

ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

CONCEPTUALISING HOMEWORK IN AN ESSEX
PRIMARY SCHOOL: LEARNING FROM OUR COMMUNITY

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ANGLIA RUSKIN UNIVERSITY

ABSTRACT

FACULTY OF HEALTH, SOCIAL CARE AND EDUCATION

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

CONCEPTUALISING HOMEWORK IN AN ESSEX PRIMARY SCHOOL: A
QUALITATIVE ENQUIRY

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The aim of this research is to explore the views of pupils, parents and teachers about homework at Maylandsea Community Primary School. Specifically it is designed to investigate their opinions about the value and purpose of homework, about what sort of homework they think may be most suitable for primary aged children, about the different roles and responsibilities of stakeholders in the homework process and about ways in which homework activities might promote children's involvement and their enjoyment of learning. These collected views were then used to prepare a framework to provide guidance, clarification and exposition in order to assist members of the school community. This research is designed to address the paucity of understanding about homework in a primary school and to discover if and why parents, pupils and teachers think that homework is valuable and worthwhile.

This study is located within a qualitative, epistemological paradigm and it employs a social constructivist research methodology. The researcher adopts the stance that homework is a socially constructed, socially described and socially conceptualised activity. This is insider research and the researcher is also the school's headteacher. There is an acknowledgement that action research models and participatory enquiry approaches have influenced the research design but have not defined it. This research is a single case study located within one semi-rural primary school in Essex.

This study finds that parents, pupils and teachers recognise that homework has an important role to play in helping primary age children to learn, in developing positive learning habits and in promoting good personal and social skills. It discovers that there is confusion about parents' roles in supporting homework. It demonstrates that homework should be made meaningful for families and engaging for pupils and that the foundation for successful homework lies within the quality of the tripartite relationships between teachers, children and parents.

This thesis offers a new framework to support teachers and families and it concludes that, whilst existing literature is ambivalent in terms of the value, purpose and effectiveness of homework, stakeholders at this primary school consider it to have positive benefits both for learning and for the personal development of young children. However, these benefits are most evident when the homework tasks are interesting, varied, personalised and relevant to learners' needs. Families are supportive of homework when they can appreciate that it is meaningful to them and their children.

Key words: homework, primary school, social constructivism, framework, stakeholders.

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*I love to do my homework, it makes me feel so good,
I love to do exactly as the teacher says I should.
I love to do my homework, I love it ev'ry day,
Also I love these men in white who are taking me away*
Michael Rosen

Chapter1: An introduction to homework and to Maylandsea Primary School

1.1 Homework in national policy and practice

In the face of all that the modern world has to offer...can the claims of homework to an hour or more of every evening be pressed...Are the evil effects of homework greater or less than its advantages? (Times Educational Supplement, 1929)

The student of contemporary homework literature will wonder how this particular debate can continue to rage so vehemently despite the passage of eighty-five years. Nevertheless, a plethora of issues, challenges, quandaries and uncertainties continue to surround both opinion and research.

In March 2012, the Department for Education announced the removal of guidelines setting out how much homework children in English schools should be given. Previous recommendations had suggested that children aged five to seven should receive an hour of homework each week, increasing to half an hour a night for seven to eleven year-olds. Secondary schools had been directed to set up to two and a half hours homework each evening (DfEE, 1998). There is no national guidance around the type of homework schools should set and it is the responsibility of each individual school to formulate its own approach to homework (DfE, 2012a).

This thesis presents the findings from a study of homework at Maylandsea Community Primary School. Based around engagement with the three major stakeholder groups of parents, pupils and teachers, it results in the creation of a framework for homework at this school. Motivation for this research arises from my own professional resolve as the school's headteacher to bring clarity, purpose and consensus to our homework practices.

There are long-standing academic disagreements about the value of homework, with critics from research communities publishing contradictory peer-reviewed material suggesting it to be perhaps useful, perhaps ineffective or perhaps potentially harmful to

children (Hattie, 2008; Hallam, 2004; Kohn, 2006a; Kohn, 2006b; Sharp et al., 2001). As we shall discover in chapter two, research into homework has proved problematic, often because of the difficulty of isolating homework factors from the many other issues which impact on learning, progress and attainment (Rudman, 2014). Consequently, there has been a call for more small-scale studies to examine homework from a qualitative perspective and particularly to help us learn more about the views of those who are setting, supporting and completing the homework (Hallam, 2006).

Educational practitioners' opinions mirror the disparities within the research community. Speaking to a national newspaper, one leading educator responsible for homework in a large secondary school encapsulates the dilemma facing colleagues in primary and secondary schools

If homework is set well then it can be useful – if it consolidates learning. But often it's not. Often, it's an extension to finish off work and it doesn't aid the child. (Guardian, 2012; 2)

Schools do, however, face certain external pressures from the regulatory body, Ofsted, because school inspectors are required to make judgements about how effectively homework is used and how it is matched to pupils' individual needs (Ofsted, 2014). The challenge for schools is to convince inspectors that homework is contributing to learning when professional opinion and research evidence is incongruous. Whilst both Ofsted (2014) and the Department for Education (Dfe, 2012a) believe that homework should be used as a tool to promote learning, how this might be accomplished is left entirely in the hands of individual schools and no further guidance is in place. In judging the quality of teaching and learning in a school, Ofsted inspectors are asked merely to check that

teachers set homework in line with the school's policy and that [homework] challenges all pupils, especially the most able (Ofsted, 2014; 57)

Enabling each school to have complete autonomy over homework presents a range of challenges for headteachers who need to understand the homework arguments and respond according to the context of their own, individual establishments. This is evidenced in my many conversations about homework with colleagues in our own and in other schools and also in the published literature (Alanne and Macgregor, 2007; Hallam, 2004; Rudman, 2014; Sherrington, 2012). There are wide variations in

homework practice between schools and the lack of any broad, professional agreement amongst teachers themselves concerning the merits, values, purposes, practicalities and aims of homework has led to a lack of understanding by educators, pupils and parents about many aspects of homework.

However, before proceeding further, it is important to say something about the context of the school where this research is located.

1.2 Maylandsea Community Primary School in context and culture

This study is located in one average-sized (265 pupils), semi-rural primary school in Essex. Here, I choose the appellation ‘semi-rural’ in order to describe a school which is located outside an urban area but which, due to both its size and its relative proximity to larger towns and cities, does not readily fit accepted descriptions of a rural school.

In the absence of a formal definition of rural, researchers have tended to use ‘small’ rather than ‘rural’ in sample construction, though some refer to sparsely populated areas. (Hargreaves, 2009; 118)

The staff at this school includes a balance of younger and experienced teachers and I have been in post here as headteacher for the last eight years. The school population is comprised of 98% white-British children and below-average numbers of pupils qualify for free-school meals. Whilst the numbers of pupils with special educational needs (9.4%) is in line with national averages (9.7%), there is a higher than average percentage of pupils who receive 1-1 support (10.9% compared with 7.7% nationally) allowing them to access the curriculum and supporting their inclusion. The school is currently rated ‘good’ by Ofsted, meaning that it is considered to be offering an effective standard of education to its pupils.

Statistical data from the local council (Maldon census, 2007), shows that the school serves an area of interesting demographic contrasts. The population as a whole is older than the national average (with a mean age of 43 years as opposed to 39.3 years nationally), has a much higher level of residents born in the UK (96.1%) than the national average (86.2%) and a lower rate of residents either born in other European Union countries or outside the European Union altogether (3.4% compared with 13.1% nationally); it does not have a significant immigrant population. The rate of unemployment (2%) is both lower than the average for Essex (2.6%) and lower than the

national average (3.3%), and the proportion of the population claiming any benefit is more than ten percent lower than the national average, suggesting that adults earn higher than average salaries. The area also has a higher rate of home ownership (40%) than the national average (30.6%).

Unusually however, for an area with these characteristics, the percentage of residents rating their health as 'very good' (46.2%) is slightly below the national average (47.17%). One statistic in particular is highly noteworthy for educators in the area; this ward has a higher level of adult residents with either no qualifications at all or qualifications equal to just one or more GCSEs at grade D or below (56.4% as opposed to 51% nationally) (Maldon census, 2007; 78).

Consequently, and a topic sometimes anecdotally discussed among the teaching staff at our school, low levels of educational aspiration among our parent body could be implied within these data. These discussions, however, could just as easily indicate the existence of negative expectations amongst teaching staff. Either way, these issues provide further justification for my study, suggesting the importance of talking with parents and teachers about their perceptions of their role in promoting homework completion and any links they perceive between homework, academic progress and attainment. I have no wish to isolate or delocalise the homework debate from those real-life involvements experienced by of our pupils, parents and teachers. Only through dialogue, discussion and debate can I ensure that

From the life-world perspective, the school and local community are seen from within local arenas where the everyday interplay between actors, conditions and processes of place – nature, production, culture – and education takes place. (Kvalsund and Hargreaves, 2009; 141)

Indeed, numerous studies about school change have identified cultural issues as critical to successful innovation (Fullan, 2001; Kelley et al., 2005). These studies also warn that where the culture does not support and encourage reform, the improvements do not occur. For this reason it will be important for me to ensure that I build a sense of psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001) engagement and involvement with my research findings if stakeholders at this school are going to feel committed to them.

Ravasi and Schultz (2006) reported that organizational culture is a set of emotional and cerebral assumptions guiding colleagues' actions; culture defines suitable behaviours for various circumstances. I would characterise our school's culture as predominantly 'adaptive' (Kotter and Heskett, 1992) because we have a strong track record of responding to the need for change and of introducing new ways of working to improve our effectiveness. I also note Cooke and Lafferty's (1987) influential design of an organisational culture inventory which includes his definition of a 'constructive' culture in which adherents value personal interaction and focus on development and shared values. Within this culture, people recognise the merits of good communication with their colleagues and they enjoy working as part of a team. This is a particularly apposite description of the culture at this school. Schools in general also possess 'humanistic' culture traits (Cooke and Lafferty, *ibid*) and staff at our school are, in my view, particularly keen to help others to develop, both socially and intellectually. They have often demonstrated that they are sensitive to the needs of others and they have told me that they value and appreciate both support and encouragement.

Nevertheless, I have also detected some tendency for colleagues at this school to demonstrate occasional aspects of 'defensive' culture (Zhang, 2009) especially when faced with another national or local initiative which they do not fully support. Within this cultural stereotype, affiliates can feel pressured to change their pedagogy and sometimes act in ways that are inconsistent with effective teaching. This can lead to a drop in personal motivation and professional satisfaction. Within the context of my study, this implies the need for me to value the inclusion, participation and views of all my colleagues and it provides yet additional justification for me to be meticulous in gathering the opinions of all our teachers.

1.3 The homework challenge at Maylandsea Primary School

Life in schools and classrooms are an aspect of our wider society, not separate from it; a culture does not stop or start at the school gates...The strengths of our primary schools are the strengths of our society; their weaknesses are our society's weaknesses (Alexander et al., 2010; 6)

It is unsurprising, therefore, that the national picture of confusion and ambiguity about homework as described at the start of this chapter, is mirrored in this primary school

where homework continues to be a contentious and much-debated issue (Rudman 2013).

Homework causes tension among parents at this school and some have previously told me (at consultation meetings, through informal conversations and by commenting in their child's home/school diary) that they do not understand why it is set, what purpose it serves or what their role is in supporting their children's learning at home. Some parents have also told me that too much homework is set or that the type of homework given requires too much adult support; others have argued that too little homework is provided and they feel the need to supplement it with work they set themselves. Parental debate has continued over the frequency, marking, personalisation and timing of the homework we set because parents have told our teachers during consultation meetings that they want to do more to help their child but they feel confused about how to do so. Teachers themselves have struggled to know what homework to set, how much to set and what to do with it once it has been completed; they are unclear about its aims and therefore the procedures they adopt are also indistinct. The homework completion rate amongst our pupils varies considerably, forcing teachers to spend time chasing up uncompleted homework because they feel it is their professional duty to do so even when they themselves do not always recognise the value of the end product. The quality of completed homework handed-in to teachers demonstrates that some children approach their homework with enthusiasm and commitment, whilst others either fail to see the point of it or approach it with very little energy, determination or vigour.

This at least is my perception of the general picture of homework at our school; it is based upon fragments of conversations, anecdotes and occasional dialogue which I have had with different members of our school community. This thesis, however, explores these issues in a planned, systematic and methodical manner. The intention is that I learn as much as possible about the views of these stakeholders and use my findings to help me deliver improvements to homework policy and practice.

So why not just abandon homework altogether? In my view it is a case of needing to find the right approach. We would be reluctant to abandon teaching maths or English simply because it was difficult to get it right. The difference is that curriculum subjects have agreed frameworks, theoretical underpinnings and a body of academic knowledge

behind them. The findings from homework studies, however, continue to be contested, queried and challenged (Kohn, 2006; Hallam, 2006) so it is not surprising that schools struggle to do it properly. There is no discernible foundation, no key-stone, few support mechanisms and no agreed theoretical framework to guide the teacher. Most of us know what homework is and there are many definitions; what we do not know is how to approach it effectively.

If still more convincing reflexive discourse were required in order to persuade myself that this is a crucial area to explore, then I need only take Fullan's (2002) advice and consult research into the role of knowledge creation which is increasingly allied with notions of effective school leadership.

A norm of contributing one's knowledge to others is the key to continuous growth for all. (Fullan, 2002; 12)

For society to prosper it must have a moral compass (Hargreaves, 2003). In my professional context this suggests that a headteacher has a moral responsibility to improve his or her school's own practice where that practice is weak and where improvements can benefit society at large. Homework is an area of great uncertainty amongst teachers, pupils and parents and I feel compelled to intervene through exploration and research.

Consequently, this research is intended to benefit the children, parents and teachers at our school and, as I discuss in chapter seven, it may even reach beyond these walls and carry some influence into what other teachers do in other schools. I do not claim generalizability of my findings into other institutions although I do assert that there is likely to be some potential for the transferability of my outcomes which may inspire head teachers, locally and nationally, to look closely at my study.

1.4 An outline of this thesis

This study sets out to answer the following research questions.

1. What is the purpose of homework for primary aged pupils?
2. What type of homework should teachers set?
3. What is the role of parents in the homework process?
4. To what extent should homework be personalised?

5. How can homework completion-rates be improved?

Taking the advice of both Rugg and Petrie (2004) and Cresswell (2008) I have been keen to maintain a continuous engagement with the literature throughout the entirety of this thesis.

In chapter two I present my review of the homework literature. In addition to offering an overview of homework research and identifying a requirement for more primary school-based qualitative enquiries, I also identify a shortage of published studies focused on parents' pupils' and teachers' attitudes toward homework. I conclude that research attempting to link homework with attainment has proved inconclusive and controversial. I debate published notions of the value and purpose of homework and recognise that this is a contested area. I recognise the potential contributions made by parents to homework routines whilst acknowledging that their role is problematic and poorly understood. I discuss concepts including personalisation, learning preference, the home environment and new technologies along with their relevance for promoting high quality homework. These theoretical perspectives, together with notions of choice, meaning and relationships which emerged from my research conversations, are explored further and as my findings are analysed in chapter four and again as I offer my new conceptual understanding of homework in chapter six.

In chapter three I describe my research design and re-state my research questions. This insider research is a single case-study designed to encompass a social constructivist theoretical framework. This research approach enabled me to learn how my participants viewed their homework roles and responsibilities and to understand their views about its efficacy, purpose and value. This in turn enabled me to construct a new conceptualisation of homework for Maylandsea Primary School. Locating my study within an interpretivist paradigm was critical, ensuring synergy between methodology and research questions. In this chapter I also justify my selection of data collection tools; I employed conversational interviews with my adult participants and both reflective writing tasks and focus group meetings with pupils. I also explain my use of inductive inference (Miles et al., 2014) within my data analysis framework and I describe how I created first a visual display and then an ideas matrix from which to distil ideas into emerging categories and ultimately themes. I describe a number of key

concepts including relationships, value and meaningfulness which emerged from my dialogues with different participant groups.

In chapter four, I present, analyse and discuss my findings and I link these to both practical and conceptual considerations. I introduce the five main themes which emerged from my research; meaningfulness; aims, value and purposes; roles and responsibilities; the homework environment; relationships. I explore weaknesses in current homework routines at the school and I discuss how good practice can be extended. Throughout the chapter, I am seeking to analyse the picture of homework as it is experienced by pupils, parents and teachers at the school and to view this understanding in the light of existing theory and scholarship.

In chapter five I use the understanding gained from the analysis of my research findings in order to create a new conceptualisation of homework for Maylandsea Primary School. I offer a critical evaluation of my research and I consider its limitations. I explain how my new conceptualisation of homework challenges some current academic homework literature whilst re-enforcing other areas of scholarship. My findings indicate that homework is seen as worthwhile when it is meaningful to pupils and parents, when its tasks are engaging, fun and interesting for pupils and when pupils can exercise choice in their homework tasks. I conceptualise homework as beneficial to both learning and personal development but I establish that these benefits are more easily recognised when the aims of homework and the value of individual tasks are clear; a critical element in a successful homework model is also the quality of the relationships between pupils, parents and teachers.

In chapter six I present my framework for homework at Maylandsea Primary School. This is significant because it represents a new, holistic approach to the formulation of a primary school homework policy. The framework has been designed to meet the needs of primary age pupils, their teachers and families in the context of this specific educational community. It offers a new definition of the value of homework for primary school children; it recognises the unique contributions homework can make to the development of independent learning skills, the enjoyment of learning, personal responsibility and educational satisfaction.

In chapter seven I present my conclusions. Here, I re-visit my original research questions, determining the purpose of homework in this school, the type of homework teachers should set, the role parents should play in homework, how homework should be personalised and how homework completion rates can be improved. I also clarify the theoretical implications of my research and explain how it challenges current notions of ambivalence and negativity about homework whilst offering new possibilities about its potential for developing young children's personal and social aptitudes. This chapter also offers a potential starting point for a framework for homework in other primary schools, along with the opportunity to refine such a framework by building on the collaborative, participatory approaches which I found so valuable in this study.

