present in a parent-child relationship. As Dunn & Plomin (1990) and Dunn (1993) observe, parenting style is dependent on the history of individual parent-child relationships, and differences between siblings suggest that effective homework support is not just a question of 'effective parenting'; homework help takes place within the context of the parent-child relationship and its precise form depends on parental theories about individual children's characteristics, development and educational needs. The force of emotional investment identified in such research is echoed in Levin et al's (1997) study of mothers' interactions with their children which found that the act of helping had emotional benefits for mothers in the sense of personal reward, but also had emotional costs and was a cause of tension, especially when their children were academically weak.

Interactions between parents and their children concerning the detailed dynamics of helping with homework are clearly complex and under-researched. There is considerable diversity in parents' expectations and experiences of involvement in their children's education and in their dealings with schools which is not matched or understood by policy assumptions or strategies. In this paper we present an analysis of homework help which seeks to explain further the nature of the tensions and sometimes conflicts which exist in many families.

The study

The data which we report here were gathered in Rochdale, near Manchester, and form part of a 12-year follow up investigation of families who had been selected from the electoral role to form the ESRC's Social Change and Economic Life Initiative (SCELI) in the mid-1980s and now had a child aged 11-16. From the 216 households identified in this way, 94 were traced and were invited to participate in the phase of the study which is reported here. Seventy families eventually participated in this phase: a sub-sample of fifty-eight of these families, all of whom were white, were interviewed by the authors and produced the data that are analysed here. The sample consisted of 56 female parent figures, 53 male parent figures, 43 daughters and 40 sons. The teenagers were all aged between 11 and 16, with a skew towards the younger 11-13 band in the girls and towards the older 14-16 band in the boys. The respondents came from a range of backgrounds: in keeping with national cohort studies (e.g., Ferri & Smith, 1996) 68% of the teenagers lived with both birth parents while the other 32% lived in a variety of other household types (e.g., single parent, adopted or blended families). In 55% of households, two adults were employed with at least one in full time paid work, in 22% one adult was employed in full time paid work, and in 23% no adult was employed in full time paid work (in four cases the mother was engaged in part-time work); 34% of households held at least one white collar worker, and 43% were blue collar.

In each household the resident parents and teenagers in the target age range were interviewed one-to-one by a member of the research team and assured of anonymity and confidentiality. The interview covered a range of topics including daily household activities, the effect of parental employment patterns, parent-teenager joint activities, closeness and change in family relationships, the experience of fathering and the meaning of family, and the teenager's future in work and parenthood. Following methods developed by family researchers such as Noller & Callan (1990, 1991), and building on the classic

observation of ‘divergent realities’(Larson & Richards 1994) in the experience of adolescents and their parents, we used the opportunity of interviewing both parents and teenagers to gain their perspectives on the same events and experiences. All the interviews were transcribed in full and names were changed to maintain anonymity. Using a grounded approach the interviews were explored on the NUD*IST (QSR, 1997) system to develop themes concerning descriptions of the family over time, ‘closeness’ in relationships, parenting and changing relationships, and patterns of overt and covert parental discipline (see Seale, 2000, for an analysis of techniques similar to those employed here).

It was within these contexts that respondents repeatedly raised the topic of homework help as a highly salient indicator of parenting styles and as a significant site of parent-child relationships. In the following sections, we identify dominant themes in accounts of homework help, and offer an analysis which focuses on conflicts and tensions arising from parents’ emotional investments in helping with homework and their perceptions of parenting, and tensions between parents and schools in terms of school demands and parents’ perceptions of their ability to help with school work. We first present an analysis of helping with homework which focuses on basic patterns and themes in parenting roles, parent-school relations, and parent-child relationships. Secondly, we contextualise these data within the wider frame of reference of respondents’ general beliefs about gender and parenting; we suggest interdependent themes of reparation and identification as constituents of parental investment in homework support and subsequent tensions between parents and teenagers. Finally, we consider the policy implications of our analysis in terms of parental disenfranchisement in the school homework agenda and tensions between parental investment and perceptions of good parenting.

School and family: an analysis of parental roles in homework help

In the original study we did not set out to ask about the topic of homework *per se*. The fact that homework was spontaneously and frequently mentioned as a major factor in family relationships by the majority of respondents when they described their typical daily routines accords it particular significance which is borne out by our analysis. For parents in particular it was the focus of some strong feelings expressed when they were asked about activities they enjoyed or disliked doing with their children. While their level of concern with the topic could be explained simply in terms of their perception that helping with homework is a socially desirable part of parenting, closer inspection of the data suggests that parents were driven by a number of internal and external pressures and concerns. Their accounts of how they helped drew on descriptions of parenting styles, on their relationships with schools, and on their relationships with their teenage children. While our initial presentation of the data is in terms of these three broad categories, we should emphasise that the nature of homework help is an amalgam of different values, concerns and beliefs. The accounts of homework helping styles given by mothers, fathers and teenagers were generally consistent within each family in terms of who helped and with what subject and in what way, but such accounts could differ in terms of what individual family members felt about the type of help offered. We consider these complexities further in the following sections.