*I started to do my homework
Unfortunately my pen ran out of ink.
My rabbit ate my text book.
My computer fell into the sink.
Charlie (age 9)*

Chapter 2: Literature review on homework

2.1 Selecting themes and developing the scope of my literature review

Whilst the locus of my own research is one specific English primary school, I have purposely examined homework literature with a wider foundation. There are two reasons for this. Not only is the amount of research evidence from English primary schools minimal with much of the research emanating from the United States and from secondary schools and colleges in particular, but valuable information and perspectives are also to be gained from reading different types of homework study. Many of the issues raised within the current literature can be viewed as generic, informing homework scholars across regional and national borders and carrying potential relevance across different phases of educational provision. Accordingly, within the larger body of homework literature

The corpus [literature] would also include those physical artefacts to which others would refer as exemplifying understanding of particular concepts and practices. (Trafford and Leshem, 2008; 68)

This suggested to me that, where appropriate, reference should be made to the work of teachers themselves where this has led to developments in homework policies or practices. There is, in fact, a growing community of teacher-bloggers, publishing their own classroom-based homework innovations on the internet and some noteworthy examples of these have been included in my study. Whether we are primary or secondary school teachers, in this country or further afield, we all share a mutual interest in this common body of knowledge which allows us to experience a sense of identity across institutions. This corpus, therefore, offers a professional and scholarly bond between educators as we seek to develop improved approaches to the delivery of homework in our various, sometimes similar, sometimes diverse institutions.

This literature review was initially designed around themes common to our own school's existing concerns, problems and challenges about homework. From my prior

experiences as a headteacher talking with parents, teachers and pupils, themes such as parental roles in homework completion, the aims and value of homework, homework and attainment, the homework environment, homework and information technology and personalising homework all emerged (Rudman, 2013). As my reading developed, these themes expanded to include more topics such as the complexities within existing homework research and international perspectives on homework; these are themes which hold a broader relevance to the homework debate and which helped inform my own research but which did not feature routinely in the daily thoughts of members of our particular school community.

Whilst designing this review, I was acutely aware of the need to ensure that I presented a comprehensive analysis of the available literature. This did not imply the need to refer to every available piece of evidence, rather the careful selection of significant, pertinent and appropriate information (Machi, 2009), particularly where I judged this to pertain to topics relevant to my own professional circumstances and of course, to my research question. In other words, I identified the literature that was important to my research and my own relationship with this literature grew, expanded and progressed as my thesis itself developed.

It was important for me to take a rigorous and systematic approach to my study of the homework literature because I understood that

A thorough, sophisticated literature review is the foundation and inspiration for substantial, useful research. (Boote and Beile (2005; 1)

Indeed, the complexity and range of opinion documented in homework research demanded both thoroughness and sophistication if this review was to provide a sound conceptual basis for my thesis.

With this in mind, my intentions were to identify, evaluate and summarize those concepts central to the homework debate and to articulate the relationships between this literature and my own professional context. Crucially, I was also keen to identify gaps in the existing knowledge-base and to demonstrate how my own research is adding to current understanding.

In order to properly immerse myself in the literature, I began my reading with reviews and meta-analyses of homework research. This served as a useful introduction to many of the central concepts, debates, arguments and contradictions within the existing knowledge-base. This initial reading enabled me to engage with a greater sense of criticality once my reading turned to the detail of particular empirical studies. I was now better able to progress my understanding as I followed the trail of concepts identified in my early reading materials. Like a web, these ideas spread out in many directions and my reading became simultaneously broader but also deeper until I found myself revisiting the same studies and the same notions on different occasions. This signified that saturation point had been reached and I felt confident in bringing the review to a conclusion.

The data collection process can stop when the point of saturation is reached, and the reviewer has sufficient evidence to convince readers that everything that can reasonably be done to identify all relevant articles has been diligently undertaken. (Randolph, 2009; 7)

I remained conscious that it was entirely plausible that new materials would emerge after my initial review had been completed. For this reason I determined to remain vigilant and to be prepared to update my review if required. If new articles did appear, I would then make an assessment about their importance whilst being mindful of Randolph's (ibid) advice that unless the publication was critically important, it should really be left out.

Learning some of the lessons from existing homework research also helped me to focus in on my chosen research approach. Quantitative enquiry in particular has proved challenging for researchers and has lacked relevance in many school situations (Hallam, 2006). This is because studies seeking to link homework with progress and attainment have struggled to isolate homework from other factors such as motivation, home environments and learning preferences and also because these studies have concentrated on large cohorts of pupils undertaking secondary school or college courses usually in mathematics and sciences (Hattie, 2008; Henderson, 2006; Kohn, 2012).

By way of contrast, my enquiry, based in a semi-rural primary school and seeking to explore the views of participants, has been designed as a purely qualitative study. As my reading of the published literature progressed, so the need for a qualitative

exploration of parents' pupils' and teachers' views about homework became increasingly evident. A gap in current understanding about these matters has undermined attempts to use homework effectively with young children (Rudman, 2014). My review of the homework literature thus proved invaluable as I made choices about my research design. As Hart (1998; 13) advised, a comprehensive literature review can

ensure[s] the researchability of your topic before 'proper' research commences...it is the progressive narrowing of the topic, through the literature review, that makes most research a practical consideration. (Hart, 1998; 13)

2.2 An overview of homework

As recently as fourteen years ago, even a cursory examination of the scope of published literature on homework would have been sufficient to evidence one of its most significant shortcomings;

The scope and depth of the literature on the topic of homework may be described in terms that Mark Twain used to describe the Mississippi River. It is a mile wide and an inch deep. (Hong and Milgram, 2000; 5)

Very little has changed, in fact. Although a small number of more detailed studies have emerged within the last decade, these were seldom focused on aspects related to either the United Kingdom or to primary schools. There is however, a large, popular literature, consisting of books and articles offering advice to parents and teachers on how to help pupils with homework (Askew and Eastaway, 2010; Bursuck, 1995; Dolby, 2011; Doyle and Barber, 1990; Rosemond, 1990) but still a sparse amount of empirical literature on the subject. Additionally, articles which present a broadly negative view of homework, asserting that homework does little to improve children's learning and can even obstruct their learning experiences are ubiquitous in popular periodicals with wide audiences. These offer a profusion of stories and examples of how homework disrupts family life and confuses children and parents (Daily Mail, 2010; Guardian, 2009; TES, 2010).

Strong views on the efficacy of homework as a teaching and learning strategy appear frequently in the professional literature (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, 2001; Corno, 1996; Gill and Schlossman, 1996; Palardy, 1995, Walker et al., 2004). The opinions expressed range from strong criticism of the use of homework (Bennett and Kalish, 2006; Kohn, 2006b; Kohn, 2012; Kralovec and Buell, 2001; Reese, 1995; Solomon et al., 2002) to

claims that its careful use can actually yield significant increases in children's academic accomplishments (Dettmers et al., 2009; Keith et al., 1993; Maeroff, 1989; Sharp et al., 2001).

The majority of academic studies are focused almost exclusively on attempts to link homework with attainment (Hattie, 2008) and sometimes on the effects of different amounts of time spent on homework (Cooper et al., 1998; Cooper 2001, Dettmers et al., 2009; Maltese et al., 2012) or occasionally on the effect homework has on pupils' attitudes and motivation generally in secondary schools or colleges (Cooper et al., 1998). Certainly there is little evidence of comprehensive research undertaken in primary schools in England (Rudman, 2014). Equally, there is no broad professional agreement amongst teachers or researchers about how to plan, set or mark homework, or indeed about its effectiveness as a teaching and learning tool (Kohn, 2006; Hattie, 2012). Consequently, it appears that throughout the last half-century, the practices of teachers regarding homework have changed little (Gill and Schlossman, 1996).

Hallam (2004) conducted a thorough review of homework research and concluded that the current debate neglects one crucial element.

The quality or type of homework is rarely taken into account in studies assessing its effectiveness (Hallam, 2004; 9)

Furthermore, she discovered that researchers frequently viewed homework as if it were a single, homogenous entity and paid insufficient attention to the range, type and quality of different homework activities. For Hallam (ibid) questions about the relevance and effectiveness of homework are extraneous. Far better, she suggests, to consider what effective homework looks and feels like.

Interestingly, Hong and Lee (2003) add that many studies appear to have been poorly designed and that in some cases they lack both depth and academic rigour. This, however, was ten years ago now and a small number of more tightly focused projects have been published since then in respected peer-review journals (Dettmers et al., 2009; Tam and Chan, 2009). Nevertheless, this remains an area ripe for further research. Writing in the context of Scottish primary schools, (Henderson, 2006) acknowledges that whilst there is a reasonable amount of existing research associated with the nature of homework tasks, possible links to attainment and so forth, there remains

A dearth of research material on teachers' and/or pupils' and/or parental attitudes, behaviours and beliefs associated with various aspects of homework (Henderson, 2006; 4)

These are, in fact, some of the considerations which will inform my own research about the challenges which homework construction, completion and marking pose at Maylandsea Primary School.

2.3 Defining homework

While there is still considerable debate about many aspects of homework policy and practice, there is little disagreement about its definition.

Homework is usually taken to mean any work set by the school which is undertaken out of school hours for which the learner takes the primary responsibility (Hallam, 2004; 4).

According to the views of parents, teachers and governors on Oxford County Council's (1997) Homework Working Party, rather than attempt to arrive at a narrow and potentially constraining definition, homework is best viewed as

...any activity that seeks to make effective links between home and school in supporting children's learning and development. (Oxford C.C. 1997; 2)

It may of course be argued that such a definition is not definitive enough, and that it is too loose a description to serve any meaningful purpose. Its strength, however, is that it allows a wide variety of tasks to be set by schools under the umbrella term of homework and consequently gives scope for schools to set homework according to the philosophical values of staff.

By way of contrast, Ofsted (1999) found that some primary schools distinguish explicitly between formal homework which is generally along the lines of setting sustained, written or mathematical tasks specifically designed to prepare older pupils for the demands of secondary school, and the on-going and less formal learning and practice tasks expected of pupils of all ages. The latter routinely include reading, multiplication tables, number bonds and spellings. One school's definition reflects this structured view of homework.

Homework does contain an element of independent study... [and] ...represents an extension of the learning activities provided andorganised in accordance with the objectives of the school curriculum. (Ofsted 1999; 12)

In addition to placing homework firmly in the domain of academic learning, this definition also raises questions about how independent the child's work at home should really be.

Further afield, academics preparing homework support material for Australian schools also argue that in addition to being both an important addition to classroom learning and a bridge between school and home, homework can be thought of as a key ingredient in the development of independent learning. Consequently, they conceptualise homework as

The time students spend outside the classroom in assigned activities to practice [sic], reinforce or apply newly-acquired skills and knowledge and to learn necessary skills of independent study (Alanne and Macgregor, 2007; 5)

Developing these definitions to include a quality indicator, Vatterot (2009), in her advice to high school teachers in the United States, offers an extremely thorough classification of high value homework.

The best homework tasks exhibit five characteristics. First, the task has a clear academic purpose, such as practice, checking for misunderstanding, or applying knowledge or skills. Second, the task efficiently demonstrates student learning. Third, the task promotes ownership by offering choices and being personally relevant. Fourth, the task instills a sense of competence—the student can successfully complete it without help. Last, the task is aesthetically pleasing—it appears enjoyable and interesting (Vatterot, 2009; 10)

Good quality homework, she is arguing, should not be about learning by rote; rather it should deepen the students' understanding and build essential skills. This notion of quality and purpose within this definition, builds upon a slightly earlier work by Heitzman (2007) who also sought to define homework in terms of its capacity to deliver high quality learning, challenge and skills development.

Assigning homework that varies in difficulty and is challenging for students, explaining how the homework can be done, allowing sufficient time, assessing students' performance on the assignment, and providing timely feedback on the assignment are advised so that homework can contribute to students' learning (Heitzman, 2007; 41).

Hence, we can see that homework can be defined either in modest, even simplistic terms as

tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are intended to be carried out during non-school hours (Cooper, 2007; 4)

or definitions can include more complex notions suggesting inherent quality control measures, pupil engagement and broader skills development. Tas et al. (2011) are representative of the growing, contemporary view that in order for homework to be truly beneficial to learning, its definition does need to include a value statement. Homework, they argue, must

possess some characteristics such as contributing [to] students' personal development and responsibility for learning, consolidate newly learned material, be appropriate [for] students' social and cultural conditions, and give students opportunity to think about how much of the material has been learned (Turkish Ministry of National Education, 2006, cited in Tas et al., 2011; 2)

I have planned that my research will allow me to follow up these ideas in order to establish what my participants feel about the role independent learning should play in homework at our school. More broadly, I plan to learn how stakeholders think homework can support other aspects of pupils' personal development.

2.4 What is the value of homework?

A major purpose of homework, according to the literature, is to help students develop good study habits and develop independent and responsible approaches to their learning. Such study skills include, but are not limited to, time organization, personal effectiveness and greater academic self-discipline (Cooper, 1989; Corno, 1996; Corno, 2000; Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Warton, 2001; Xu and Yuan, 2003).

A popular area for research into homework is its value to schools and families. Much of the existing knowledge-base, however, is tenuous. One research team wrote

Extensive classroom research...and international comparisons of year-round time for study suggest that additional homework might promote students' achievement. (Paschal et al., 1984; 97)

This statement with its inherent ambiguities was followed much later by Kralovec and Buell's (2001) stinging critique of homework as a largely irrelevant, burdensome and ineffective imposition on family life. Using the contradictory findings from previous research as its basis, the authors concluded that reform of homework at the very least, and ideally abandonment altogether, would be the only way to

enable families to reconstitute themselves as families and help parents pass on to their children something other than the exhaustion of endless work. (Kralovec and Buell, 2001; xi)

These authors believed that research into homework does not support the increasing emphasis given to work at home. They concluded in fact, that it may even be counterproductive especially for pupils of primary school age. Citing numerous studies, this meta-analysis finds example after example of homework creating rifts between parents and children, causing great stress to children themselves and ultimately having at best very little and usually absolutely no positive bearing on learning, motivation or pupil achievement. Even the teachers' best efforts at adding creative sparkle to homework routines come in for censure with this reference to one research-participant's angst over homework.

I am way up there when it comes to support for higher-order learning. But I have recently learned firsthand the limitations of my ardour. After a day at work, the commute home...there comes a time beyond which I cannot sustain my enthusiasm for the maths brain teaser or the creative story writing task. (Natriello, 1997; 573)

Genuine education, these authors believe, is about democratic citizenship and involves preparing students to grow, debate and participate in the realistic, urgent and pressing matters of contemporary society. Such participation they hold to be unlikely when children have spent too many of their waking hours dominated by the demands of school, and too few

trying to forge a stronger sense of their social selves, with all the possibilities and limits those selves contain. (Kralovec and Buell, 2001; 101)

What I wonder, will parents at our school have to say on the subject when I ask whether they think homework really is worth the effort?

One particular aspect of the homework debate amongst parents, pupils and teachers at my school is its potential to give opportunities for practising basic skills. This is one of the main arguments proffered by stakeholders to support homework routines. Anecdotally, teachers in my own and in neighbouring schools have often told me that they set homework specifically to encourage the practising of skills which pupils have been taught in class.

Kohn (2006b) however, maintains a sceptical position on the effectiveness of homework as a tool connecting practice with proficiency. This position is entirely consistent with his broader and well publicised views that none of

the usual defences of homework – that it promotes higher achievement, ‘reinforces’ learning, teaches study skills and responsibility...actually pass the test of research, logic or experience. (Kohn, 2006b; i)

Whilst acknowledging that it is clearly reasonable to form some link between practice and proficiency, (Kohn, *ibid*) argues persuasively that

once again we find ourselves with a proposition that turns out to be true in a far more limited sense, with more qualifications and caveats attached, than may have seemed to be the case (Kohn, 2006b; 59)

Kohn’s (2006b) objection is centred upon his concept of learning which he understands as a social construct in a tradition ranging from Vygotsky (1978) to Glasersfeld (1989) and more recently Schmidt (2007). Describing behaviourist, practice and repetition theories of learning as superficial, Kohn (2006b) sums up his view of the misplaced emphasis given by teachers to homework reinforcement activities in two thought-provoking sentences.

In reality, it’s the children who don’t understand the underlying concepts who most need an approach to teaching that’s geared to deep understanding. The more they’re given algorithms and told exactly what to do, the farther behind they fall in terms of grasping these concepts (Kohn, 2006b, 60)

If this is correct, then we might conclude that the time and efforts of a considerable number of teachers who set this kind of homework are not only wasted but unwittingly these teachers may actually be damaging their students’ learning.

Support for this argument is evident especially amongst writer- practitioners. Kamii and Livingston (1994) and Kamii (2009) are not alone in arguing that even in a subject like mathematics where traditional homework routines have concentrated on practising numerical operations from reception class to high school

...kids are given rules that don’t make sense to them, and repetition seems to be necessary to memorize rules kids don’t understand (Kamii and Livingston, 1994; 67)

Kohn (2006a) elicits further support for his anti-reinforcement homework stance through the work of psychologists. Langer (1998) is one such example and her work on

what she terms ‘mindfulness’ in learning has led her to question the value of practice-based methods in teaching. Her fear is that

When we drill ourselves in a certain skill so that it becomes second nature we may come to perform that skill ‘mindlessly’ (Langer, 1998; 7)

Educational learning, these writers are arguing, is not like learning to improve at sport. Understanding, not repetition, is the key to success in the classroom and deep-level learning is unlikely to be secured when practice and reinforcement activities are set for homework by albeit well intentioned teachers.

Hattie (2008) presents a less polarised view of the value of homework in his highly influential distillation of the key messages from an enormous array of world-wide educational research studies. His meta-analysis of one hundred and sixty-one separate statistical studies with over one hundred thousand student participants, offers mathematical values to represent the likelihood of homework making a positive difference to pupils’ learning. He concludes that, overall, homework has a twenty-one per-cent chance of making a positive difference to learning but this is an average figure across both the primary and the secondary sectors. The effect at secondary school, he argues, is far greater than at primary, possibly, he hypothesises, due to younger pupils being less able to undertake independent learning or avoid distractions when working at home. Even at secondary age, Hattie (ibid) suggests that the real value of homework is when it is linked to revision-style activities and he finds little evidence of its value in developing time-management skills. Commenting on these findings in an online discussion paper, one headteacher-researcher echoes many readers’ thoughts as he comments on Hattie’s (2008) own acknowledgement about potential weaknesses in such an enormous project with so many variables.

Hattie is at pains to point out that there will be great variations across the different studies that simply average out to the effect size of his barometers...so many variables that aggregating them together is more or less made meaningless? Well I’d say so (Sherrington, 2012; 2)

Fascinatingly, Hattie himself has added a comment to Sherrington’s (2012) online paper, confirming the need for further research into homework at primary school level. Hattie writes, helpfully

The message about the low effect in primary school means that there is a high probability that many homework practices may not be working. The key is that

this highlights the importance for schools to now evaluate the effectiveness of its primary homework practice. And if that turns out to be like most other practices (low effect), there is an invitation (indeed an imperative) to try an alternative set of practices re. homework...and increasing the students (and parents) understanding about the language of learning. (Hattie, 2012; 6)

Had I needed further endorsement of the legitimacy of my current research, then Hattie (ibid) has certainly provided it here. For purposes of clarity, I should emphasise that Hattie (ibid) is not suggesting that primary schools should remove homework from their curriculum, rather he advises unequivocally that

I do NOT recommend abandoning homework, and I do provide some direction for effective homework policies... but most of all the invitation is to 'Know thy impact.' (Hattie, 2012; 6)

Other studies have suggested that the true purposes of homework may lie in outcomes which are less easy to measure. Hallam (2004) sees its potential as a tool to encourage creativity, develop generic skills including self-discipline, independence and responsibility and at the same time provide opportunities for schools to engage parents more closely in learning. This potential for schools to use homework to satisfy a broad range of academic and social needs suggests that, properly structured, it has the capacity to deliver extremely positive outcomes for children and families. Quite understandably

The perceived importance of each of these purposes will vary over time depending on circumstances. No single piece of homework will satisfy them all. (Hallam, 2004; 5)

The significance of each homework purpose is likely to vary considerably depending on the age of the child and hence between primary and secondary schools. At primary level, teachers stress the importance of developing broader learning skills such as motivation, enjoyment of learning and involving families. In secondary schools, consolidating skills and building on prior attainment is often considered most important. (Hallam, 2004)

Other writers add the list of homework's potential to fulfil multiple requirements. According to Weston (1999) for example, these include the early development of independent skills in readiness for secondary school, positive work habits and study skills.

Horsley and Walker (2013) focus intently on these varied skill sets, developing the argument that homework can help teachers develop aptitudes and proficiencies which are more difficult to acquire in the classroom alone. Interviewed in an influential educational magazine, the report's co-author Richard Walker explained how

Working at home can create self-directed learning skills, things like time management, emotional regulation, finding a place to work, focusing attention and so on. Likewise, it develops enquiry learning skills. While schools may believe they are doing both these things, in reality the majority of class-based tasks are still directed and regulated by teachers. (TES, 2013; 40)

As Hallam (2004) had previously indicated, such a range of skills can surely only be delivered by offering students many different types of homework task. Consequently, my research has been designed to explore this issue with pupils, parents and teachers at our school. Meanwhile, it is important to discover what literature currently advises about the nature of these different homework tasks.

2.5 Different types of homework tasks

The type of homework set by schools varies according to the age and ability of the pupil and the demands of the curriculum (Hallam, 2004; 5)

This is unquestionably true and work has been undertaken to identify different homework genres. A recent review of homework research conducted by Dobozy (2010) on behalf of Australia's Edith Cowan University, identified three core categories of homework; reinforcement, preparation and extension. Dobozy (2010) links these homework types to Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy of learning, acknowledging the contribution of Anderson et al. (2001) in revising Bloom et al.'s (1956) original work. This taxonomy is used by Dobozy (ibid) as a theoretical guide to exemplify each type of homework.

In this way, at one end of Bloom et al.'s (1956) taxonomy spectrum, homework based upon previously taught material is associated with lower order thinking skills. Similarly, homework that expands upon and extends into real life situations and moves beyond classroom learning is seen as promoting higher order thinking amongst students. Typical of such higher order homework activities, according to Dobozy (2010), would be exploration and expression activities.

Homework involving exploration lets students look at new and different areas of a subject according to their interests and preferences. Homework involving expression... require[s] well-developed research, critical thinking and problem-solving skills. These homework tasks are generative, meaning they require students to generate new knowledge. They require much planning, and close alignment between learning outcome and learning task (Dobozy, 2010; 6)

A further probe of the literature allows for the identification of a fourth, distinctive category of homework task. Increasingly, we see teachers setting creative activities in order to engage reluctant learners. Hughes (2010) based his creative homework tasks on his own work as a primary school teacher in an English school. Disillusioned with a marked reluctance, particularly amongst boys in his class, to complete traditional practice or extension-style homework activities, he set about devising a homework programme for his pupils. His homework consisted of creative tasks which encouraged pupils to use their imaginative, design, artistic and aesthetic skills. His findings serve as encouragement to other primary school teachers to experiment with a more diverse, imaginative set of homework solutions.

Over the next year the number of children participating in homework rose as they worked their way through the new creative tasks. In addition, feedback from parents was extremely positive, many noticing a positive change in their children's attitude towards homework. (Hughes, 2010; 6)

An additional, fortunate consequence relating to the alleviation of parental anxieties over homework is also reported

In many cases it seemed the format and content of these new homework tasks was putting an end to the confrontation, arguments and bribery they [parents] previously resorted to in order to ensure homework was done. (Hughes, 2010; 6)

The critically-minded commentator must, however, note that this teacher is simultaneously marketing his own book of creative homework activities and consequently his readership should maintain a sense of perspective over his self-proclaimed successes. Nevertheless, his preliminary work did involve carrying out a preferred learning style questionnaire with his pupils and he discusses how he designed his creative tasks to match their learning preferences. Interestingly, no mention is made of any attempt to design homework around children who may have expressed interest in other styles of learning.

It is likely that my pupil participants, their parents and teachers all have their own views about the most effective homework tasks and it has been important for my research to explore this to discover how and where these views converge.

2.6 Linking homework with academic attainment and pupil progress

This has often proved to be the main focus for previous researchers. However, studies seeking to link homework with academic attainment and pupil achievement yield inconsistent findings; indeed this goes some way towards explaining why one prominent commentator believes homework to be a valueless activity (Kohn, 2006a; Kohn, 2012).

Keith et al. (1993) and Doyle and Barber (1990) reported some significant, positive effects attributed to homework in American colleges and high schools. However, other reports have produced inconsistent and at times contradictory conclusions. Paschal et al. (1984) reported a number of positive effects of homework on academic attainment whereas Smith, (1990), Cool and Keith, (1991) and Chen and Stevenson (1989a) found no difference at all in student achievement as a function of time spent on homework. Some investigators (Cooper et al., 1998, Cooper, 2001) reported finding a negative relationship between the amount of homework and student attitudes to homework overall. My own professional experiences as a headteacher suggests that this is entirely possible, especially if younger or less able pupils are overloaded with homework when they experience difficulties aplenty during the course of a normal school day.

One significant study (Cooper et al., 1998) reported that it was not the amount of homework assigned but rather the amount of homework completed that is more closely aligned to student achievement, especially with higher achieving pupils. This research, based on questionnaires from 709 students and 82 teachers in American high schools, also reported that about one third of the students' responses stated that they often do not complete their homework at all. If compliance is a determining factor in the effectiveness of homework as a tool to enhance learning, then questions about what increases pupil motivation to do homework should be given priority in future research. Accordingly, I have taken the opportunity of exploring how my own pupil participants feel about their homework motivation in my exploration of their views.

A more recent study (Maltese et al., 2012) adds to the debate by providing further evidence of the tenuous linear relationship between homework and attainment. The study analyses the relationship between time spent on homework and the academic performance of American high school students in mathematics and science assessments. The researchers examined survey data from two large-scale statistical reports, the National Education Longitudinal Study and the Educational Longitudinal Study collected in 1990 and 2002. The authors explain that they used quantitative data and statistical analysis methods to control factors such as students' prior achievement, motivation and background and investigated the extent to which test results in science and mathematics varied in relation to the time these students devoted to their homework activities in these subjects.

The results indicate that there is no consistent significant relationship between time spent on homework and grades, but a consistently positive significant relationship between homework and performance on standardized exams. (Maltese et al., 2012; 52)

Essentially, their findings indicate that there was some modest, albeit statistically significant link between homework time and actual test scores but this was not enough to improve overall grades. In other words, there is some evidence to suggest that some of the students who self-reported themselves as spending the longest amounts of time on homework did achieve a couple of extra marks on their tests. Even this finding is subject to sceptical analysis by Kohn (2012), a renowned homework scholar who finds much to critique even in this modest assertion. Upon discovering that the student participants from each data survey self-reported vastly differing time spent on their homework (thirty seven minutes a day in one survey and sixty minutes in the other), Kohn (ibid) commented

There's no good reason for such a striking discrepancy, nor do the authors offer any explanation...even though those estimates raise troubling questions about the whole project, and about all homework studies that are based on self-report. Which number is more accurate? Or are both of them way off? There's no way of knowing. And because all the conclusions are tied to that number, all the conclusions may be completely invalid. (Kohn, ibid; 1)

Nevertheless, this study did seek to pay particular attention to specific grade marks rather than overall grade averages and this represents an attempt to fine-tune the research process and to improve on previous methodologies (Kohn, 2012). It may be thought surprising, therefore, that even this study with maths and science at high school level, was not able to identify anything other than modest rises in some students' scores

attributable to homework. At this point I can only confirm that it is not unusual for longer scale studies to find smaller effects in relation to achievement (Cooper, 2001).

A slightly different perspective is offered by Trautwein et al., (2009) who argue an inverse relationship between time spent doing homework and academic accomplishment. The obvious question arises; how can doing more homework lead to lower achievement? The answer, Trautwein et al. (ibid) suggest, stems from the complex relationship between time spent on the homework and the students' intrinsic motivation. Less able students, they argue, need to spend more time on their homework than more able students.

The relationship between homework time and achievement was moderate at the school level and negative at the individual level. ... homework frequency – but not homework time – was a significant predictor of achievement at the class level. ...extended homework times reported by individual students were more likely to reflect motivational problems or problems of understanding than to be a sign of high student motivation or effort. (Trautwein et al., 2009; 79)

A common strand present throughout much of the literature seeking to link homework with attainment, concerns the limited amount of comprehensive research available as well as the challenges of quantifying associated factors such as home background, student motivation and other socio-cultural factors. Equally, research examining the effectiveness of different types of homework and how each may relate to achievement or progress is not well-developed and is often complicated across different academic subjects and curriculum-specific issues (Foyle and Bailey, 1988; Kohn, 2012; Maltese et al., 2012). This all contributes to conflicting findings and unreliable evidence for homework's overall effectiveness (Cooper, 1989; Cooper, 2001, Kohn, 2012).

As my research is a small-scale, qualitative, single case study, I was not looking to make any claims linking homework to achievement. Nevertheless, I have been interested to learn what my participants think about homework and academic success and whether there was any broad agreement between the views of different stakeholder groups.

2.7 Homework, motivation and learning preferences

Studies examining homework and attainment lead to considerations of motivation and learning preference. This is because considerable research evidence indicates that when

teachers allow children to learn in school under conditions that match their individual preferences, then higher achievement, better motivation to learn and improved attitudes toward school result (Dunn and Dunn, 1993). The suggestion is that if homework were also differentiated to meet students' preferred learning styles then it would become a more effective learning tool.

If teachers are to embrace fully the concept of learning style differences, then translating this to homework situations carries with it certain implications for teachers' workload. There is, after all, widespread acknowledgement that classroom routines should be adapted for more effective teaching and learning (Burwell, 1991). Some commentators are beginning to feel that the same should be true of homework.

Teachers should make available several kinds of homework instructions, along with various types of homework assignments to meet specific learners' needs. (Hong and Lee, 2003; 139)

Fishman et al. (1998) believed that the systematic use of computer technology for homework design offers exciting possibilities for homework to be made personal to the needs of pupils. However, Cooper's (1989) research into home-based learning concluded that individualising homework assignments had a minimal effect on pupil achievement but added substantially to teachers' workloads. Perhaps then, the additional work involved in individualising homework activities is simply not justified by its impact on pupil achievement? Again, there appears to be considerable scope for following up these issues in my own research. One commentator blames the paucity of work in this area on

the lack of a reliable instrument to assess individual homework behaviour, in particular. (Hong and Lee, 2003; 6)

Nevertheless, Trautwein and Ludtke (2009) have since attempted to address this issue and they examined the determinants of homework motivation and homework effort across six schools in Germany. Their largely positivist approach included analysis of a Likert-scale questionnaire, a cognitive ability test and an assessment of what they termed the 'cultural capital' of students' families by asking how many books there were in the home. The study involved over five hundred students of lower secondary school age across six school subjects. Their findings show that the students' motivation varied

primarily as a function of their shared perceptions of homework quality and control and of their conscientiousness, individual perception of homework quality, and expectancy and value-beliefs. (ibid; 243)

It was noticeable that they also report that factors such as cognitive ability, family background and parental involvement with homework suggest only loose associations with the effort these students put into their homework. Acknowledging potential weaknesses in their own research, specifically around the self-report style of the data collection, they are aware that further research would benefit from

obtaining additional data on homework characteristics and parental attitudes and behaviours from additional sources (e.g., parents, teachers, classroom observations to cross-validate findings. (ibid; 256)

This is a significant gap in current knowledge about homework which I have been keen to exploit in my own case study research.

Some very recent work is currently being developed in this area and some preliminary results have been published in the form of a paper presented to an international conference in Turkey. Here, Tas et al. (2011) adapted Trautwein et al.'s (2006) homework quality scale and employed statistical analysis in their quest to develop a reliable scale to measure students' homework motivation based on their perceptions of the quality of their science and technology homework as well as the quality of their teachers' feedback on their homework. Other recent work focused around students' homework motivation and attitudes includes Xu (2009) who found that student-level motivation played a significant role for Chinese secondary school students and that this was positively influenced by the quality of teachers' feedback on their homework assignments.

Indeed, some existing literature does indicate that students' homework motivation and effort can be influenced by teachers' homework practices, mainly around the quality of homework given, its frequency, the guidance which teachers supply and the links between the content of the homework and the students' own interests (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; Trautwein et al., 2006). There is evidence that teachers should give homework with specific purposes so that students can benefit from the effort they exert (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001). Indeed, providing homework that ranges in difficulty and is demanding for students, showing how the homework can be completed, allowing sufficient time, assessing students' results on their assignments and providing

appropriate feedback on the assignment are all seen as advantageous if homework is to be worthwhile (Heitzmann, 2007). Beyond this, little research evidence exists.

Nevertheless, discussions about student motivation and homework completion lead inevitably to consideration of the child's own role in homework and his or her attitude towards it.

2.8 Students' own roles and responsibilities in homework activities

Research literature has provided some starting points, notably via the early work of Wood (1987) who found that American students in both secondary and elementary schools generally feel that homework assignments are necessary and help them improve their grades and do better in examinations and assessments. Interestingly, Nelson et al. (1998) discovered significantly different views on the appropriateness of differentiated homework assignments between children in special education and those of average or above average abilities. Less able pupils were comfortable with specially tailored work, suggesting perhaps that they were well aware of their own difficulties and felt justified in completing less demanding work than their peers. Higher attaining pupils however, preferred that everyone be given the same work to do at home. Partial justification for this stance was given by the authors, who claimed that the children thought that everyone should work and compete on equal terms. There is perhaps some merit in this explanation, as experience tells me that young children have their own unique and evolving views about fairness, which, though immature compared with an adult's perspective, are nonetheless strongly held and often strongly expressed.

Bryan and Nelson (1994) found that as children grew older and received more homework, so they considered both homework and school in general to be getting increasingly boring. Attitudes hardened and enjoyment of learning began to fall away. A crucial factor in this rather dispiriting picture of secondary education in mid 1990s America was thought to be a lack of feedback by teachers to pupils on the work they had been doing at home. Experience in my own school tells me that these issues are seldom confined to one single drawback, but I would certainly agree that this may well be one factor amongst others leading students to feel that their efforts are unappreciated and consequently that learning lacks reward.

A more promising finding emerges from a more recent study by Hong and Lee (2000) who initially reported rising enthusiasm for homework among America's fifteen and sixteen year olds. Then, in a follow-up study two years later, students reported increased motivation when allowed to structure their own homework environment according to their own particular preferences. This compared markedly with younger pupils who tended to work when and where their parents instructed them.

Developmental differences in personal and situational variables related to effective homework performance should be taken into consideration when attempting to individualise homework. (Hong and Lee, 2003; 123)

Here we also see the idea of independent, individualised learning beginning to emerge through homework. The implicit suggestion is that this very independence, once given over to the students themselves, may be one way in which homework can be used to develop educational maturity and to assist pupils to engage more enthusiastically with the learning process. Here we see another gap in current knowledge which I have pursued as part of my own research; at our school teachers report that some older primary age pupils can be reluctant to engage with the homework set for them.

Whilst there is limited research on student responsibility in the enhancement of learning, there are some studies in this area which do have implications for homework. Reid (1987), researching into the experiences of American students with English as their non-home language, delivered a powerful argument that students must be given opportunities to assess their own learning preferences and should be encouraged to diversify those preferences. Self-recognition in this area can, it is suggested, help them make useful decisions about how, when and where they should go about doing their homework. It is worth noting that although learning style experts propose that teachers accommodate differences in learning style, Fleming and Mills (1992) shifted the main responsibility to the students themselves, especially where working at home is required. As a headteacher, it is pertinent to comment that children of primary school age may lack the emotional maturity needed for this advanced level of self-awareness; they may also lack the power to exert sufficient influence over their parents to be able to decide on these things independently (Rudman, 2014).

Cooper and Nye (1994) reported that homework does much to foster independence and personal responsibility. Students who are motivated to do well in their homework, they

argue, are developing self-discipline, self-direction and independence. These are transferable skills, which will serve the children well in every area of learning and personal development. They are holistic and they are life-long. Persuasive though this argument may appear, there is surely a major caveat here. Why would the opposite argument not apply instead? What, for example, about the poorly motivated student? Won't repeated experience of failure to complete homework have a cumulative negative effect on those students' self-esteem as learners and on their attitudes toward school? One group of researchers attempted to take account of poorly motivated students with low levels of content knowledge and poor basic study skills, concluding simply, (and rather simplistically in my view) that

teachers need to consider these factors when planning homework. (Epstein and Patton, 1993; 68)

With the pupils themselves being expected to assume responsibility and demonstrate independence when doing their homework, what, if anything, should their parents be doing to support the process?