The most basic account of homework help can be framed in terms of parenting styles. Parents described interactions over homework in terms of beliefs about appropriate support which ranged from non-interventionist to more controlling strategies. Five distinctive groups covering this range are described and illustrated in Table 1 with an indication of their frequencies.

Table I: Parenting styles in homework help (N= 58 families) (continued overleaf)

Style description and family types	Example quotations
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<p>No particular help mentioned Homework mentioned only in passing if at all and no helping strategy reported. Frequently relates to older children still at school; 6 of the 12 target age children had left school, and 3 had learning/behavioural difficulties which preoccupied parents rather than homework</p> <p>9 families (16%): 3 white collar, 5 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>He is doing his GCSE's, he's in his final year, so he is doing a bit of studying... We don't do a great deal together ... I'll ask him how he's got on at school, we'll talk a bit about football... (Henry Brook, double-glazing fitter; ex-wife Carol is a f/t payment supervisor, son Joe is 15)</p> <p>Most of the time he is up in his room.... they don't talk to parents a lot, yes, I mean I speak to him how his gone on at school, and this, that, and the other, but we don't go in for long detailed conversations with him, no, because he tends not to want to do that. (Mike Fairchild, administrator/manager, wife Helen is f/t receptionist, son Adrian is 16)</p>
<p>Praise, unconditional support Parents ask about homework and stress praise and encouragement rather than explicit teaching/explaining</p> <p>4 families (7%): 1 white collar, 2 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>Oh no she's does it all herself but she lets me know where she's up to with it all. (Roger Green, service engineer, wife Mary is unemployed, daughter Jane is 16)</p> <p>His school work he loves, his academic work's brilliant.... We don't push him in any way. We'll ... encourage him but he's never been pushed. He's done it all himself. (Steve Percival (mechanic – own business) wife Jill, (packer in factory), Chris (16)</p> <p>John's one of these people who puts in enough effort in his academic work to keep his teachers and his dad and I happy, he's not interested in doing any more than that. (Claire Sharpe, self.emp. acupuncturist; husband Peter is a senior planning officer, son John is 15)</p>
<p>Promoters of autonomy - but available when needed – parents as responsive helpers Parents primarily present themselves as 'being there' if needed to talk things through, although their ability to help in some cases may be limited. Homework help is largely initiated by teenagers.</p> <p>28 families (48%): 9 white collar, 11 blue collar, 8 unemployed</p>	<p>She will try, she will try and do it, but if she get, if she tends to get stuck, her Dad will, he doesn't do it for her, but he talks it through. (Mary MacLaughlin, unemployed; husband Joseph is unemployed/disabled, daughter Hannah is 12)</p> <p>With French, she says "Mum I don't know how to do this?" and "How do they expect you to do homework when they've not explained to you, what to do, or you've never done it before in class?" And he'll say "Come here, let's have a look" and they'll work it out together, you know, he won't do it for her. He'll say "Well if that says that, well what does that say, well that's your answer". (Hazel Banks, p/t cleaner, of daughter Fiona, 13)</p> <p>My mum asks me if I need any help and I'd say no if I didn't (laugh) but if I did need any help then she wouldn't like tell me the answers, she'd give the clues and I'd have to figure it out for myself. It's more or less the same with me dad as well. (Pam Yates (12) father Peter is a school computer technician, mother Lucy is a systems engineer)</p>
<p>Homework support as pro-active involvement/encouragement and guidance Parents actively encourage/support/guide teenagers, may initiate joint homework activities.</p> <p>10 families (17%): 2 white collar, 5 blue collar, 3 unemployed</p>	<p>Recently Joe has been doing an English course and he brought his book home, one of his books home of Mice and Men, so I read it, cause I've never read it before. So I thought, well as I'm interested in books anyway it's not a hardship to read a book so I thought I'd read it, and he's brought a video home over the half-term intending to watch it, and I intend to watch it with him. You know, there is, I like to be a bit involved in what he is doing, and show that I'm interested, I think. (Mary Dale, unemployed; husband David is an engineer in glass-cutting machinery, sons are Joe, 14, Nathan, 11)</p> <p>[Homework] is one thing that's pretty defined as my department! ... I've more studying aptitude and I know where they're going with their 'O' levels (Heather Sweet, unemployed; husband Gerry is unemployed/disabled, children are Steve, 16, John, 14 Sally, 13)</p> <p>She's got to do a 100 word essay on Lancashire so obviously she's a bit young to know about, I mean she's just thought about Blackpool and Blackpool lights and things like that so we discussed about the Coop in Rochdale and Gracie Fields and things like that. She was born in Rochdale so she's hopefully written, written that this morning, hopefully. (David Lowe, manager; wife Jean is a school secretary, daughter Suzanne is 12)</p>