2.9 The role of parents in homework completion

When considering my own professional context, it is evident that due to the age of the children (ranging from four to eleven years old), involving parents in the homework process is likely to be a key factor in its effectiveness as an extension of classroom based learning. Indeed, a major drive in our school is to involve and engage parents more effectively in supporting various aspects of school life and learning. In my experience as a headteacher across three different schools over seventeen years, homework can be a way of involving parents more fully in the education of their children. Indeed, some parents have told me this, sometimes even seeing it as the only way to be involved in their child's life at school. Nevertheless, Hughes and Greenhough (2002) discovered that parents in four primary schools felt that their children were too young for homework and consequently their model (which I explore in more detail in chapter five of this thesis) is focused more towards homework in a Bristol secondary school. Equally, Baumgartner et al. (1993) warned of the negative effects of homework if parents pressure children or if they are confused about how to help them. Balli (1998) elaborated on these points, stating that children appreciate their parents' interest in their homework, and believe that they do better in school with their parents' help. However, it is also reported here that children have mixed perceptions about how much their

parents facilitate or confuse them when helping with their homework. In general terms, the small amount of research undertaken in this area does suggest that there is a positive relationship between parental involvement in homework and children's attitudes towards homework in particular and school and learning in general (Snow et al., 1991). But, can it actually be said that parental involvement in homework has a positive effect on academic achievement?

In a relatively early review of homework research, Ziegler (1986) suggested that parents like schools to set homework because it provides evidence that the school is serious about its core purpose of teaching and learning, and also because it gives them a window on their child's experiences at school. Neither Cooper (1989), Miller and Kelley (1994) or Levin et al. (1997) found much evidence to support theories linking parental involvement to attainment. However, both Levin et al. (1997) and a later work by Cooper et al. (2000) both suggested that it is not the amount of parental involvement but the kind of involvement that is important. Indeed, they both felt that parents who gave more autonomy to their children and tended to make fewer but more pertinent interventions in homework, appeared to have children who achieved higher marks in standardised tests. This, of course is an issue of parenting style which the researchers felt may be linked to home background in general; parents from less affluent backgrounds reported less support for autonomy and more interference in homework matters (Cooper et al., 2000). It is clear, however, that any suggestion of a direct causal link between parental involvement and either homework success or pupil attainment should be treated with scepticism.

Meanwhile, longitudinal studies suggest strong links between the regular engagement of parents in home learning activities and children's academic and social development (Harris and Goodall, 2007; Melhuish et al., 2001). Although parental involvement and support have the greatest impact during early childhood, evidence suggests it also has a significant effect on educational outcomes in adolescence (Desforges and Abouchaar, 2003).

Over the course of the last fifteen years, a body of research has built up into parental involvement in young children's reading. This has included both quantitative and qualitative research, much of which has focused on pupils living in areas of social

deprivation with a history of poor literacy levels. Somewhat contradictory results have emerged for reading initiatives based around parental involvement. Some researchers reported no effects on reading and others claimed to have identified significant, positive effects (Sharp et al., 2001). Overall, research evidence suggests that simply encouraging parents to get involved is not sufficient to promote success in reading. On the other hand, studies do raise the possibility that encouraging parents to use particular strategies could be the key to greater success. Indeed, this was the distinguishing feature of the more successful ventures such as the Haringey Reading Project of the early 1980s as well as various family literacy schemes run by many Local Education Authorities (Brooks et al., 1996).

Parental involvement with homework, especially for younger children, is often associated with children's reading development (Brooks et al., 2008; McElvany and Steensel, 2009; McElvany et al., 2010; Steensel, 2009) and findings do suggest a broadly positive link between this involvement and children's early fluency skills (Sénéchal and LeFevre, 2002) as well as their enjoyment of reading (Baker and Scher, 2002; Baker, Scher and Mackler, 1997). However, despite these links, some literacy activities that parents undertake with their children have been shown to be more effective than others. Sénéchal's (2006) meta-analysis compared different types of parental involvement in American schools and demonstrated that parents who teach specific literacy skills to their children – such as the alphabet, word reading and letter-sound correspondences – were twice as effective as parents who merely listened to their children read and six times more effective than parents who merely read to their children.

Parents' active participation with general homework tasks (helping, tutoring, working alongside the child) has been examined in several studies (Chavkin and Williams, 1993; Ginsburg and Bronstein, 1993; Okagaki and Frensch 1998). However, researchers have also examined two more specific parental approaches to homework involvement. These involve either structured, often planned efforts to help the child with specific tasks, or informal, student-responsive interactions where the parent responds directly to a child's request for homework help. Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2001) believe that in their meta-analysis of such studies, they may have identified some connection between these homework-help initiatives and students' academic success.

Some investigators have associated these two general approaches with varied patterns of student outcomes (e.g., more structured approaches have been associated with poorer student performance, less-structured approaches with better student performance). Others have reported that parents tend to use both general approaches to homework involvement, apparently responding to specific homework task demands and individual children's learning preferences. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; 202)

These authors do acknowledge, however, that more research needs to be undertaken before any substantive claims can be made.

The majority of these studies, however, have defined homework involvement in relatively uni-dimensional terms or have embedded the topic within inquiry focused more directly on related issues. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; 206)

The central role played by parents in young children's learning and the corresponding opportunities for homework programmes to be successful, demonstrate the importance of continued inquiry into parents' roles and responsibilities in their children's homework routines.

Particularly in need of specific examination are parents' motivations for engaging in homework help, [and] the dynamics of effective parent-child interactions during homework involvement. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; 206)

I return to Hoover-Dempsey et al.'s (ibid) work again in chapter five where I explore their development of a model for parental involvement in homework which I analyse alongside my own conceptual findings.

2.10 Homework as an aid to home-school collaboration

During the course of my work as a headteacher, parents have told me that one reason they value homework is the opportunity it affords them to work in partnership with our school. There is a small amount of literature focused on this issue. Some interesting homework materials were developed in the early 1990s by Joyce Epstein and her colleagues at the Center on Families, Communities, Schools, and Children's Learning in Baltimore (Epstein et al., 1992; Epstein and Salinas, 1991; Epstein and Salinas 1992). Here, the Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) interactive homework process was developed to support schools in helping families become better informed about their children's homework. Within the programme

homework is conceptualized as a three-way partnership involving students, families, and teachers....The materials feature homework assignments that require students to talk to someone at home about things they are learning at

school, and provide a structured means for parents to provide written feedback to teachers. (Olympia et al., 1994; 13)

In this way, discussion between students and their parents becomes integral to the process as students share with their parents the things they are learning at school.

TIPS homework... is designed specifically to keep students and their families talking about schoolwork at home. (Epstein and Salinas, 1992; 2)

Xu and Corno (2003) investigated the role of family homework help on a range of homework management strategies reported by urban middle school students in the United States. The results suggest that parents can play an important role in assisting their children in completing homework in a timely and responsible manner and using their involvement to better inform their discussions with teachers. However, that study involved a limited sample in one urban middle school only.

In a separate, but related study some three years later, these same researchers developed their earlier research and their participants on this occasion were 238 students in one public middle school in eastern central Tennessee. By contrast, this school was located in a rural community, 79 miles away from the nearest metropolitan area.

Consistent with the findings from their first homework survey with urban middle school students (Xu and Corno, 2003), this time they presented findings suggesting that families from rural backgrounds continue to play an important role in promoting desirable homework strategies beyond the elementary years (Xu and Corno, 2006; 4). This is an important finding, because it suggests that parents and other family members, even when they themselves are not educated beyond high school levels, can exert a positive influence over the homework routines of their young children. Specifically, they report that rural middle school students can benefit from family help about how to maintain motivation and engagement in learning. Middle schools in general, and rural middle schools in particular, they argue, might benefit from encouraging families to become involved in both structuring and also monitoring preadolescents' homework. (Xu and Corno, 2006; 4)

Interestingly, these authors also report that about thirty per-cent of families in their study were not involved at all in supporting their middle school children's homework. This mirrors a previous finding, this time from a larger, nationally representative sample

of eighth grade participants in the United States dating back to the early 1990s (Horn and West, 1992).

These findings suggest that the role which parents play in supporting homework may have broader implications relating to children's longer term approaches to all sorts of learning opportunities, including learning within classrooms. Whilst it would be inadvisable to speculate beyond this, it has been important to follow up these within-family homework issues in my own research and also to consider any implications for children whose parents do not involve themselves in homework routines.

2.11 Homework without adult support

Small amounts of research have been directed towards issues of homework promptness, apprehension and planning and especially on the impact for pupils when parents are not involved in the homework process. I have often considered the possibility that children may not do their homework on time not just because they are disorganised, but because of the fear of failure or perhaps because they worry about not doing something well enough (Rudman, 2014). I have not found very much research evidence to support this hypothesis, although Retish et al. (1991) hinted at this with their theory that certain children are trying hard to work with growing independence and it is they who reject parental guidance. The children concerned resent adult interference and are willing to take the consequences when they hand work in late; at least it is their own work and they need the extra time to perfect it. In the longer term, this may be a good sign. These pupils are taking on additional responsibility for their own learning. Eventually, they will

acquire confidence in their ability to complete homework as well as other tasks and become independent and self-regulated learners. (Warton, 1997; 217)

Encouraging students to set their own goals for completing homework could be one way to encourage work to be handed in on time and to minimise the effects when parents do not support their efforts. Miller and Kelley (1994) investigated issues around setting goals. Based around children in the United States, they examined the effects of goal setting on children's homework performance. Their research participants were four parent-child dyads (groups of two people) in which the child exhibited substantial homework problems and the parent struggled to assist. Significant improvements in children's homework accuracy and completion rates were reported in two of the four

pairs. Goals, they discovered, should be reasonable and easy to accomplish and they should form the basis for children to evaluate their own performance.

I find much to admire in this piece of research. These ideas are used increasingly across the curriculum in primary schools today in assessment for learning and in pupil-based target setting. Both are central to our emerging concepts of personalised and independent learning.

2.12 The role of the homework environment

Commentators, researchers, psychologists and sociologists have long been convinced of the significance of social and cultural environments, including the home environment, in the realisation of a child's potential for development.

Education must be oriented not towards the yesterday of child development, but towards its tomorrow. (Vygotsky, 1978; 24)

Anecdotal evidence gleaned from my day-to-day conversations with parents, shows that many believe that a quiet room is the only place for their child to do homework properly. This perception is supported by a study from the United States in which Cooper et al. (2001) found that an important role played by the parents of elementary school pupils involved them in helping to remove distractions during homework activities; this increased the amount of homework completed. Indeed, this study led to the creation of 'A model of homework's influence on the performance evaluations of elementary school students' (Cooper et al., *ibid*) which I will discuss in more detail when my own conceptual ideas are presented in chapter five of this thesis.

However, there are other research findings which dispute the efficacy of this distraction-free homeworking environment. Whilst many students prefer a quiet background when concentrating on difficult material, others appear to learn better with some background sound (Pizzo et al., 1990). For the latter, sound appears to block out other distractions. Music without lyrics seems to be more conducive to learning than music with words because of the potential distraction of the lyrics (DeGregoris, 1986). Perhaps unsurprisingly, Armstrong et al. (1991) discovered that having the television on in the same room as a student doing homework was found to be an enormous interference when the homework was cognitively demanding. Contemporary studies appear to

confirm these earlier findings, with evidence emerging that the ability to concentrate on academic work whilst engaging with other media is often problematic.

The research is almost unanimous, which is very rare in social science, and it says that people who chronically multitask show an enormous range of deficits. They're basically terrible at all sorts of cognitive tasks, including multitasking. (Nass, 2013; 3)

Parents also ask my views about whether their children should be allowed to do homework with friends. The response from literature is a pragmatic one. Research tends to indicate that if parents are willing to take account of individual preferences for either learning alone or learning with friends, then homework becomes more effective than a non-matched approach based purely on coercion (Dunn and Dunn, 1993). There are many psychological and behavioural gains in doing homework with others, but adverse effects have also been reported (Miles, 1987). Some children may become too dependent on the support of their friends, and this may lead to them being unable to work alone. Others take advantage of the group and contribute very little. As a consequence, more capable pupils can come to resent working in a group, because the work is not shared equally and they see others getting credit for work which is not their own. It is not surprising then, if high achieving children prefer to do their homework alone (Hong and Lee, 2000).

Parents sometimes ask me about the type and frequency of monitoring they should offer to their children whilst they are doing their homework. This, literature sensibly advises us, is likely to vary considerably from child to child according to their different, individual needs.

For example, students who are easily distracted or who struggle with learning may need and benefit from relatively close monitoring, as is true of students who like to work near a parent or receive frequent feedback. Students who have strong self-regulation skills or find learning relatively straightforward are likely to benefit from "looser" monitoring and increased autonomy. (Walker et al., 2004; 4)

Straightforward though this may seem in theory, it is nevertheless, something which parents at our school have, in the past, told me they struggle with in practice. Literature does, of course, offer a number of additional, relatively non-controversial suggestions for parents about how to create a home environment conducive to supporting homework. Essentially, such a home would be quiet and well lit (Patton, 1994) and

whilst each child's learning style is different, most writers agree that students do their homework more effectively when the child is free from distractions (Gaillard, 1994; Paulu, 1998). Setting aside a specific time for homework each day (Paulu, 1998) is regarded as preferable to more improvised arrangements. Perhaps somewhat contradictorily, parents are also cautioned against pitting homework against other activities their children enjoy, or creating conditions which cause them to rush through their homework in order to return to other activities (Black, 1996). Paulu (1998) argues that family routines which include prearranged and mutually agreed homework times have even been linked to higher pupil achievement. Ensuring that pupils have all the equipment they need before they begin, will clearly minimise frustration and interruption (Paulu, 1998) and therefore some degree of planning and preparation by the parent can support the child's homework success. Simply being present, available and supportive when children seek clarification about their tasks can be immensely reassuring to children (Paulu, 1998) as can looking over homework and giving suggestions, without actually doing the homework for them (Paulu, 1998).

Whilst evidence from my own conversations with parents shows that they are sometimes keen to link rewards or punishments to homework performance, literature has advised against this on the grounds that while it is beneficial for parents to recognize their children's academic successes, this should not lead to them providing external motivators for achievement (Dev, 1997). Instead, parents are advised to highlight the value of learning in their conversations with their children and to show that they understand and value the hard work their child is putting in when completing homework (Patton, 1994). Indeed, as we shall discover in chapter four (where my findings are discussed), whilst parents at this school may not have very much experience of higher education themselves, this does not mean that they attribute less value to their children's learning or that they are not ambitious for their children to succeed.

2.13 The role of homework clubs

I am occasionally asked by parents whether our school intends to establish a homework club. This, they add, could support children whose families struggle to make time available for supporting homework in the evenings or at weekends.

Literature offers the view that homework clubs can indeed be advantageous, especially to certain groups of students and their families. Not only do such clubs offer a safe environment, especially for adolescent learners who might otherwise be alone at home and potentially vulnerable, but, according to research conducted with teenage students attending one such facility in New York

they are also important because they offer individualisation of instruction...these learners can work with a caring adult who highlights their strengths and needs. (Sanacore, 2002; 1)

Other studies have also demonstrated that a range of positive outcomes can emerge from investment in homework environments which are separate from the students' actual home. Homework clubs in off-school facilities such as libraries and other public spaces have recently begun to evolve in the United Kingdom. Train et al. (2000) reporting on the development of such clubs in north-east England, reported that that they offer an interesting change of learning environment for students (one that is different from both home and school) and which avoids the usual distractions of a busy home. Crucially, such clubs eliminate the burden from parents who would otherwise have to supervise homework.

Other factors associated with the success of homework clubs are attendance which is voluntary rather than compulsory, the availability of qualified staff to support students and easy access to a range of appropriate learning facilities, particularly information and communication technology (Train et al., 2000). Parents of children attending these facilities reported that they no longer felt the need to coerce their reluctant children to complete their homework.

Homework clubs in school libraries were also shown to have been beneficial in a similar study undertaken in Australia. Here, the clubs enabled students to be tutored by qualified teachers who oversaw the quality of work produced. This became associated with improved rates of homework completion (Luke et al., 2003). Furthermore, and also reported from Australia, such clubs can be particularly useful amongst populations where there are high levels of social need; these are the areas where fewer students complete compulsory schooling and where academic attainment is often lower than national averages (Lamb et al., 2004).

Criticisms of after-school homework clubs tend to focus, not on the philosophy of the concept, but on the occasionally poor practical application by providers. Ofsted's (2002) analysis of over 175 homework clubs in secondary schools across England, established that students from underprivileged backgrounds who were in need of a quiet place to do their homework, were in fact the least likely students to attend (Ofsted, 2002). Reporting that the quality of support offered to students was also variable and with a quarter of all homework clubs found to be educationally inadequate, inspectors found that staff running the clubs often had little idea what homework had actually been set. With limited opportunities for the staff running the clubs to report back to teachers, the report also claimed that the vast majority of schools even failed to monitor which students attended the clubs. Register taking was rare and the very pupils who were most likely to benefit were not the students who actually attended. Dishearteningly, the report concluded that

Attendance is not usually monitored, so there is no basis for assessing whether those who might benefit most are attending regularly, if at all. Ensuring the provision is taken up by those most in need is a problem for virtually all schools. (Ofsted, 2002; 6)

Consequently, we can appreciate that the creation of a homework club requires some very careful consideration if it is to be welcoming, supportive and successful. Here, the responsibility falls upon teachers and school leaders to create an inclusive, well organised space to help students learn.

Because after-school staff also supervise homework, it's important that they create a comfortable, quiet environment and maintain consistent rules for homework completion (e.g., who can work together, when it's okay to ask for help). (Walker et al., 2004; 4)

Homework clubs are less common, but certainly not unheard of in primary schools. I was mindful to ask parents, pupils and teachers for their views about their viability in my case study.

2.14 Homework and lower achieving pupils

One particular concern among teachers at our own school is how best to use homework to support learning for our most academically vulnerable pupils. The research evidence here points to one central question; which approaches to homework are most appropriate for lower-achieving children? It is useful to consider some pieces of background evidence first. Ofsted (1999) found that lower-ability secondary school

pupils were set less homework than their peers and MacBeath (1996) found evidence to suggest that this led to some feelings of disenfranchisement and resentment amongst them. However, when teachers set the same homework for all pupils, regardless of ability, they were often faced with very poor levels of homework completion by the less able. This has led to further calls for teachers to differentiate homework tasks, at least in relation to the ability of their pupils (MacBeath, 1996; DfEE, 1998).

More specifically, Bursuck (1995) examined research amongst a sample of special education teachers in the USA who were asked to produce a list of recommendations for homework communication in order of importance. The most highly ranked suggestions included requiring students to keep a daily homework record book, asking parents to ask their children about homework every day and encouraging schools to promote better communications with parents through for instance, telephone hotlines and releasing teachers to talk directly to parents. In my view, these suggestions are likely to be advantageous to all pupils in all schools, not simply low achievers.

Parents of children with identified learning disabilities were the focus of a study by Kay et al. (1994). This study showed that parents felt ill equipped to help their child with homework and would value far greater communication with teachers and schools. The sort of homework assignments these parents considered most suitable for their children were 'real life' tasks, tailored to the needs of the individual child. One study produced contradictory findings, however, suggesting that giving some pupils less challenging assignments could have a very negative impact on those pupils' self-esteem (Nelson et al., 1998).

Two very specific intervention programmes have reported promising results with low attaining children. Callahan et al. (1998) involved the parents of twenty-six students at risk of school failure through poor social and poor academic skills and attempted to familiarise them with homework materials and to introduce them to self-management techniques which they could use with their children. Results indicated a significant improvement in homework completion rates and in the quality of these students' homework following the training. Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1998) described how teachers of primary age children tried different strategies to improve the quality of homework submitted. The most effective strategies amongst low attaining pupils were

once again giving ‘real life’ assignments, coupled with using homework planners and getting pupils to keep their own record of homework completion. These studies appear to show that a combination of parental involvement, reality-based assignments, using diaries for planning ahead and involving pupils in self-monitoring strategies may be the most fruitful approaches to successful homework practice with lower achieving children.

Nevertheless, I find it hard to avoid drawing two conclusions of my own at this point. One is that there is really insufficient evidence to reach firm conclusions about the efficacy of these approaches and the second is that these techniques would probably prove equally useful with pupils and parents right across the ability spectrum.

I made a point of discussing these issues with parents of children with special educational needs and disabilities to discover how they thought homework should be developed to meet these very specific needs.

2.15 Flipped learning approaches to homework

A recent innovation in the use of homework is to allocate more of the fundamental learning activities to be done by students at home. This is being done in order to create time and space for more personalised, potentially deeper learning to take place during lessons. In such classrooms, more time can be allocated for group discussions, questioning by students and students working collaboratively and helping each other to learn. Essentially, this teaching and learning process changes the allocation of teacher time because traditionally it has been the teacher who asks the questions and leads the discussions (Brame, 2013).

LaFee (2013) recognises that the principal strategy used by practitioners to deliver this approach is called flipped learning. Whilst practice varies from school to school, a flipped learning environment is fundamentally about reversing the traditional teaching and homework relationship.

Instead of holding forth at the front of a classroom – the traditional notion of the ‘sage on a stage’ – teachers convert their lectures to videos, slide shows, or audio lessons that can be watched by students at home. (LaFee, 2013; 13)

One particularly advantageous consequence reported by advocates of flipped learning is the diminishing need to chase students for overdue homework assignments. Quoting one research participant, LaFee (ibid) references how this teacher's professional life as a chemistry teacher has improved because

The difference I see is that I am not collecting pieces of paper from students to indicate they have 'done their homework'. (Lafee, ibid; 13)

Nevertheless, there are significant question marks over the effectiveness of flipped learning if it is used as the primary approach guiding a school's homework practices. Critics wonder at both the practicalities and the equalities inherent in flipped teaching especially in those communities where families may lack technological support in the home and also in classrooms containing poorly motivated students or where equipment is unsophisticated (LaFee, ibid; 14)

Two leading advocates of flipped learning believe, however, that these concerns are largely unjustified. Bergmann and Sams (2012) argue that flipping classrooms requires only a minimum standard of in-school technology.

There are a lot of free, simple programs to help people create videos and other instructional materials that don't require anything more than a smartphone (Bergman and Sams, 2012; 68)

Furthermore, drawing on their own experiences as colleague classroom teachers delivering lessons in chemistry to American students at Woodland Park High School in Colorado during 2007 and 2008 served to convince them both that flipping their classroom and homework tasks could benefit all their learners, regardless of academic abilities, levels of motivation or technological prowess.

The time when students really need me physically present is when they get stuck and need my individual help. They don't need me there in the room with them to yak at them and give them content; they can receive content on their own. (Bergmann and Sams, 2012; 6)

They further reasoned that if all their lessons were recorded and viewed by students through their homework activities this would free up valuable lesson time to provide additional support with tricky concepts. Although brief and clearly anecdotal in its methodology, Bergmann and Sams (2012) work is nevertheless regularly cited as a practical model for other teachers wishing to reverse the traditional homework-classroom relationship.

Because conceptual development takes place through homework, advocates assert that flipped learning processes create valuable space in lesson time. This in turn allows their teachers to plan classroom lessons which enable students to engage in practical tasks, to learn by doing and to work collaboratively (Bishop and Verleger, 2013; Rosenberg, 2013) in ways which benefit learners of all abilities.

Furthermore, argues Rosenberg (2013), reversing the traditional homework and classroom learning activities can assist teachers who wish to devote more of their own time to those students who need the most support. The confident learner can work independently, following up on concepts introduced through the homework and teacher time can be re-allocated to more vulnerable learners throughout the lesson.

Bishop and Verleger (2013) provide a comprehensive survey of current and on-going research into flipped learning and conclude that findings generally describe positive opinions amongst students

but there were invariably a few students who strongly disliked the change. (Bishop and Vergler, 2013; 8)

DeGrazia et al. (2012) report that, when supplied with video-style homework assignments to watch, students arrived in lessons far better prepared than they had done with textbook chapters to read. These improvements in readiness for learning are noteworthy and they reinforce the findings from an earlier study which suggested that college students in particular are more likely to engage with visual media than traditional reading assignments which are often poorly completed (Sappington et al., 2002).

One thought-provoking study based around student achievement on an electrical engineering course in the United States (Day and Foley, 2006) reported encouraging results in its examination of pupil performance throughout an entire semester of flipped learning activities. These findings are, however, predominantly related to this one particular college course with a specific type of flipped learning solution in place; it is not based on established procedures to guide adaptation (Day and Foley, 2006, Bishop and Verleger, 2013). Consequently, there is little evidence available to inspire generalisation beyond that one unique teaching situation.

Bergmann and Sams (2012) report one surprising and welcome consequence from their flipped learning homework activities. Whilst talking to parents during parent and teacher consultation sessions, it was discovered that many parents had themselves watched and enjoyed the science homework videos. Since then, they have discovered that many other teachers experimenting with this same approach have received similar parental feedback. Evidently, some flipped learning approaches are capable of delivering both increased student engagement and parental involvement in learning.

Foot and Howe (1998) outlined the theoretical foundations which underpin flipped learning. They documented its emergence from theories of student-centred learning and have traced its origins back to the constructivist and collaborative ideas of Piaget's (1930) theory of cognitive conflict and to Vygotsky's (1978) well documented work on the zone of proximal development. Kolb's (1985) work on learning styles can also be seen as a pre-cursor to flipped learning theory, however, as Bergmann and Sams (2012) are careful to remind us.

It is important to note that while learning styles serves as a justification for differentiated learning activities, it does not necessarily provide a framework for how these activities should be structured (Bergmann and Sams, 2012; 10)

Crucially, this raises the question of whether these approaches could translate into primary school classrooms where the needs, skills and attitudes of pupils are very different from secondary age and college pupils. Research evidence in this area is embryonic, especially in the United Kingdom, but a number of practitioners are currently posting ideas for applying flipped learning in primary schools to web sites. Because primary classrooms are now technologically well-resourced and can also offer a flexible approach to curriculum delivery (newsanywhere, 2013) there could be the potential to allow flipped learning to succeed with younger children. One blogger reports favourably upon his experiences.

For today's primary school teacher, the greater availability of technology means you can employ the flipped classroom technique easily. Your class will mostly [sic] likely be technology-savvy, so adapting to the flipping technique should be easy for them. For those students who are flagging behind, you can use the time in the classroom to pay them closer attention. Plus, of course, it's not essential to flip your classroom every day – just when you see fit. (Newsanywhere, 2013;2)

A small number of homework activities at our own school exhibit some characteristics of flipped learning and it was interesting to explore these with my participants and to learn whether they felt there was scope to build upon this emerging practice.

2.16 Personalising homework activities

Once concepts of curriculum personalisation began to enter the educational psyche, it was only a matter of time before practitioners experimented with ways to personalise the homework itself. Indeed, Creasy's (2014) work was written to inspire both primary and secondary teachers who wish to move away from traditional homework practices due to disillusion and dissatisfaction with their results. Taking note of the tentative and often ambivalent messages emanating from many homework studies (Kohn, 2006; Kohn; 2012; Hattie, 2008), Creasy's writing is significant because it is representative of a new breed of teacher researchers, publishing informed guidance to colleagues in a style which encompasses both academic and practitioner traditions. Chief among the views expressed are that homework has the potential to enrich creative learning, to encourage students to take responsibility for their homework success and to empower learners both emotionally and intellectually. Prior to publication, one reviewer (admittedly on behalf of the publisher) wrote enthusiastically about the possibilities of this new approach for teachers and their students.

Creasy showcases 'enquiry within a context'; learning beyond the classroom and equipping students to think...In a nutshell, Unhomework is the passport to 'free children from the straightjacket of standardised homework' (McGill, 2014; 4)

Creasy (2014) advocates project-based homework activities in which students might be asked to choose either the project itself or the method of undertaking and presenting their finished products. Recognising the daily challenges faced by many teachers who struggle to set, monitor and collect homework activities, this approach allows the students themselves to differentiate their own homework routines. This is exciting thinking for many teachers and could

secure a classroom experience that lowers teacher-workload, yet heightens student grit and independence. (McGill, 2014; 4)

This aspect of practice-based homework research is nascent however, with evidence and interest very recently beginning to emerge directly from the classroom, often in the form of teachers' own blogs and websites; such work is often seen as a complement to projects planned by professional, academic researchers (Kara, 2012). Evidence for

homework personalisation is being driven by the very teachers who have struggled to succeed in imposing nineteenth century homework regimes upon twenty-first century children. In this spirit, one newly energised teacher writes

Important homework is important. “Make-work” homework is evil. Workbook homework is too often mind-numbingly boring, and therefore not useful. Too much homework is cruel. Assigning the same homework for everyone makes sense for about 25% of the class, and therefore, is a waste of time for 75% of the class. (Herder, 2012; 1)

Also typical among the new generation of teacher-bloggers is Australian practitioner, Mel Cashen, whose homework website contains ideas for personalising homework for Grade 5 and Grade 6 students in Australian primary schools.

I wanted to give students more ownership in their homework. Hence came the grid with a range of ‘activities’ students could do, usually based around an inquiry unit we were doing. I even extended it to include a presentation to the class. (Cashen, 2010, 1)

Cashen’s (2010) approach is to present a variety of tasks, linked to the curriculum, but giving students choices about which activities they would like to complete. After completing their chosen activity, the students are required to discuss not only the work they have achieved but also the nature of the task and their reasons for having selected it.

Students could pick from a range of tasks based around the multiple intelligences but they also had to reflect on them. They would discuss how some tasks were harder than others or if they need help with some and not others. The students were all reflecting on how they learnt and realised that sometimes we had to work hard and other times things came really easy. (Cashen, 2010, 1)

Personalising the homework experience has many advantages for teachers and students. Children who are given a voice are more likely to complete their homework without teachers needing to issue frequent reminders and this is likely to benefit schools, families and the students themselves. (McGill, 2014)

2.17 Homework personalisation through technology

A particular challenge now facing educators is how to make the best use of computer systems to assist in the delivery of personalised homework schemes. Literature demonstrates that many schools are increasing the availability of new technologies to support personalised learning in class and at home. Websites, learning platforms and

internet-based homework resources are common and their use continues to expand (Underwood et al., 2007). Nevertheless, when Robinson and Sebba (2010) concluded their case study of ten institutions across a range of educational sectors they discovered that much more could still be done to maximise the impact of this new technology.

Our findings suggest, however, that genuine learner-led personalised learning using digital technologies was relatively rare...even though the institutions were selected/self-selected for their activities in this area (Robinson and Sebba, 2010; 774).

In general, the authors found that primary and special schools demonstrated more willingness to innovate, perhaps, they surmise, due to the greater organisational freedoms within these types of school.

In the course of professional discussions, colleague headteachers from neighbouring primary schools have told of the mixed successes they have experienced when setting homework to be undertaken electronically. In fact, studies suggest a number of reasons why technology-based homework activities are not more widely used by schools. These range from the number teachers who need additional support and encouragement to engage with digital resources which are new to them (Williams et al., 2000) to schools who experience difficulties funding and maintaining resources (McFarlane et al., 2007) and concerns about access to technology for students in the home (Robinson and Sebba, 2010)

In order to encourage homework personalisation through technology, schools also will need to prioritise effective teaching of computer skills not only to the students but also to staff. Whilst identifying

Relatively more driving than constraining forces which were working towards shifting the equilibrium towards that of 'ideal' (Robinson and Sebba, 2010; 774)

the authors conclude that

those learners who are most likely to be in a position to lead their learning are those who possess good digital technology skills, and whose teachers also possess high quality digital technology skills, have an interest in technology, and who allow their students to be actively involved in deciding what and how to learn and assess work. (Robinson and Sebba, *ibid*; 774)

The implications for school leaders are clear; an effective training programme needs to be developed and a culture of technological engagement produced if true personalisation of the homework experience is to be embraced.

I pursued these issues with all my participant groups, as anecdotal evidence already suggested that many of our pupils enjoyed the computer-based homework which our teachers sometimes set. Questions remained however, about which pupils liked this work, what their parents thought about it and whether there was scope to present more homework in this way.

2.18 Gender differences in homework

One aspect of homework which arises occasionally in the academic literature concerns possible gender differences in pupils' attitudes towards their homework tasks. From a sociological standpoint, research suggests that girls are often considered to be more self-reliant than boys (Deslandes and Cloutier, 2002) and to have a stronger work ethic (Warrington et al., 2000). The implications of this are that girls may have a more positive view of homework and a tendency to take their homework more seriously. Boys are considered more likely to form distinctive views in which they separate schoolwork from life at home whilst girls are likely to be more organized and more inclined to approach their homework with enthusiasm and vigour (Mau and Lynn, 2000). This will not surprise many teachers; staff at my school frequently comment that it is the boys who require the most frequent reminders about homework completion and homework quality.

Psychological perspectives add weight to these arguments, proposing that boys are more likely to resort to defensive strategies either to provide excuses for poor performance or to suggest that they possess a superior, natural ability (Jackson, 2003). Again, I have heard teachers at my school complaining that some boys will procrastinate, work deliberately slowly or avoid even the appearance of working hard either in the classroom or at their homework.

This hypothesis, that innate gender differences impact upon homework routines, is supported by evidence emerging directly from homework studies. Although based in secondary schools, they carry implications which teachers in primary schools may also

wish to consider. Harris et al. (1993) interviewed 57 students in their final year of schooling in three semi-rural comprehensives in England. Their findings suggested that the boys were less willing to manage their homework time than the girls and generally demonstrated less commitment to organising, completing and returning their homework. These male participants, all aged sixteen and in year eleven, self-reported that they

“usually do [their homework] at the last minute or not at all,” whereas “the girls have got more sense to plan it out” (Harris et al., 1993; 9).

A later single-case study by Younger and Warrington (1996) arrived at a very similar set of conclusions. Conducting a qualitative enquiry with GCSE students inside one English secondary school, they discovered that girls and boys commonly adopted quite different homework routines. They reported that

girls [were] working more steadily and consistently, producing work which was neater, more detailed and coherently planned, and showing more effort and resilience.” (Younger and Warrington, 1996; 310)

When Hong and Milgram (1999) studied differences in homework styles and preferences among 272 seventh grade students (134 males and 138 females) in an American high school and simultaneously among 219 seventh grade students (115 males and 104 females) in Korea, they discovered a number of interesting gender differences. Using a survey-style questionnaire to obtain their participants’ views, they found that more male students than female students in both countries preferred homework when it involved either tactile or kinaesthetic activities. It was noted that more female than male students also reported that they regularly organised their homework assignments in a particular order.

Collecting quantitative data using a statistical survey of 238 middle school students in one rural school in Tennessee, Xu and Corno (2006) confirmed these earlier findings and established once again that when it comes to homework, teenage girls’ natural learning dispositions may give them certain organisational advantages.

...girls reported taking more initiative than their male counterparts in the majority of homework management strategies examined (i.e., to budget time, to be self-motivating during homework, and to control potentially interfering emotions.) (Xu and Corno, 2006; 9)

Whilst the authors admit that these findings are not easily generalizable

because students attended one rural public school, and only about 10% of them came from non-Caucasian backgrounds (Xu and Corno, 2006; 9)

it would appear safe to conclude, on the basis of findings from a number of different studies (Honigsfeld and Dunn, 2003; Mau and Lynn, 2000; Pajares, 2002; Zimmerman and Martinez-Pons, 1990), that girls tend to be better than boys at planning their homework strategies, setting their homework goals and showing high levels of responsibility and perseverance with their homework. These findings carry certain implications for schools like my own, where teachers are keen to improve the educational outcomes for all pupils and where boys' attainment can present its own particular set of challenges.

If the evidence from secondary schools resonates across the primary sector, then it will be important for teachers and families of young children to pay particular attention to boys' homework and to emphasise the need for closer monitoring of their homework routines.

Such an approach is important, as parental attitudes toward homework can play a significant role in shaping student attitudes toward homework. (Xu and Corno, 2006; 11)

Two very different, but highly relevant and distinctive findings have emerged recently from a study of American adolescents. Psychologists (Kackara et al., 2011) analysed male and female high school students' subjective experiences of homework. Using extant data collected through experience sampling methods, a methodology that asks participants to stop at critical times and make notes of their live experiences in real time (Hektner et al., 2006) they explored gender differences encountered during homework. This involved the students keeping contemporaneous records of how and where they liked to do their homework and about their levels of concentration, effort, interest, and stress whilst actually completing their homework tasks. They describe their findings as follows:

Girls, regardless of age, reported greater stress than boys when doing homework alone, and lower stress when doing homework with friends. High school girls reported lower interest than middle school boys when doing homework alone. (Kackara et al., 2011; 70).