<p>Monitoring: parental control Parents describe main task as ensuring that homework is done and ensuring that school demands are met. High degree of control over homework activity reported - teenagers are not allowed to 'make their own mistakes' with respect to the school.</p> <p>7 families (12%): 5 white collar, 2 blue collar, 0 unemployed</p>	<p>My dad likes checking the homework to see if I've got it all right at night, yeah [R: Your dad checks it?] Yeah, and he makes sure I've done it all and if I haven't then he, say like I've been ill, then he has to make sure that I have to get a book off someone to copy it up ... No, I don't like homework but he cuts down on me to make sure I do it. (Dan Jones, 11 of his father Peter, a hospital manager; mother Maggie is p/t bank clerk)</p> <p>Here's her homework book, and that's what she's got to do ... We know what she's got to do each night when she comes home and we check it and we sign it, and we've got a programme and we do her book, and we make sure that it is religiously done. (Brian Ford, recently redundant office manager; wife Juliet is full-time worker for charitable social work agency, daughter Susan is 15)</p> <p>I try not to get involved too much with homework, I'd rather them did it. I like to know what they don't understand, what they do understand, what they're struggling with ... we know now what's happening It gives us an insight and they don't feel as though we're spying on them ..' (Ed Finch, printer; wife Pat is p/t printer, daughters are Susan, 14, Emma, 12)</p>
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Table I (cont'd): Parenting styles in homework help (N= 58 families)

Nearly a quarter of the families reported that parents provided little active help in homework, either because it was no longer needed (6 of the target teenagers had left school), because it was no longer asked for, or because parents perceived their role as one of emotional support and encouragement rather than help *per se*. As can be seen from the table, the most popular response was in terms of parental response to teenager demand: nearly half of the parents were described as helping when asked, although the extent of their help might be just in terms of talking the problem through and acting as a sounding board. This was particularly true of those parents who described themselves as out of touch with the curriculum or not good at particular subjects. Most parents and teenagers described a clear division of labour in terms of mothers' and fathers' aptitudes for particular subjects; but even if parents felt confident in explaining a subject they emphasised that they aimed to enable their children to do their homework independently. They took the view that teenagers should be autonomous but should be supported when they asked for help. Households where there was no adult employed in full-time work were heavily represented in this category, reflecting a common parental response in this group in terms of lack of ability in academic subjects or being out of date. Nearly one fifth of parents emphasised pro-active involvement in homework, describing explicit guidance or encouragement on the part of parents. Their positive approach contrasts with that of the 12% of parents who described their main task as monitoring homework to ensure that school demands are met rather than initiating or elaborating on homework activities.

These parenting styles are cross-cut by the perceptions of the school-home relationship and parents' relative power with respect to school which are depicted in Table II (overleaf). Of the 49 families in which homework help was described, help varied from a clearly confident approach to homework support which supported the school curriculum (over 30%) to an awareness that parents 'weren't up to the job' in meeting its demands (over 20%), a group in which unemployed families featured. Confident supporters were more likely to take on the pro-active guidance parenting role in Table I, and to take the position of being able to compensate for perceived inadequacies in teaching at school. Some of these parents were well aware of the need to get good grades and hinted at the possibility of raising their children's marks by their own intervention. Others were less at ease both with the school and with the subject-matter of homework: 28.5% of families described homework activities as largely driven by the school with parents acting on behalf of the school to ensure that their children performed at an appropriate level. A further 20% of families described helping as something undertaken on behalf of the child, in which parents acted either as 'fellow travellers' who are happy to work out the answers to homework problems alongside their child, or as 'co-conspirators' against the common enemy of school.

Relationship to school and family types	Example quotation
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<p>Confident homework support: active teaching roles Enactment of explicit ‘teacherly’ behaviour, for instance the use of numerous questions and assumptions about the need to elicit a specific ‘right answer’, or adoption of a compensatory teaching role. In some cases parents are close to undertaking the homework task themselves although they are anxious to say that they do not do their children’s homework for them, aware that they could be seen to be colluding in ‘cheating’.</p> <p>15 families (30.6%): 6 white collar, 6 blue collar, 3 unemployed</p>	<p>The only thing he excels at at the moment is maths, I mean Neil was only just beginning to talk, and he’s two years of age and they would be in the car and it would be “Right, count how many white cars you see Neil” and by the time he was three it was “What’s 3 and 3, what’s 6 and 6” and by the time he was four he was doing take-aways with him. So by the time he went to school he could do brilliant maths, you know. (Sarah Sanderson, f/t s/e small business; husband Paul is f/t s/e small business, son Neil is 11))</p> <p>At the moment she's just er like her homework, you know, a teacher type of role at the moment yeh. Hopefully she can do what she wants to do, we'll encourage her to do that. Like with her homeworks and things like that we'll help her, we won't do it but we'll help her and tell her what she's going wrong. (David Lowe manager; wife Jean is a school secretary, daughter Suzanne is 12)</p> <p>Geography – well, it was the first time that they've really done it as a subject on its own; ... To sit down and tell her what the teachers really should have done - the basics, why they are doing what they are doing. And it seemed to click then with her. (Amanda Golding, p/t care worker EPH; husband Adam is a printer, children Diane, 13, Fred, 11)</p> <p>He just like shows me how to do it properly. [R: Does that help you to understand it better?] Cos the teachers don't really explain it well enough. (Dan Jones, 11 of his father Peter, a hospital manager; mother Maggie is p/t bank clerk)</p> <p>Er, she likes to think that she has done really well in them to try and achieve, that she is getting a good mark in them, and so she thinks that if I, if she involves me she might get that little bit more of a higher mark or something but um, I just give her my ideas and let her work on them. (Margaret Sourbutts, school dinner worker; husband Peter (stepfather) is retired sewage worker, daughter Kathy is 11)</p> <p>I get such a kick out of Kirsty's homework now, I just absolutely love doing Kirsty's homework (Sue Ivory, p/t school dinner assistant and childminder; husband Malcolm is a printer, daughter Kirsty is 11)</p>
<p>Acting on behalf of school Ensuring that school demands are met, ‘siding’ with school</p> <p>14 families (28.5%): 7 white collar, 6 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>We do talk about this that well if you don't, can't be bothered to do this homework Rachel, it’s at the checkout at Tesco's for you.... if you have all the tickets in your pocket, if you manage to get your A-levels and go to college and that you've got more chances. (Martin Lake, engineering inspector; wife Helen is voluntary playgroup worker, daughter Rachel is 11)</p> <p>I make them do their homework even though it's not due ... I don't care if I come home to a tip as long as the homework is done. (Karen Killington, sales manager; non-resident father Jim is a taxi driver, daughters are Amy, 14 and Louise 13)</p>
<p>Acting on behalf of the child On an equal footing with their child with respect to the school, responsive to child requests. Parents offer support by working alongside children, sometimes against the explicit ‘common enemy’ of school, sometimes as ‘fellow traveller’ in joint enterprise.</p> <p>10 families (20.4%): 3 white collar, 5 blue collar, 2 unemployed</p>	<p>We work it out together. (Fred Warren, tool maker in factory; wife Pat is a nursery officer, daughter Julia is 12)</p> <p>So we're both sat there doing a task that neither of us are enjoying really. (Amy Scott, staff nurse; husband John is an engineer, daughter Sally is 13)</p> <p>When like I've done my homework, I always go to English with my mum 'cos she's good at talking and stuff, and with my maths, my mum's not good at maths so she always sends me to my dad. So, he always, he always sits in this chair and I sit on the floor or something, and our 'phone turns in to a calculator so we do it on there. And he shows me how to like do percentages and stuff which is pretty good. (Sarah Corner aged 14, father Ted is order processor in warehouse + p/t self-employed builder, mother Pauline is ex shop manager – retired on health grounds)</p>

Table II: Parents’ relationships with school (N= 49 families [not all 58 families reported helping with homework])

<p>Not up to the job A number of parents felt that they were not up to helping with homework, or had only a limited ability to do so.</p> <p>10 families (20.4%): 1 white collar, 3 blue collar, 6 unemployed</p>	<p>They won't ask me for nowt, because I'm worse than them. (Sharon Little, unemployed, husband Derek is unemployed, daughter Karen is 11, sons Paul and Peter are 16 and 11)</p> <p>Well sometimes they're there doing their homework and they'll give us a sum, it's all right or finding out something, there's a word missing or what is it and like that but most of the stuff like school, homework stuff and those sort of like that because I don't read good and all that. I can't even spell anyway but I don't bother, with me I didn't need it at that time. There was a need to learn how to earn your money and look after it. (Stan Barnes, unemployed, wife Linda is p/t café worker, daughters Lucy and Mary are 13 and 12)</p> <p>Paula she relied on her mum for all her homework, I mean I weren't clever meself but I would help her with what I thought I could help her with ... I used to tell her what I thought she should do. (Bob Black, manual worker for water contractor, wife Joan is school dinner worker, daughter Paula is 16)</p>
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Table II (cont'd) : Parents' relationships with school (N= 49 families [not all 58 families reported helping with homework])

As Tables I and II show, many parents felt pressurised by school in terms of the need for qualifications and the need to fulfil the homework task satisfactorily; 20% regarded themselves as wholly inadequate in homework support. Pressure also came from another quarter: that of their relationships with their children and their own identities as people and as parents. Interactions over homework were coloured by perceptions of children as reflections of their parents with abilities or interests in common, by the experience of parenting as fostering a dependent person (see Langford et al, 2001), and by the use of homework help as an opportunity for closeness, as Table III (overleaf) shows.

More than half of the families, including the majority of the unemployed group, described homework help in terms of parenting. For teenagers, it was an expected part of the parenting role, but parents themselves described it as a duty, and as part of the job of supporting a child in gaining their independence. For many parents, being able to answer questions and to contribute to their child's academic progress was a reflection on their own success and a matter of pride and often pleasure. For a further 14% of families, homework help was embedded in the parent-child relationship in terms of perceptions of affinities between parents and children with respect to subject aptitudes and mutual enjoyment of a task which gives an opportunity for closeness. For some parents homework offered a chance to make up for missed opportunities and to re-live an interest through their child. For the remaining 32% of families, half of them white collar workers, homework help was dominated by conflict and anxiety. While the unemployed group were more likely to consider themselves unable to adequately support homework, they did not stand out as expressing anxiety about the future for reasons which are unclear but which may be explained for the white collar group in terms of parents' particular investments in their children. Many of the families expressed anxieties about their children's futures which focused on the need to be successful academically. As we will show in the remainder of this paper, themes of investment and reparation, and the pressure from schools to ensure exam success, cause tensions between parents and teenagers and sometimes contradictions for parents themselves.