Consequently, if doing homework alone is more stressful, and with friends is less stressful for girls, then teachers and parents will be keen to use this knowledge to help

them structure appealing homework environments that better suit both girls and boys. I asked parents and pupils at our primary school where they liked to do their homework and who they liked to do their homework with. It was interesting to see whether these same experiences reported by teenagers were paralleled amongst younger children.

2.19 The international picture

A search for international perspectives indicates an enormous variety of different and often diametrically opposed ways in which legislation and policy provide guidance to schools on homework. Two leading contributors to policy are Australia and The United States of America; both countries set clear parameters on homework. Of particular note is 'Helping your Child with Homework; For Parents of Children in Elementary through Middle School' from the United States (Department of Education, 2002). Specific features include a definition of homework, that homework is a partnership with parents, and also a set of guidelines to establish a whole of school policy for homework within each school. Also, in Australia, state-specific legislation such as Queensland's 'Education (General Provisions) Regulation' (2000) state that a teacher can require a student to undertake homework and also allow the school principal to decide what constitutes a reasonable amount of homework.

In France, President François Hollande has unveiled a very different plan. In order to tackle social injustice and inequality he plans to ban homework altogether (Hollande, 2013). Banning homework would put France at the cutting edge of pedagogical thinking, although it would not be without precedent. Media reports also indicate that an elementary school in Maryland in the United States has replaced traditional notions of homework with a requirement for half an hour each day of at-home reading and a German high school is piloting a complete homework ban as a follow-up to educational reforms which lengthened the school day and limited time for extra-curricular activities (The Wall Street Journal, 2012)

France's rationale for this proposed, nationwide ban is based on political notions of social justice and egalitarianism. Believing that students whose parents help them at home have an unfair advantage over those whose parents do not assist, Hollande (2013) went on to develop his views in an interview given to an international news organisation. In France, he stated,

Education is priority. An education program is, by definition, a societal program. Work should be done at school, rather than at home (Hollande, 2013; 1)

The problem, as M. Hollande sees it, lies not with the homework itself but with the idea that some homes and some families are more encouraging of homework than others. Nevertheless, bringing this policy onto the statute books may prove a challenge in itself. As one news organisation informs us

More than two-thirds of the country [France] would oppose the ban...so there's hope that even in the land of *égalité* there's some recognition that state power cannot equalize everything. It's also reassuring to know that a majority of French adults believe there's something to be said for instructing children in the need for personal initiative and responsibility, regardless of excuses or circumstances. (Circa, 2013; 2)

Recently published research from China, however, provides an entirely different national perspective. Hong et al. (2011) report that not only do Chinese teachers assign a larger volume of homework than British teachers but Chinese parents themselves are vocal in insisting that their children be given a lot of homework to do. Research on homework with Chinese students is, of course, hugely pertinent due the high level of academic achievement of Chinese students as compared to students of Western countries (Chen and Stevenson, 1995).

It is interesting to understand how homework routines in our English primary school compare with overseas practices and to see what we might learn from schools across the world. My school has recently linked with a Maasai community primary school in a remote region of Kenya. There, children arrive at school at first light to do the homework which they cannot do in their traditional 'manyattas' (houses) as these have no electricity or lights at home.

Crucially, this raises issues of history, socio-economic conditions and culture. Hence, at this point I paused to consider a series of questions raised from the literature about the extent to which these cultural differences might influence attitudes to homework not merely across continents but even between schools in the same country, the same county and even the same town? This represented another gap in current understanding and I was keen to seek out any pertinent historic or cultural explanations for stakeholders' views on homework in our school.

2.20 A brief summary of the homework literature

Many authors have acknowledged that researching homework is not straightforward (Cooper, 2001; Hallam, 2006; Trautwein and Lüdtke, 2009, Rudman, 2014). Studies seeking to research the effects of homework struggle to isolate other factors such as family background, teaching quality and the existing skills and abilities of pupils. Studies have tended to focus on homework where measurable outcomes are possible and quantitative methodologies have been employed. This has had the effect of marginalising research in individual schools, especially primary schools and in subjects where students' progress is assessed qualitatively. Consequently, interpreting findings and generalising results has been problematic. Indeed, one study into existing research concluded

There are considerable methodological problems in undertaking research on the effects of homework. (Hallam, 2006; 2)

What studies do indicate is that attainment amongst secondary age students seems to rise when moderate amounts of homework are set (Cooper, 2001) whilst at primary level the effects are much less apparent, particularly for young children (Cooper et al., 2000; Hallam, 2004).

Existing research on homework has done much to illuminate some controversial issues, but is still unable to provide conclusive responses to many questions surrounding attitudes, parental involvement, types of homework, personalisation and links to achievement and progress (Rudman, 2014). According to one renowned commentator who has written extensively in this field in both empirical and analytical contexts, this is due to those complex cultural traditions found inside each individual school (Hallam, 2004).

Too often, homework is given merely to keep children busy or to satisfy the demands of parents, teachers or legislators (Kohn, 2012). What is right for my school can surely only be determined through intense scrutiny of its own unique socio-cultural identity. My research has been informed by existing scholarship. Nevertheless, learning how to meet the homework needs of our children and families and how to offer appropriate personalisation, routine and structure in those tasks can only come about through my

critical analysis of those specific data collected from our own unique learning community.

2.21 Researcher response to the homework literature

Many of the issues surrounding current homework literature and existing research into homework which I have discussed in this chapter, have provided further incentive for my present study. For example, in their review of research on parental involvement in homework, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) showed that academic research has mainly been undertaken using quantitative surveys and statistical analysis of grades. Out of fifty-nine studies which they identified (ibid), only five of these employed any kind of qualitative approach. Consequently, the need for a qualitative study such as mine is further reinforced. Equally, research into homework has usually been centred around the likely impact of parental involvement on student achievement or students' attitudes towards homework completion (Fosberg, 2007). Published findings on the effects of homework on achievement remain inconclusive. Some studies argue that parental involvement has positive effects on progress and attainment (Balli, 1998) whilst others suggest that its impact is either tangential or even negative (Bempechat, 2004, McNeal, 1999). Indeed McNeal (1999) claims that the inconsistent findings might be due to a lack of any agreed conceptual framework for homework; this gives further encouragement for the rationale of my own study and specifically for the creation of framework for homework. According to McNeal (1999), parental involvement in homework has little effect on achievement, because achievement is a cognitive process. Naturally, I was keen to hear the views of parents at Maylandsea Primary School and to learn about how they felt that their own involvement with homework relates to their children's learning. It is evident that research literature has found it difficult to distinguish the pedagogical aspects of homework from the social, emotional and developmental issues although these latter skills have received little attention in previous research (Fosberg, 2007; Rudman, 2014). In secondary schools and colleges, where the overwhelming majority of research has been conducted, Solomon et al. (2002) claimed that homework is a locus of great strain in households because of the conflict which arises between parents' anxieties and teenage students' hesitancy to accept homework help. Parents' desires to maintain elements of control over of their teenage children is thought to destabilise these students' growing wish for autonomy and subsequently, their parents'

concerns about their children's future ... create a climate of pressure to succeed (Solomon et al., 2002; 620).

In a primary school, because children are younger and relationships between young children and their parents are at different stage of development, it is possible that an alternative picture might emerge from my research. It is noted that homework has been described as overburdening students and causing them unnecessary stress (Hellsten, 2000) and that it can unhelpfully blur crucial boundaries between home and school life (Westlund, 2004). I was eager to discover what teachers, pupils and parents at my primary school thought about these issues. It was also clear from my reading that the lack of a clear, empirically-derived, conceptual framework for homework at primary level has hindering not only practitioners but also theorists and academic researchers; educationalists currently lack an agreed model through which they can critique the efficacy of homework.

Equally, whilst a small amount of work has been undertaken on homework where the context for the enquiry has been deemed an important socio-cultural factor in the research (Hong and Lee, 2000; Xu and Corno, 2006; Xu and Yuan, 2003) the siting of this study in a semi-rural, English primary school is a particularly notable feature of my research.

2.22 Linking homework literature to my research design

It is evident from my review of the homework literature that the majority of studies have been conducted outside the United Kingdom, often in the United States, and rarely in primary schools. These are significant gaps in current understanding. Where studies have focused on links between homework and academic attainment, usually in secondary schools or colleges, these have often proved inconclusive. Crucially, attempts to connect homework with so-called 'softer' academic skills which can underpin attitudes and dispositions towards learning, such as developing personal responsibility, independence, resilience, time-management and good study habits have often been disregarded. Corno (2000) however, helps me set the scene for my own research when she reviews some recent homework literature and calls for

A new conceptualization of homework [which] is not just an academic task but one that infiltrates family and peer dynamics. (Corno, 2000; 529)

Discussing the currently untapped potential of homework as an aid to developing students' positive work habits, she suggests a number of potential advantages from homework policies which fully engage all stakeholders.

What students take from doing homework includes knowledge and skills stretched across the home-school environment, interpersonal and self-regulation styles and mannerisms, and an identification with an academic and social community of others who do homework. (Corno, 2000; 545)

Homework, she feels, has the potential to exert a positive influence on a student's attitude toward school.

Nevertheless, the debate about the impact of homework on families is no nearer reaching any satisfactory conclusion; very little work has been accomplished with families, especially with families of young children, to discover more about how homework can be re-conceptualised to fit better with the demands of modern, family life.

As far as teachers themselves are concerned, research points to their uncertainty about the value of homework and this causes confusion about the type, frequency and purpose of the homework activities they set. It is little wonder that homework is a contentious issue; there is sparse understanding about a school's rationale for setting it and limited advice to parents about how or why they should support it.

Consequently, my intention has been to design a qualitative enquiry, focused around a critical exploration of the views of parents, pupils and teachers in an English primary school. I needed to discover more about how homework could be given a shared understanding amongst stakeholders, with an agreed purpose, rationale and framework to support learning. I needed to understand where the views of different groups diverged and where they coalesced so that I, in my role as headteacher, could provide more effective, quantified leadership in this important aspect of school life.

In appendix 4 I have included a table which sets out the key texts and summarises the range of literature included in this review.

*Some of our lessons might be boring,
Sometimes I might even get caught in maths, snoring.
But if I can get all my homework done,
At least I can play out and have some fun.
Tom (age 10)*

Chapter 3: Research design

3.1 Introductory comments

In this chapter I set out my rationale for choosing an interpretive, qualitative, emic methodology and specifically a case study. I discuss my overall research design including my desire to follow best practice and ensure that a strong, ethical framework underpins all aspects of my research. I critically evaluate a pilot project and this helps further refine my specific research area and approach. Finally, I explain how my data have been analysed and how this analysis led to the development of five major homework themes which I then explore in detail in chapter four.

I also use this chapter to help me focus my thoughts about my data collection methods. I begin with a brief background statement leading to an affirmation of my research questions, which have themselves helped me arrive at my choice of research approaches (Andrews, 2003). I also demonstrate how my analysis of the homework literature has provided a secure framework for the conceptualisation of my topic and how this in turn has influenced how I

investigate[d] appropriate options for [my] research design. (Walliman, 2005; 224)

I explain how my research has been carried out so that ultimately I am able to demonstrate that I have been able to

connect [my] research questions (purpose) to the data (collection process). (Punch, 2000; 52)

It is clear to me that research design should be located at the heart of the doctoral research process (Trafford and Leshem, 2008; 90) and that decisions about research design and methodology should emerge naturally as a consequence of both the specific research questions and the cultures and professional contexts within which the research

is sited. School cultures are constructed from complex networks of history, tradition and practice which have become established over many years. Moreover, these

Cultural patterns are highly enduring, have a powerful impact on performance, and shape the ways people think, act and feel. (Deal and Peterson, 1999; 4)

Consequently, it has been important for me to design a research approach which takes account of the views of all participant-groups and which is inclusive, comprehensive and broad. A few of our teachers are long-serving, having taught at this school for over two decades whilst others are more recently qualified. Interestingly, a similar pattern emerges amongst our parents; some families have lived in this village for over twenty years and others are newly arrived, often relocating from areas of higher density housing to this semi-rural location.

All these participants have views to express and these views are products of their own individual histories, backgrounds and experiences. Together however, these opinions coalesce to shape the culture of our school community and I am keen to explore these as fully as possible in order to make sense of what homework means at this particular school.

3.2 Background statement

In two preparatory articles, I began to explore both the context for my research (Rudman, 2013) and the current literature surrounding homework in primary schools (Rudman, 2014). My findings identified a number of gaps both in the academic knowledge base and in our own school-based homework practices, which my research is designed to address. These concern the extent to which homework is effective in promoting learning, supporting families, engaging pupils and encouraging personal development. In short, there is a paucity of research evidence surrounding the views of parents, pupils and teachers in primary schools about most aspects of homework (Hallam, 2006; Hong and Lee, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; Rudman, 2014) and consequently considerable scope for the application of qualitative research methods to help me explore their thinking.

Findings from my review of the homework literature also demonstrated that whilst a range of research methods have been applied to homework investigations, studies gathering quantitative data have produced outcomes which can be contradictory to each

other. Such studies have generally focused on examination-level courses, typically seeking to relate homework to academic achievement in secondary school or college courses.

I have designed a very different research approach which meets the parameters of my own professional context. My research design takes a more inclusive, emic, interpretive stance and exploits the opportunities which my headteacher's role affords me of talking with members of this school community and exploring their views about homework.

Within this qualitative methodology I attempted to build particularly upon the findings of Henderson (2006) and Hallam (2004; 2006) both of whom advocate the need for more in-depth research into the views of stakeholders within a school environment.¹

3.3 Research aims

Consequently, this research sought to explore the views of parents, pupils and teachers about homework. Specifically it was designed to discover their views about the value and purpose of homework, what type of homework is best for primary aged children, parents' roles in the homework process and how homework activities can be designed more effectively to promote children's enjoyment of learning. Emerging from this new understanding, I have developed a framework for homework in order to provide a structure to guide teachers, assist parents and support pupils.

3.4 Research questions

These research questions initially began to emerge from my recognition of the problems associated with homework at my own school. They were then substantially re-worked, refined, redeveloped, and academically informed by my interrogation of the homework literature.

1. What is the purpose of homework for primary aged pupils?
2. What type of homework should teachers set?
3. What is the role of parents in the homework process?
4. To what extent should homework be personalised?

¹ Susan Hallam is professor of Education and Music Psychology at the Institute of Education, University of London. In an email exchange with me in the early stages of my thinking about research design, she confirmed to me that 'there are considerable opportunities for the application of conversational and other qualitative methodologies for homework in a primary school.'

5. How can homework completion-rates be improved?

3.5 Selecting a methodological paradigm

Researchers have long debated the relative value of qualitative and quantitative inquiry (Patton, 1990) and mixed methods research is also becoming increasingly recognised within research practice and is even documented in some quarters as the third major research approach (Johnson et al., 2007). However, the vast majority of small scale, practitioner-led educational research is predominantly qualitative and often phenomenological in its design.

Sometimes phenomenology is viewed as a paradigm (Crotty, 1996) sometimes as a philosophy (Thompson et al., 1989) or a perspective (Zahavi, 1999). Whatever its precise definition

Phenomenological researchers generally agree that our central concern is to return to embodied, experiential meanings aiming for a fresh, complex, rich description of a phenomenon as it is concretely lived. (Finlay, 2009; 6)

These approaches often seek to identify with events which are firmly rooted in specific contexts or settings and as such this approach matched my needs well. Whilst I was not planning to use phenomenology per se, I was certainly keen to employ some of its principles, particularly through valuing the voices of my participants.

Logical positivism, or quantitative research on the other hand, uses experimental methods and statistical techniques to investigate hypotheses and to develop generalisations. Here we can clearly see two fundamentally different approaches for conducting research, and the way a researcher acts is inextricably linked to the critical assumptions within each paradigm. Qualitative research, broadly defined, means

any kind of research that produces findings not arrived at by means of statistical procedures or other means of quantification. (Strauss and Corbin, 1998; 17)

Whilst positivist researchers seek to determine cause and effect, to use prediction and to generalize their findings, so qualitative researchers strive for insight and understanding. The qualitative researcher leaves it to others to identify any patterns in their findings which he or she may wish to apply to broadly similar contexts. (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). My intention was to learn more about the views of members of this school community and allow colleague headteachers in other schools to extract any similarities which they may recognize if these happen to also apply to their own institutions.

Qualitative and quantitative inquiries lead to two fundamentally different kinds of knowledge. For example, Eisner (1991) offering an authoritative and frequently referenced opinion, pointed out that all knowledge, including knowledge derived from quantitative research, is positioned around qualities of some form. Proposing a continuum-centred approach which moves from the fictional truth of a novel at one end of the continuum, to controlled, scientific experimentation at the other, he believes that work at either end of this continuum can possess validity and significance. Not unreasonably, he states that

Qualitative research and evaluation are located toward the fictive end of the continuum without being fictional in the narrow sense of the term. (Eisner, 1991; 30)

It had certainly not been my intention to pursue an experimental study as this was unlikely to help me absorb and understand the views and opinions of members of this school community. Hence, as I moved forward towards an exploration of stakeholders' views of homework in this school, I was keen to learn more about the richness contained within the individual stories and experiences my participants were encouraged to tell. For me, this added a resonance and a depth which extended my own contextualized understanding of these phenomena.

In selecting an interpretive approach, I also rejected the use of a mixture of qualitative and quantitative approaches. This was not due to any philosophical objection, but rather on practical grounds. Mixed methodologies are commonly employed when researchers are constructing new layers of research or when exploring their statistical data qualitatively or perhaps in order to develop a new research tool or identify a set of variables to test out in a later positivist enquiry (Creswell, 2004). Mixed method studies also allow any initial quantitative study to be followed up with a subsequent qualitative enquiry in order to obtain more detailed or perhaps less ambiguous information (Lieber and Weisner, 2010).