Relationship emphasis and family types	Example quotation
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<p>Identity as parent Homework help is described as part of one's identity/role as a parent – eg, being able to help a dependent to develop and taking pride in their achievements, doing the job of a parent; not necessarily conflict-free.</p> <p>26 families (53%): 8 white collar, 9 blue collar, 9 unemployed</p>	<p>I think the biggest satisfaction I get is when she asks me questions and I'm able to give her the answer. But that's basically school work, y'know, when she hasn't understood something at school or she's, er, heard something and er, I've told her the best way that I can that they're wrong or they're right but there's a bit more to it, y'know, I've explained to her, helping her really. (John Foster, unemployed; wife Sue is unemployed, daughter Rebecca is 11)</p> <p>I just like watching her getting on with her life and just glad that she is the way that she is, and she'll come in and just sit and do her homework, and really into her education. And I can just sit and watch her for hours doing her homework and really into it. (Hazel Banks, p/t cleaner, of daughter Fiona, 13)</p>
<p>Embedded in the parent-child relationship: enjoyment and closeness, parent-child identity, reparation Parent and child enjoy doing homework together as an opportunity for closeness. Can include reparation for lost opportunities: helping with homework enables parents to pursue interests perhaps abandoned in their own school careers. In other cases child and parent seen as having something in common, may be portrayed as accounting for one parent helping with a particular subject; can also be a question of same gender ability/affinity.</p> <p>7 families (14.2%): 1 white collar, 5 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>She always likes me to help her when she gets projects for history or geography and things like that, and we do tend to do those together and get involved in those together. (Margaret Sourbutts, school dinner worker; husband Peter (stepfather) is retired sewage worker, daughter Kathy is 11)</p> <p>I get such a kick out of Kirsty's homework. That's what I was doing when you came. Um, I mean I do a morning at Art School, I've been doing for five years ... I just so enjoy Kirsty's art, it's wonderful. ... I get such a kick out of Kirsty's homework now, I just absolutely love doing Kirsty's homework (laugh) it's sad 'int it? But I love it, I absolutely thoroughly enjoy it. (Sue Ivory, p/t school dinner assistant and childminder; husband Malcolm is a printer, daughter Kirsty is 11)</p> <p>Of course he's also heading towards being scientific at the moment at school and erm, and with me being a chemist, that helps, so we talk about scientific things as well (Eric Dawson, health & safety inspector in engineering; wife Sandra is a teacher, son Edward is 14)</p>
<p>Anxiety about the future Parents express anxiety over their children's school performance, homework help is necessary to ensure success. Some parents point to their own experience in the job market. Often results in tension.</p> <p>12 families (24.4%): 7 white collar, 4 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>I want them to stand on their own two feet, and I want them to realise what the value of going to school is, because I think in some respects, I think you get lulled into a false sense of security at school and you know, like, I don't stand over them and make them do their homework, I don't think it's right that you should do that. I think they should want to do their homework... I worry to death that they just become eternal students for the sake of it, you know. Sort of, they get a grant and go to university and get mediocre results and at the end of it come out with mediocre jobs because it is the least line of resistance, there is no willpower involved in it. (Derek Melton, senior planning officer, wife Diane is personnel manager, sons Pat and Joe are 16 and 13)</p> <p>I hate it when she nags me, she can be a bit of a nag sometimes. [R:Why do you think she nags?] I don't know, she just wants me to do good in school, get good marks. I need a push but I don't need them to sit there and going "Now do your homework, now do your homework, now do your homework". (Lucy Mason aged 14 of her mother Sue (p/t cleaner in own business); father Pete is a plant operator NWW)</p> <p>I don't enjoy doing their homework. It's um, it's one of those things, if they're stuck then I've got to help them through it. ...Unwillingly, because I hated school and I couldn't wait to leave. ... I've tried to drum it into them that you know that I've never had any real training of any kind, so I've got no qualifications...they should get something behind them. (Derek Little, unemployed; wife Sharon, unemployed, children Karen, 11, Paul, 16, Peter 11)</p>

Table III: Homework help within the parent-teenager relationship context (N= 49; [not all 58 families reported helping with homework])

<p>Conflicts over homework help Homework help is reported as causing tensions whereby teenagers reject or are critical of parents' help and will not accept their parental teaching role and expertise.</p> <p>4 families (8.2%): 1 white collar, 2 blue collar, 1 unemployed</p>	<p>And sometimes if she's doing homework and I know she's got it wrong and I worry about, well right now she's got this wrong now do I tell her that she's got it wrong and then I think - Oh yeah, well I will tell her she's got it wrong, so I say - Well you know all these sums you've done here Suzanne, well they're all wrong. And then she goes - 'what were you doing looking at my book and why've I gone wrong' and those sorts of things like that and 'I think homework is so boring'. So things like that, I'm not very good at helping with homework. (Jean Lowe, school secretary; husband David is a manager, daughter Suzanne is 12)</p> <p>If they need anything or any questions it is always they come to their dad. But with Nicholas these past couple of years .. it is 'Sir said this and Sir said that', Sir was right and dad was wrong and there has been a bit of a conflict. It got to the stage where Philip was trying to help him with his maths .. he wouldn't listen. So when he was at school one day Philip asked the teacher for a paper and he got 96%. And he told Nicholas, it wasn't to show off to Nicholas but it was to let Nicholas know that his dad knew quite a wee bit and that he could actually really help him... (Irene Baxter, unemployed/disabled; husband Philip is unemployed/disabled, children are Nicholas, 16 and Kate, 14)</p> <p>I always seem to have a go at him if he says, I don't get what he's saying, I seem to shout at him. (Susan Finch, aged 14, of father Ed, printer; mother Pat is p/t printer, sister Emma is 12)</p>
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Table III (cont'd): Homework help within the parent-teenager relationship context (N= 49; [not all 58 families reported helping with homework])

'Wait till your father gets home' – gender and ability

The data presented in Tables I to III represent a broad range of the type of roles that parents adopt. While we have presented this information in a snap-shot form, it is important to bear in mind that respondents were not simply describing isolated events but were referring to entrenched patterns of general practice in helping with homework. Their actions incorporated more general stances on the goals of homework interaction, beliefs about teaching styles, attitudes to school and perceptions and experiences of parent-child relationships. We have already commented that families were in general consistent in their accounts of who helped with homework, how they helped and with which subject. In the following sections we will analyse responses about homework within the context of other family narratives in order to examine the ways in which families establish patterns of homework help over time.

In explaining their everyday practices, respondents frequently describe the establishment of parental roles which are arrived at through a long-standing process of attribution of responsibility. This was the case in the Sanderson family, where subject-specific roles for helping were clearly defined:

Sarah Sanderson: So Neil is old enough and sensible enough to know the difference..[between us] .. if he wanted help with drawing something for homework, he would go to Paul, if he wanted help with maths in his homework he would go to Paul, but if he wanted something to do with English, spelling, he would come to me, he knows the difference. That's not to say that in the early days that he didn't go to Paul and say "Dad how do you spell?" but dad would say "Oh I don't know go and ask your mum".

Paul Sanderson: I'm good at some things and I'm bad at others... Um, and if he has a problems with the things that he knows I'm good at, he wouldn't dream of going to

Sarah, he wouldn't even dream, if he has a problem there and Sarah's sitting here and he is doing his homework and I'm not in the house, he will wait until I come home. (Sarah and Paul Sanderson, f/t s/e small business; son Neil is 11)

Many respondents referred to parents' academic abilities as a significant ingredient in their family pattern of homework help. Beliefs about parenting, parental academic ability and subject aptitude become entrenched over time and set the family pattern of homework help. These assumptions are frequently informed by beliefs about gender. In the Baxter family there is a consensus that unemployed and disabled ex-Further Education teacher Philip Baxter is 'the clever one'. Daughter Kate, who is 14, says that her dad helps with homework because '*he's dead brainy*' and Irene Baxter, who is also unemployed and disabled and an ex-nurse agrees that her husband is '*brighter than me*'. Some other mothers in the sample similarly described themselves as incapable of helping with homework because they did not have the academic ability, portraying fathers as the teacher or expert. Commenting on her father's '*bigger brain*', Judy Dent echoes the identification theme in Table III as she aligns herself with her mother's supposed incompetence at mathematics:

Judy: he helps with our work more than mum will. She will help us but he's easier understanding it. I'm not saying that she's thick or.... but he's got like a bigger brain, something like that.... if I ask mum to spell something, she might say "Bob is this right?" and then dad'd have to say it.

R: So he's better at spelling and things?

Judy: Yeah, and maths especially. I'm no good at maths, so I take after me mum. (Judy Dent, aged 11; father Bob is a p/t care worker, mother Katie is a f/t school caretaker; one sister Mandy aged 15)

As these examples illustrate, many respondents describe traditional gender differences in ascribed subject abilities. Moreover, parental 'responsibility' for homework help frequently reflects a traditional gendering of parenting roles - mothers are deemed to be better talk partners than fathers (Warin et al, 1999) with clear consequences. Sarah Corner for instance assumes that her mother's facility with talking equates with being good at English:

When like I've done my homework, I always go to mum with my English 'cos she's good at talking and stuff, and with my maths, my mum's not good at maths so she always sends me to my dad. (Sarah Corner aged 14, father Ted is order processor in warehouse + p/t self-employed builder, mother Pauline is ex shop manager – retired on health grounds)

Reflecting the importance of work roles for men in the sample (see Warin et al, 1999) and allusions to expertise and identity in Table III, Fred Warren sees a place for himself in the family in terms of an ability to do maths which he relates to his job:

There's, one of my places I find that I fit in quite well is I have to help her with her maths homework. I'm no use with her English homework because I'm an engineer and engineers can't spell, but I have to help her with her maths homework. (Fred Warren, tool maker; wife Pat is a nursery officer, daughter Julia is 12)

The data show how individual families evolve a 'habitus' of homework help practices in reference to broad dimensions of gender and ability which largely determine *who* helps. However, in order to fully understand family practices of homework help we need to explore the wider narrative given in parents' accounts of *why* they help. Within these highly personal family histories we find the key to understanding what drives the emotional intensity of homework interactions and why parents help in the ways they do. In order to

do this, we need to widen the context of our analysis to include parental investments in their relationships with their teenage children.