My research has not been planned along any of these lines. My desire has been to present a richly descriptive enquiry in which the process began with a clear purpose, moved towards the generation of research questions, discussed data collected in the form of views and ideas emerging from my interactions with participants and led to the

production of a critical, informed analysis of these findings. This is typical of the type of single, purely qualitative research design described by commentators such as Creswell (2004), Denzin and Lincoln (2011) and Savin-Baden and Major (2013).

This qualitative research has been designed in order to allow me to develop a comprehensive understanding of human behaviour (Silverman, 2011) in the context of stakeholders' feelings and actions about homework in this primary school. One notable commentator who has written extensively about this type of research design has provided significant justification for my selection of this approach. Conceptualising qualitative research as an inquiry process founded upon distinct methodological traditions and designed to help us develop an improved understanding of social situations, the strengths of qualitative research are the ways in which it

builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in natural settings. (Creswell, 1998; 15)

This is a vivid description of my own professional context and mirrors my research intentions exactly. Nevertheless, an examination of my own epistemological and ontological loci were necessary before I could fully establish any single, methodological position.

3.6 Epistemological and ontological considerations

The foundations upon which researchers construct their methodologies are their ontological and epistemological positions. To many researchers these are fundamental concepts which

are like a skin not a sweater; they cannot be put on or taken off whenever the researcher sees fit. (Marsh and Furlong, 2002; 17)

These positions are firmly embedded in the researcher's attitudes towards the world. More specifically, ontology can be understood as the nature or the theory of being. It concerns questions of how the world is constructed. In my educational context I asked myself 'what is the history, culture and practice of this school that I have planned to learn more about?' Here I distinguished between notions of a real school that exists whether I know about it or not and inside such a school normal activity takes place. Conversely, I also considered that there was no such thing as a 'real' school but only a school that was socially and obliquely constructed and which could only be understood in terms of the actions and views of its community.

Ontological positioning therefore suggests a particular epistemological stance. This is because our individual epistemological position reflects our

view of what we can know about the world and how we can know it. (Marsh and Furlong, 2002; 18)

As a researcher exploring participants' views I took the position that my observations of the world around me could never be objective but always affected by my socially constructed view of that reality. From a philosophical standpoint, this could also lead to the problem of the double hermeneutic in which

the world is interpreted by actors ... and their interpretation is interpreted by the observer. (Marsh and Furlong, 2002; 19)

This makes it a double interpretation and therefore arguably even less objective than the initial one (Schmidt, 1994a).

The implications for my research were clear. I had to seek to understand the views of my research participants rather than explain them. As Marsh and Furlong (2002) report, any field of study is influenced by its histories and principles. It was the narrative produced by the collective knowledge of staff, pupils and parents in my case study school that gave their stories meaning.

These aspects [are] shared by individuals (via rules, conventions, norms, common sense) and via expected expectations. (Schmidt, 1994b; 615)

It is these collected expectations, beliefs and outlooks which enable a shared sense of social reality to develop in school communities; these also serve to confirm a local identity within populations. Hence, I was also aware that my own ontological and epistemological positions all pointed to models of social constructivism and I recognised members of our school community as collaboratively creating a unique culture of shared meanings (Grant, 2007). Armed with this prerequisite of self-knowledge, I found myself better placed to avoid contradictory research strategies. I was keen to involve as many stakeholders as possible because for me the veracity of their lived experiences across the school were most likely to be discovered among the stories, narratives and perceptions which they agreed to share with me and which characterised this complex social setting.

Nevertheless, this particular epistemological positioning did raise a number of questions about how researchers can fully understand the realities they are investigating, about the relationships between participants and the views they divulge, about the assumptions that guide the learning process and also about

the possibility of that process being shared and repeated by others in order to assess the quality of the research and the reliability of those findings. (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009; 2).

Whilst there were no easy solutions to these fundamental qualitative research dilemmas, a suggested process of on-going epistemological reflection did offer me some reassurance. Epistemological reflection does not purport to apply universal truths to the research process and in that sense it is not a normative undertaking (Miller and Fredericks, 2002; Schmidt, 2001). It requires a determined, imaginative, reflexive thought process that is in a state of constant renewal.

This demonstrated some of the challenges I faced in designing this interpretive study, especially as the views of my research participants were initially so poorly understood. Continuing epistemological reflection within a qualitative research design is critical, especially in situations where sought knowledge and opinions are likely to have been largely unexplored

or else, they cannot be, in part or as a whole, registered, observed, or understood by existing theories and/or concepts. (Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2009; 3)

Henceforth, I determined to reflect continually on issues surrounding my participants' intentions, values, assumptions and motives as part of my critical analysis of the stories they told me and the data they supplied. Constructivist epistemologies accept that the researcher and his or her participants are intertwined in an interactive process and that each has the potential to influence the other (Cupchik, 2001).

Furthermore, given my role as headteacher of this school, I also embraced the notion of insider research when constructing my methodology.

3.7 Insider research

In using the term 'insider research' I mean to describe an approach in which I, as both practitioner and researcher, have a direct involvement with the school in which my

research has taken place (Robson, 2002). Such an approach stands in marked contrast with many positivist research designs in which the researcher is usually an objective outsider studying a situation which is entirely external (Denzin and Lincoln, 2000).

An educational researcher's role can range from being a full member of the institution being studied to someone entirely unknown to the participants and completely unfamiliar with the environment (Adler and Adler, 1994). While there are numerous descriptions of insider-researchers, usually these are practitioners who have elected to study the organisation or group to which they themselves belong (Breen, 2007). What was important to me was to avoid ambiguity and to be clear and transparent about this situation right from the start.

It is crucial for social researchers to clarify their researchers' roles, especially for those utilizing qualitative methodology to make their research credible. (Unluer, 2012; 1)

Here it is worth pausing to acknowledge that all insider research brings with it a more problematic concept of validity due to the researcher's close involvement with the people, issues and cultures in the setting being studied. The scientific researcher could claim that I risk losing my objectivity and distorting my results (Ratner, 2002). At the same time, anti-positivists will be aware that whilst true objectivity is an elusive concept, the researcher's own potential biases always pose a threat to the validity of the research process and the trustworthiness of the entire project (Rooney, 2005). Amongst other considerations, I was mindful of the need to ensure that my professional relationships with participants did not have a negative impact on their behaviour and responses and that my depth of knowledge about the school did not lead me to make unreasonable assumptions or overlook potentially important information.

Consequently, I was aware that these issues, which are fundamentally associated with power relationships, need to be carefully considered when undertaking insider research. This is because

The process of conducting enquiry based on relationships introduces issues of power where the researcher-researched relationship is also guided by larger social structures. (Das, 2010; 5)

Here, I took the advice of Karnieli-Miller et al. (2009) and Archer (2007) and ensured that I would engage with all my participants in a manner that welcomes their

participation, is sensitive to their roles and responsibilities and recognises the validity of their contributions.

I had to overcome role-duality (Gerrish, 1997) and as an insider-researcher I was aware of my need to balance my longstanding and well established insider responsibilities with my new, temporary, researcher role (DeLyser, 2001). I have been in post as headteacher for eight years now and I enjoy cordial, professional relationships with my colleagues, especially my four colleagues on our senior leadership team. I was keen to ensure that I paid just as much attention, however, to all stakeholders, particularly parents, many of whom I know only superficially. Partly due to socio-economic factors and the demography of this area, we have a high percentage of working parents at our school, many of whom I see only a few times each year. We also have a small number of parents whom I know much better because they are often in and around the school helping teachers in classrooms or organising fundraising activities. I was eager to engage all parents in my research but planned to make a genuine effort to engage working parents as it was their busy lives which they had previously told me can impact upon their ability to engage with their children's homework. Their perspectives would be crucial in helping me to form a balanced perspective about attitudes to homework at this school.

There are many clearly documented advantages of insider research. Insiders often have a detailed understanding of the institution which the outsider almost certainly does not. This can allow insider researchers to proceed with greater focus (Tedlock, 2000). It is also argued that participants may feel more comfortable and able to talk more openly if they are familiar with the researcher (Tierney, 1994). These two advantages allow proponents to argue that insider research has the potential actually to improve validity because of the greater richness and authenticity of the information which can be obtained (Tedlock, 2000).

Bonner and Tolhurst (2002) identified a number of additional benefits of insider-research, all of which are highly relevant to my situation. The insider-researcher has usually accrued far better understanding of the culture within the institution being studied and consequently he or she is less likely to distort the natural flow of social interaction between participants. Additionally, having an established set of relationships

is likely to encourage not only the telling of truthfully-held beliefs but also the judging of this truthfulness. Insider-researchers are more likely to understand the politics of the institution, and can use this knowledge to know how to best approach people. In general, insider-researchers possess an enormous reservoir of knowledge which an outsider would take a very long time to obtain (Smyth and Holian, 2008).

Overall, and by acknowledging my insider position with my participants, my responsibility was to minimise the impact of bias. In particular, I ensured that I gave equal weight to the opinions of all groups of stakeholders whilst undertaking my research with divergent groups of pupils, school staff and parents. I conducted my research in full awareness of its socially situated nature (Hammersley, 2000). If I succeeded in making my research process clear, inductive and transparent, I would be able to assert that anyone reading my work could develop their own viewpoints which

are equally as valid as our own. (Cohen et al., 2011; 106)

3.8 Employing a social constructivist theoretical framework

Homework, I contend, is a social construction. It is a socially constructed feature of our national education system and of our school's approach to teaching and learning. My aim has been to understand how homework was viewed within this school community and to use this knowledge to help me construct a conceptual framework for homework in this school.

Here, I recognise the need to differentiate between my chosen term 'constructivism' and an alternative term, 'constructionism'. I recognise that these concepts are closely related although for the purpose of clarity it is appropriate to offer my own interpretation. For me, their proximity of meaning recognises that both terms imply a sense of co-operation between people when working together in knowledge creation. Nevertheless, their difference is that in social constructionism, the focus is upon the product created as a result of that social interaction, whereas social constructivism emphasises the development, learning, understanding, knowledge and growth which results from these interactions (Schmidt, 2007).

Social constructivism represented my attempt, as an interpretive researcher, to understand the nature of homework realities at this school. Social constructivism had its origins in sociology and it became strongly associated with qualitative research methods

(Andrews, 2012). Social constructivists are interested in the processes by which meaning is created, negotiated, sustained and modified (Schwandt, 2003) and exponents aspire to understand the world of lived experience from the viewpoint of those who are actually experiencing it (Andrews, 2012).

Consequently, within our school as within any society, reality is a subjective concept achieved through socialisation. Each member of our school's community experiences his or her own unique sense of identity and that identity originates from the social context in which that person lives, works, moves, communicates and thinks (Burr, 2003). Principally it is through language that this process of socialisation occurs, and ideas, notions and concepts are developed and rendered meaningful (Berger and Luckmann, 1991).

Fundamental to social constructivist thinking is the concept that the case being studied is a dynamic one (Schmidt, 2007). In other words, as far as my research is concerned, members of our school community do not respond simplistically to external stimuli as behaviourist thinking might imply (Baum, 2005), rather they engage with ideas as they seek to understand and explain them. Pupils for example, do not simply digest and learn new information and teachers do not simply apply new strategies into their pedagogy. Instead, they initially form cautious interpretations of new concepts which are then tested and re-formed in the light of their experiences. By this process of thinking and talking, conceptual, emotional and intellectual structures are created and tested. Ultimately a suitable assemblage of thinking is created (Poerksen, 2004). Implicit in this cognitive process is the notion that no individual possesses an objective reality; reality for each one of us is a product of our own socially constructed thinking which we mould and develop according to our own construct of reality (Young and Collin, 2004). This is commensurate with the way in which notions of homework at this school have developed. Moreover, this is likely to be true for all schools because homework is a construct formed out of numerous cultural and sociological influences; essentially sociocultural theory describes a world in which conceptual development is associated with participation in culturally structured practices (Barab et al., 2007).

If homework has a strong constructivist character then the practices of teachers who set that homework and the role of parents who support it should be sympathetic to this construction. Homework strategies within a social constructivist perspective would be

likely to incorporate activities that are personally meaningful to the children who have to undertake them and this might include negotiated tasks, providing choice for pupils, discussions, collaborative work and ensuring that personalisation and valuing meaningful activity is recognised. I ensured that this central tenant of the socio-constructivist methodology was apparent in my own thinking as my research conversations were planned and undertaken and once again as my data were analysed. Hence, social constructivist thinking needed to be at the forefront throughout my research design.

This same constructivist approach has helped shape my research interest around issues of homework completion. I was keen, for example, to learn more about why children do not always do their homework and why parents are not always successful in ensuring that homework is handed in. In organising this aspect of my research design I was mindful of Kohn's (1996) persuasive position that student compliance with learning activities is most easily achieved through an engaging curriculum where interest in learning, collaborative working and enjoyment are evident. Subsequently, other social constructivist thinkers have also advocated such a model for the curriculum at large. This approach challenges teachers to locate their students as co-creators of their own learning activities and allows pupils to be actively involved in deriving meaning from their learning tasks (Wolfgang, 2001). I was keen to discover whether my participants thought that there was scope to apply this philosophy to homework and therefore I planned to include discussions about the roles which choice, learning preference and project work could play in our homework routines.

Given the prominence of situated cognition in social constructivism (Wilson and Myers, 2000) I also decided to explore participants' views about homework collaboration between children themselves and within families. I wanted to learn about parents' pupils' and teachers' views on homework clubs and children doing their homework together; situated cognition positions learning within social contexts rather than within the psyche of any one student working in isolation. Because learning is contextually embedded (Gauvain, 2001) homework which values discussion could prove effective. I wanted to find out whether participants saw homework as a tool capable of encouraging pupils to become better communicators and better problem-solvers at our school. Research evidence does suggest that debate and conversation can deepen learning

(Reznitskaya et al., 2007; Weber et al., 2008), increase motivation and help children to solve problems (Matsumara et al., 2008) and proffer their own opinions courteously (Reznitskaya, et al., 2007).

In designing this study, I was aware that social constructivism as a theoretical research framework does have certain inherent limitations. Constructivist approaches may be focused towards action and as such are well suited to practitioner research requirements. Nevertheless, they also tend to arrive at action by means of a circuitous route; constructivist researchers usually ask their participants to describe rather than explain their feelings (Valach and Young, 2002). Necessarily, the researcher must be capable of conceptualising both their own and their participants' context or reference points, and they must appreciate that meaning may alter according to location, culture and context (Reid, 2006). Because I already knew the school's context well, I did not envisage that this would be problematic in my study.

Constructivism also sees the development of new understanding as critical but this often remains a prologue to more meaningful, practical accomplishments which may only be achieved at a later date. Not only did I need to be aware of this myself, but I also needed to ensure that my participants understood that this study was capable of generating new understandings and paving the way for new homework applications but it would not be a panacea for everyone's immediate practical difficulties with homework.

For usefulness to be assessed by practitioners, the ideas need to be unpacked and introduced via initial and on-going training opportunities. (Reid, 2006; 8)

Acknowledging that new information and new understanding in the constructivist world is experientially relative and emerges from practice (Cromby and Nightingale, 1999) certainly helped give shape to my research methods. This in turn encouraged me to delve deeply into the pedagogy of my teacher participants and into the notions held within families and to value all contributions. Similarly, Hacking (1999) argued that social constructivist methodologies liberate researchers because of the possibilities offered for engineering change through re-framing social conventions. This also suited my purpose as I later proceeded to design a framework for homework at this school based upon the range of opinions I had gathered. However, I received a caution about applying these methods exclusively which I was also determined to heed.

If we were to encounter an actual, coherent, fundamental, genuine alternative to our epistemic system, C2, whose track record was impressive enough to make us doubt the correctness of our own system, C1, we would not be able to justify C1 over C2 even by our own lights. (Boghossian, 2001; 57)

So, I appreciate that social constructivist methodologies imply an intention to avoid making absolute judgements about truth in favour of an acceptance that something is believed only in the light of practice, culture, history or experience. Nevertheless, my role had to be to mould the views I gathered into a framework that would suit the needs of the whole school and enhance learning. Ultimately, I would be required to constrain one notion of culturally situated social constructivism because on practical grounds at least, I would have to question the notion that all world views have equal merit. Clearly it would have been impossible for me to produce a coherent framework for homework whilst including all the diverse and sometimes conflicting views of my participants. I decided to value all views on equal terms and those which did not feature in my framework would not be treated as unworthy or untrue but I may have to regard them as impractical within a policy perspective at this particular moment.

3.9 An Emic Perspective

The terms emic and etic refer to two distinct methods of conducting research involving human participants. Tracing their origins back to work in linguistics and anthropology in the middle decades of the twentieth century, Headland (1990) explained that the terms have become more widely employed by researchers across different academic disciplines, including in education.

My research is situated within a broadly emic tradition. This approach employs an inductive methodology and emphasises the value of participants' views, words and perspectives. According to Lett (1990), emic constructs can be understood as a series of conceptual, categorised descriptions and accounts

regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviours are being studied. (Lett, 1990; 130)

In selecting this approach, I was keen to allow my participants' voices to resonate. This enabled themes, patterns, and concepts, all hitherto unexplored at this school, to emerge. This approach is extremely useful when exploring ideas where existing theoretical models are weak and this certainly applies to homework in primary schools. One of its

particular strengths lies in its potential for the researcher to appreciate the uniqueness of the views being expressed (Morris et al., 1999).

Nevertheless, my desire was to be realistic in all aspects of my research design and I was aware that it would have been impossible to divorce myself from the pre-existing thoughts, ideas and notions I already held about homework. It was one thing to remain open-minded and to place significant value on the views expressed by participants but it would not have been possible to be purely emic. Thus, whilst locating my study largely within the emic perspective, I was not untypical of the vast majority of qualitative researchers in acknowledging some tension between emic and etic extremes (Friedman and Schustack, 2012).

3.10 Ethical awareness

Ethical awareness should be built into educational research at the design stage. I had obligations and responsibilities to all my research participants but more than this

values must underpin the research enterprise itself, and also the selection of particular issues for investigation. (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012; 5)

A particular feature of my research is that it involved primary age children as participants. Consequently I needed to be aware of all the typical aspects of ethical practice such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity; advice on all these themes is ubiquitous in research literature (Cocks, 2006; Dockett and Perry, 2007; Heath et al., 2007). However, there were some even more intricate issues to consider when planning work with primary age children.

Research with young children requires practitioners to adopt an ethic of care (Shaw et al., 2011). For me, this did not imply over protectiveness but rather the need to establish a research culture of concern and mindfulness in which I remained vigilant and sensitive to the needs and moods of these participants (Nutbrown, 2011).