Parental investment in homework

Why does homework have such salience for parents when they are asked about relationships with their teenage children? As we have already noted, homework was frequently mentioned by parents in response to questions about patterns of family routines, patterns of family closeness and communication, and aspirations for the future. Homework help does not occur as an isolated event in the family; the values, beliefs and expectations that influence types of help are part of the wider picture of 'doing the family' (Morgan, 1998). Families willingly produce shared accounts of entrenched practices which reveal beliefs about gender and ability; however their emerging family narratives also reveal influences such as reparation and identification which have deeper historical roots and which are already hinted at in the data presented in Table III. Many parents described strong feelings of identification with their children: particular aspects of their children's lives triggered a sense of connectedness through the reflection of perceived similarities of temperament, appearance, interests and abilities. For example, asked about what he enjoys about being a father, Paul Sanderson replied:

I think it's just standing and looking and - amazing - really, YOUR children. ... sometimes it can be almost like looking in a mirror and - just the looking and seeing them getting on with life and knowing that you're part of that..... They start developing their own personality and in that personality you can see sometimes a very large reflection of yourself ..

We can further illustrate these themes through an examination of two families in which accounts of parental identification and parental reparation provide an insight into parents' emotional investments in homework: the Baxters and the Ivorys.

Interviews with the Baxter family revealed a history of tension over son Nicholas' perceived lack of scholastic achievement. His father Philip described a very strong value for 'educational achievement' derived from his need to make reparation for his own father's lack of 'intellectual advancement'. He perceives his major contribution as a father - in contrast to that of his own - to be one of very active involvement in his children's education:

I'm more educationally advanced so I can learn about what the kids are learning and then act as a teacher to them. Er.... whereas my father wouldn't. My father wasn't even interested in what I was doing at school. I have tried so hard to, since primary school with the kids ... so that we're really involved with them. I get to know what they're doing.

Looking back to Table III, we see that Philip Baxter appears in a confrontational and competitive role in his relationship with Nicholas as described by Irene. Like a number of other fathers, he also invokes his expertise in a particular academic area – technology - as an important issue in homework help, and he clearly advocates the confident teacher role from Table II in terms of his relationship with school. In terms of his parenting style, in interview he subscribes to the involvement and guidance style in Table I. The family's accounts of his particular approach to Nicholas's schoolwork provide us with an explanatory context for his taking on of these roles as opposed to others. Expertise is important to Philip Baxter because, as we have seen, he is concerned to be in a position to 'act as a teacher', and he believes that a certain level of 'educational advancement' is necessary to do so. However, the position he takes is resisted by Nicholas:

Nicholas has still got the resentfulness where he will not accept advice. Er.... I got all my old ... technology OU books out and stuff. He wouldn't accept it. I got the answers, the answer sheets for revision questions and stuff, or revision packs - 'Let's go through it together.' - 'No I don't, no I'll do it myself.' Er.... got the CDs for the maths etc for the computer. No, he would much rather play ... soccer and stuff. ... I foresaw that at this age I might be a bit more involved in what Nicholas does. He might involve me a bit more in what he does at college so I can help him.

Nicholas' resistance leads Philip to extreme action in his attempts to prove his academic credentials by actually undertaking the same examination paper as his son. Although Philip himself says that he possibly tries 'too hard', his own lack of school success, which he partly blames on his own parents, feeds his desire to see his son succeed:

I just wanted to turn 'em out - I think every parent says it - that they want them to be better than what we are so each succeeding generation is better and better. I yeah I know my two will be better than my mum and dad er... educationally wise, er... whether they'll enjoy life any better I don't know. I'm hoping they will be better than me.

Although - in common with other parents in the sample - he subscribes to a theory of betterment across the generations, and expresses strong aspirations for his own children to do better than himself at school, he also expresses a self-contradictory desire to be seen - particularly by Nicholas - to be more expert than him. The roots of his competitiveness and ambition lie in his own early academic 'failure' as Nicholas observes:

I think my dad sees himself as, well, not a failure but someone who hasn't achieved what they want to be in life and my dad's trying to push us to be what he wants us to be in life so yeah so he's trying to better his dad that way.

For Philip Baxter, academic success for Nicholas would not only confirm his good parenting but would also reflect well on him through a process of projective identification. Despite his subscription to a guidance mode of parenting, his strong desire for Nicholas to succeed academically leads him to a more controlling mode.

In contrast to Philip Baxter's style of homework help, Sue Ivory invests heavily in her daughter Kirsty's art work, finding that the experience of helping her is 'wonderful' and something she 'gets a kick out of' because she enjoys the activity for its own sake. Indeed, her enthusiasm is such that she would like to do Kirsty's homework for her entirely. While her style of help differs radically from Philip Baxter's, the underlying motivation for it presents very similar themes of reparation and identification which emerge from the Ivory family's accounts. If - with her mother's help and support - Kirsty can realise her potential ability in art, it would confirm and reflect her mother's own artistic talent:

I could have done a lot more than what I have done, and sometimes I just think, um..., I've wasted a bit of my life really, not my family life, but careers wise I think, I just regret that I didn't stay on at school and get qualifications. I get such a kick out of Kirsty's homework now. (Sue Ivory, p/t school dinner assistant and childminder; husband Malcolm is a printer, daughter Kirsty is 11)

She expresses a sense of a lost opportunity to develop her own identity as an artist, the potentiality of which is confirmed by seeing valued attributes of herself reflected in Kirsty. A sense of reparation for her own failure to develop as an artist drives her promotion of Kirsty's ability. However, as in the case of Philip Baxter, Sue Ivory also expresses

contradictory feelings with regard to Kirsty as she imagines a future where Kirsty's ability outstrips her own:

She'll realise then that she doesn't really need me and I will feel threatened then, very much so, I'll just have to go to some more night school (laugh).

Paradoxically, a parent's promotion of their child to fulfil their own thwarted ambitions, whilst bringing about a sense of identification with the child, can also lead the parent to feel 'left behind'.

The wider homework context: going beyond the family

Whilst Sue Ivory describes a time in the future when she will feel left behind, some parents reveal how they already feel excluded from being able to influence educational outcomes through help with homework. As Table II shows, some parents, particularly (but not exclusively) working class parents, express a sense of disempowerment and exclusion from the curriculum. Stan Barnes, like Sharon Little, feels he is 'not up to the job':

I haven't got a clue. ... I can't understand, I don't know what they mean. ... most of the stuff like school, homework stuff and those sort of like that because I don't read good and all that. I can't even spell anyway. I mean half the homework she comes home with I have never even heard of. (Stan Barnes, unemployed, wife Linda is p/t café worker, daughters Lucy and Mary are 13 and 12)

Similarly, Sue Mason, asked what she least enjoys doing with her children, joins many other parents in naming helping with homework:

Homework drives me mad sometimes, yeah. Do you know a lot of it is frustration because the maths now, I can't do, they'll say "Oh mum" and they'll be getting stressed out over a problem, and I'll look at it and I think the most frustrating part is that I can't do it, I can't help them. (Sue Mason, p/t cleaner in own business; husband Pete is a plant operator NWW, daughter Lucy is 14)

Michelle Millhouse describes the pressure of trying to get her son to live up to externally imposed standards of reading which she is not in a position to challenge:

Michelle: He doesn't do it deliberately, but when I say "Right get your homework out", and he'll start messing around ... sometimes I haven't got the time for him, mentally. The one thing I hate doing with him I suppose is his reading. Because it's frustrating for him as well as for me because at the age he is, some of the words he should know which I know he doesn't know, and, it can get very het up. The same with his homework some times. It's the mental pressure that's put on. And sometimes I just don't take it very well. (Michelle Millhouse, p/t worker in florist shop; husband Stuart is unemployed, son Tony is 11)

Like Michelle, Amy Scott is powerless to dictate a more motivating and enjoyable homework content for her daughter; as she says, '*we're both sat there doing a task that neither of us are enjoying really*'. We have described this 'partnership' in Table II as one of battling against a common enemy – a stark contrast with the 'learning partnership' advocated in the DFEE *Guidelines*. Whereas Amy and her daughter are on 'the same side' in coping with the demands of homework, for a number of parents homework is a site of considerable conflict based on parental anxieties and teenagers' reluctance to be helped, as in the case of the Baxters: Philip's strong agenda for educational betterment has led to

alienation within the relationship as his attempts to control his son undermine Nicholas' growing autonomy. These interdependent themes of educational and social betterment are particularly strong in the Baxter household but typify the aspirations of a number of parents; driven by their anxieties about the future, they expressed a strong desire to control their children's academic progress. Paula Killington, a sales manager whose husband is a taxi driver, points out that '*If they don't do well with their homework they will end up working in Kwik Save*', and Juliet Ford, a full-time worker for a charitable social work agency, argues that '*you only get out what you put in*'. David and Jean Lowe, who both express anxiety about getting 12-year-old Suzanne's homework right, resort to checking her bag:

Well, Jean, usually, when [Suzanne's] gone to bed she usually looks through her bag and sees what she's done - to see if it's right. (David Lowe, manager; wife Jean is a school secretary)

Conclusion

Current policy is aimed at strengthening the role and status of homework on the assumption that it unproblematically raises educational achievement. However, policies such as the DFEE *Homework Guidelines* and the introduction of home-school contracts do not take account of the complex factors mediating the three-way relationship between schools, parents and their children. Current government initiatives relating to homework reflect the wider background concern with parenting which, despite the rhetoric of support for families, is based on a deficit model frequently positioning parents as irresponsible and ill informed. The numerous initiatives aimed at developing parenting skills are in harmony with homework-related policies only in so far as they reflect this underlying model. In our review of the literature we observed that the connection between homework and attainment is well researched, but the family processes involved in homework are not. The data presented here show the complexity of parental investments and the role played by homework help in relationships between home and school and within families themselves. These are issues that must be taken into account in the current emphasis on homework, since they raise a number of questions for policy concerning home-school partnerships and the best use of parents' enthusiasms, expertise and knowledge of their own children to not only support schools but to influence and contribute to the curriculum and its delivery. Our analysis shows that parents are investing considerable time and emotional effort into supporting a homework agenda that is not their own and which they have little power to influence. They are driven by concerns about their children's futures which create a climate of pressure to succeed. The data show the cost in terms of the quality of the relationship between parent and child of any educational advantage that is gained from homework. As Michelle Millhouse says, '*once I've snapped they just stay out of me way. So then they won't even ask*'.

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