Flewitt's (2005) paper was of great benefit to me as I reflected on these issues. She problematises ideas around the negotiation of not only initial but ongoing consent when conducting exploratory research with young children. Ultimately she proposes that

by adopting a flexible, reflective stance, early years researchers can learn much from children. (Flewitt, 2005; 554)

In exploratory research the idea of 'informed' consent can often prove challenging because the particular direction which the research will take is uncertain (Flewitt, 2005). Explaining to young children the characteristics of the research can lead to further complications and make the use of the phrase 'informed' appear particularly inapt. Flewitt (2005) prefers to use the phrase 'provisional consent' which she explains in terms of the ongoing assent of the children to continue taking part. She writes that the children's

agreement was understood to be provisional upon the research being conducted within a negotiated, broadly outlined framework and continuing to develop within the participants' expectations. (Flewitt, 2005; 557)

Provisional consent within my research design needed to be conceptualised as a work in progress, negotiated, never assumed, ongoing (Simons and Usher, 2000) and wholly dependent on my ability to create and maintain a relationship of collaboration and trust with the young participants. My aim was to remember that as members of the research community our prime obligation must always be to the people we are studying.

The lives and stories that we hear and study are given to us under a promise, that promise being that we protect those who have shared them with us. (Denzin, 1989; 83)

Thinking more broadly about my study, ethical considerations were viewed on both an empirical and a theoretical level and I was keen for these concerns to infuse the complete research process. The complexities of researching aspects of participants' lives, their homework routines, family practices and beliefs and publishing these accounts raised multiple ethical issues which could not be resolved simply by the application of ethical guidelines.

Certainly I recognised the existence of intrinsic tensions in my research because it was designed to be interpretive and fluid with uncertain outcomes. Ethical guidelines, helpful though they were to me, are nonetheless static and largely formalised (Wiles et al., 2012).

I was aware of five commonly recognised principles for ethical, qualitative research (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Accordingly my first consideration was to ensure that no harm could befall my participants as a consequence of my research activities. The greatest risk of harm, I concluded, was psychological or reputational harm which

my participants might have experienced if my conversations with them exposed their controversial or contentious personal or professional views to others. Complete anonymity and confidentiality were promised and individual as well as group discussions were made available so that views could be expressed discretely if desired.

Respecting the autonomy of my participants (Lomas Scott and Fonseca, 2010) was the second significant consideration in my planning. Specifically I wanted to encourage participation in decisions about timings and locations for research conversations but mainly about whether or not individuals actually wished to participate at all. This was a key factor in my research with colleagues because I did not want any teachers to feel compelled to take part due to feeling pressure from me as their headteacher or from any of their peers who had chosen to participate. I made it clear both orally and in the written information I provided, that participation was entirely voluntary. This participation was based upon the notion of informed consent (List, 2008) which was achieved through the participant information documents I had provided and with reassurances that they could withdraw freely from the process at any time before findings had been analysed. Once this next step had been undertaken, I explained, removal of their data would be impossible for practical reasons.

My third major consideration was to ensure that I protected the privacy of my participants (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). Eventually my research findings were to be disseminated; they would be circulated within our school and made available for publication. I undertook, however, not to make public any individually attributable views and to keep all my participants' personal data secure, confidential and anonymised. Furthermore, my readership would only be able to distinguish between the views of different participant groups and would not be able to identify any individuals within those groups.

My fourth concern was around offering reciprocity to my participants (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). I was aware that many individuals would be agreeing to cooperate with my research in various ways. In particular this would involve devoting some time to converse with me or to undertake some reflective writing or complete a questionnaire. The very nature of the research process can be disruptive to participants' personal or professional lives. In return for their involvement, I was offering

participants the opportunity to share their views with me and to have a role in shaping future homework practices at this school. In the event, this proved to be an appealing proposition for many parent participants who were keen to let me know their views. Teachers told me this was a subject they were interested in too and the pupils themselves were enthusiastic about being given the chance to tell me about a subject which affected both their home life and their education.

My fifth consideration was to ensure that I treated all my participants equitably (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). I resolved that my individual participants and my participant groups would be treated equally in the sense that no single interest, opinion or viewpoint would be unjustly favoured or discriminated against. I determined that I would give all groups a fair hearing, value all opinions and attempt to produce a completed narrative which recognised and celebrated the different, perhaps divergent perspectives I was likely to encounter.

Additionally, I was mindful that ethical awareness is a complex issue (Stark, 2012) which should be about more than just the researcher's interactions with his or her participants (Morrow, 2009; Stark, 2012). Research activity can impact upon society more generally (Hammersley and Traianou, 2012). In my circumstance I was aware of the need to ensure that the reputation of our school and the community it serves was not harmed by my research activity or by the publication of my findings. More broadly I also had a responsibility to the teaching profession as an entity, and thereby the interests of teachers holistically, not to damage our professional reputation. This would be achieved by giving careful consideration to the tone as well as the detail of the work I submitted. I was not expecting my findings to be hugely controversial, however as public servants, teachers are subject to professional scrutiny and it was important for me to be aware of this and not to undermine their integrity.

3.11 A case study approach

This research has been designed as a single case study. I wanted to find out as much as possible about homework in this primary school. Based upon these collected data and consequently upon my new, detailed understanding of stakeholders' views, I constructed a framework for homework at this school. It lies beyond the scope of this present study to evaluate the effectiveness of this framework but this will be undertaken

at a later date, once it has been operating for a period of time. Essentially, this study has been about exploring the case and making recommendations for improvements to policy and practice based upon my exploration.

The defining feature of many case studies is their holistic approach (Stake, 1995; 2006). Stake (2006) however, also offers a different form of case study which is frequently used by educational researchers. This is called an ‘instrumental’ or a ‘delimited’ case study (Stake, 2006; 73) and here the concentration is often upon a single issue or a problem which has been identified within the case itself. This matched my requirements exactly because my research was not designed around our school as a whole, rather it was located around one specific area of its practice. My research does not attempt to offer a comprehensive, all-inclusive portrayal of this school. Rather, my

research processes are shaped by the particular aspect of the case which is of interest. (Hamilton, 2011; 2)

The use of multiple perspectives and different kinds of data collection is characteristic of high quality case study and this lends weight to the validity of the findings (Thomas, 2011). Indeed, case studies generally rely on multiple sources of data (Yin, 2005) and in fact gathering multiple perspectives by using different data collection tools is a distinguishing feature of any high quality case study (Hamilton, 2011). In my research this has included a mixture of conversational interviews, focus groups and pupils’ reflective writing. This builds on findings from my literature review which demonstrated that there has been little work of this nature undertaken about homework in the primary school. I have aimed to produce an end product in the form of a narrative report characterized by thick, rich, vivid descriptions capable of showcasing the uniqueness and complexities of this specific school context. I have also devised a conceptual model for the delivery of homework in this school.

From this point of view, the proximity to reality, which the case study entails, and the learning process that it generates for the researcher will often constitute a prerequisite for advanced understanding. (Flyvbjerg, 2011; 311)

This appeared to make the case study the ideal approach for my research which involved my attempt to advance my own understanding about the complex social reality in which parental views on homework were situated.

Nevertheless, before making a final decision I found it useful to reflect upon one influential theorist's view of an inherent strength of case study research to find out whether this really suited my particular research purposes and my research questions.

...the case study produces the type of concrete, context-dependent knowledge that research on learning shows to be necessary to allow people to develop from rule-based beginners to virtuoso experts. (Flyvbjerg, 2011; 302)

This described existing homework procedures at our school perfectly. Teachers followed a set of pre-suppositions, historic practices and professional expectations, in other words their perceptions of the rules for setting homework and parents might attempt to comply. When it came to understanding homework we were all beginners and we did not understand the rules.

In settling upon a case study approach, I was aware that the method has sometimes been criticised for its potential to maintain

a bias toward verification, understood as a tendency to confirm the researcher's preconceived notions, so that the study therefore becomes of doubtful scientific value. (Flyvbjerg, 2011; 309)

This required me to ensure that my research design contained sufficient methodological rigour to overcome this critique. Additionally, I was reassured that a particular strength of a well-structured case study is that

it can "close in" on real-life situations and test views directly in relation to phenomena as they unfold in practice. (Flyvbjerg, 2011; 309)

Indeed many researchers who have conducted in-depth case studies have found it necessary to acknowledge that prior assumptions were misplaced as their findings challenged them to revise many of their original their hypotheses (Flyvbjerg, 2011). Consequently I resolved to remain open-minded, reflective and unprejudiced throughout my enquiry and to treat with equal merit all the opinions and ideas generously shared with me by participants.

However, I was also aware of another recurrent theme in critiques of case study methodologies where specific, often independent and autonomous institutions are the object of enquiry. That is

The familiar criticism facing case study researchers is ‘How can you generalise when $n=1$?’ (Bassey, 1998; 2)

Bassey (1999) has considered the challenge of making generalisations based upon the study of a socially-situated single or multiple cases. Whilst rejecting notions of positivist, scientific generalisation (Popper, 1963) which are clearly not meant for the naturalistic setting of the educational world, Bassey (1999) does however, propose the concept of the ‘fuzzy’ generalisation. Here, it is suggested that whilst y leading to z is not *bound* to occur in phenomenological enquiry, it could certainly be argued that y *could* lead to z in two unique environments where cases are sufficiently similar.

Consequently, whilst my findings are not typically generalizable to other primary schools, I nevertheless anticipate that other schools, perhaps applying the concept of the fuzzy generalisation, should be able to recognize aspects of their own communities in my findings and may even choose to apply aspects of my conceptual model within their own schools.

Case studies can be used for descriptive, explanatory, or exploratory purposes (Yin, 1993) and I have designed an exploratory case study. As little in-depth qualitative research has been undertaken in this area, an exploratory case study in which I investigated stakeholders’ views and developed a model for homework in this school appeared to be the most useful approach. My purpose was to gain familiarity with the phenomenon of homework in this school and to acquire new insights into stakeholders’ views. Social exploratory research

seeks to find out how people get along in the setting under question, what meanings they give to their actions, and what issues concern them. (Schutt, 2005; 12)

Consequently, my prime motivation was to discover more about the social phenomena which is homework in this school without anticipating any particular outcome.

Equally, in discounting the use of a wholly descriptive or explanatory case study I recognized the lack of any reliable, tried and tested homework models against which to compare my findings. The goal of explanatory research is to go above and beyond what exploratory and descriptive research can tell us and to identify the actual reasons a phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2005). There has been insufficient ground work in this area or

at this school to make this a realistic approach. Nevertheless, I recognized the interconnectedness of all three potential case study designs and I fully expected to see some overlap between these as my research progressed.

3.12 Acknowledging the contribution of action research models.

In the early stages of my thinking, I did consider defining this as an orthodox action research project but then, upon reflection, I decided against this. I acknowledged that my study was indeed research which I had initiated in order to solve a problem (Atkins and Wallace, 2012), in this case to clarify my understanding of homework and hence to improve homework practice. Action research certainly implies dynamic participation by the researcher in the change process. Nevertheless this change, in action research models, happens contemporaneously as the research is actually taking place (Burns, 2007) and it becomes fundamental to the research design; that was not what I had planned. My research was based around an exploration of views leading to my creation of a framework for homework. Improvements to homework practice in the school would only follow after this research was completed. Whilst I did not rule out gradual growth within the framework itself, this again would happen over time in the years following the study. This evolutionary process would be steady and gradual as the teacher and parent demographics shifted with the passage of time. The pressing issue, and a major rationale for my current research, was for me to develop new understanding; future policies and practices could then be constructed on this secure foundation. By contrast, action research would have suggested to me a more immediate link to the introduction of change in practice (Coghlan and Brannick, 2000) within the research timetable itself, together with on-going, research-led refinements to that change.

I do acknowledge that definitions of action research are generally concerned with notions of practitioner-led, sometimes participatory enquiry in order to improve working practices or gain new understanding. This influential, early text formed the basis for many more recent, similar sentiments.

Action research is simply a form of self-reflective enquiry undertaken by participants in social situations in order to improve the rationality and justice of their own practices, their understanding of these practices, and the situations in which the practices are carried out. (Carr and Kemmis 1986; 162)

Within such a definition, my study would not have appeared out of place. For me, it is the process by which action research is generally undertaken which differs from my research design. In addition to the creation of new knowledge, a common feature of action research studies reveals their role in directly implementing change (Fullan, 2000; Macintyre, 2002), reflecting upon that change, documenting the effects and then refining and implementing further improvements (Mills, 2003; Stringer, 2007). Within a whole school homework culture, this was simply too ambitious an approach for me and unrealistic too especially where colleagues and families would, I reasoned, need time to absorb and reflect upon some fundamentally new outlooks.

In summary, whilst designing my study I was pleased to acknowledge a number of similarities with action research approaches. This enquiry was undertaken in order to improve my understanding about homework and to help me develop a more informed rationale for future practice. It did not, however, involve the usual research spiral of different steps linking planning to actions and reflections in the way common to recognised, bone fide action research work from Lewin (1948) onwards

each of which is composed of a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of the action. (Lewin, 1948; 206)

Lewin (ibid), generally credited as the originator of the term action research (Smith, 2001), has clearly had an influence on studies such as mine, notwithstanding the passage of almost seventy years. Although my study might be more representative of contemporary re-workings of his ideas, his desire to use practitioner-led enquiry to achieve social democracy and to improve educational practice certainly influenced my own research ideas. A recurring theme in his work was his desire for better integration of theory and practice (Kolb, 1985) and I would be pleased if that particular aspect of action research were identified within this homework study.

3.13 Participatory approaches

Discussions about action research led inevitably to considering participatory issues because a characteristic of action research is its participatory design (Stringer, 2007) Indeed, according to those who have written extensively on this approach, research can

only [be called] action research when it is collaborative, though it is important to realise that action research of the group is achieved through the critically

examined action of individual group members. (Kemmis and McTaggart, 1988; 5)

Just why it must be participatory has been subject to some debate (Webb 1996) but as far as my research is concerned, I have already shown that it has links to action research without being properly characterised as such. Likewise, I have identified a number of features associated with participatory approaches but I have not claimed it as fundamentally participatory.

In participatory studies the process by which the research is carried out is just as important as the research outcomes themselves (Krishnaswamy, 2004). This process is intended to build research capacity and improve the enquiry skills of the research participants. Typically, this capacity building takes place when community members start to develop their own research skills, perhaps by identifying their own research questions and learning how to investigate them.

Community members learn to analyze information they have collected and decide how to use this information. (Krishnaswamy, 2004; 17)

In my study I have included the views of a range of stakeholders and to that extent an element of participation has been achieved. However, unlike genuine participatory research it is me alone who has collected the data and used these to construct the framework for homework. There was an element of co-construction in the development of this framework but only because I presented my draft model back to my participants for feedback and then made some minor adaptations accordingly. This process allowed me to ensure that the end result was mutually satisfying. Hence, my framework takes into account the views, opinions and suggestions of stakeholders and to that extent it is a representation of their meaning and understanding. It would have been inappropriate for me to claim that significant co-construction took place. Essentially, I designed my research to include stakeholder views, and gained participation from stakeholders in exploring the issues of the ‘case’, without doing a truly participative piece of research.

My rejection of a wholly participatory research design stemmed from well documented challenges of the approach; the scale and scope of homework complexity leads to many divergent views. In these situations, participation runs the risk of stagnation (Chevalier and Buckles, 2013) and by relying too much upon local group dynamics and vested interests, participatory activity can also struggle to develop genuine strategies for social

transformation (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). I was also aware that this study was not simply about solving an identified problem (Burns, 2007) but more about exploration and discovery. I concluded that, as headteacher, my role was to lead this research, to organise and manage the involvement of participants and to view my findings as having potential for greater participation in the future.

In deciding against a fully participatory approach, I was nevertheless aware that such approaches have developed in response to elitist research techniques. Consequently I was mindful of the need to lead my research democratically and sensitively.

Do not monopolise your knowledge nor impose arrogantly your techniques, but respect and combine your skills with the knowledge of the researched or grassroots communities. (Fals Borda, 1995; 4)

I have no fixed allegiance to any specific interest group within the school but instead I was determined to be receptive to all narratives and counter-narratives and try to recapture these within my own reported findings. I shared what I learned with all stakeholders in a format which everyone could comprehend because these

should not be necessarily a mystery nor [accessible only to] a monopoly of experts and intellectuals. (Fals Borda, 1995; 4)

3.14 Issues of trustworthiness, reliability and validity

The concept of objectivity, a functional prerequisite in postpositivist research design is superseded by the notion of confirmability in the social constructivist paradigm (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). The conjecture is formed that data, findings, interpretations, and outcomes are all rooted in the context of the case under investigation.

In terms of truthfulness and usefulness, constructivist approaches seem like the way forward for a more holistic, ethically motivated and politically aware form of practice (Reid, 2006; 8)

If my research is to prove reliable then an assessment of its trustworthiness is crucial. Seale (1999) helps the qualitative researcher redefine notions originally developed for positivist studies by suggesting that the

trustworthiness of a research report lies at the heart of issues conventionally discussed as validity and reliability. (Seale, 1999; 266).

Another notable commentator urges me to ignore the concept of reliability altogether, arguing that since reliability requires measurement, it can have no relevance in qualitative investigation. She goes so far as to say that if reliability is even considered as a requirement of research design then the

consequence is rather that the study is no good. (Stenbacka, 2001; 552)

Patton (2002) however, takes a different approach, advising that in anti-positivist projects reliability is derived purely as a consequence of the validity in the study. Indeed, notions of validity are illustrated by a wide range of terms in qualitative studies. Validity appears as no single, fixed or unanimously accepted concept, but

rather a contingent construct, inescapably grounded in the processes and intentions of particular research methodologies and projects. (Winter, 2000; 1)

Whilst it has been argued that validity is not necessarily applicable to qualitative research, many authors do seek out some form of control mechanism to reflect the integrity of their research. Creswell and Miller (2000) for example, suggest that validity is affected by the researcher's own personal perception of the validity within the study. We see numerous researchers developing their own notions of validity and producing what they feel are more appropriate terms such as 'rigour' and 'trustworthiness' (Davies and Dodd, 2002; Mishler, 2000; Stenbacka, 2001)

A key technique which I planned to use in order to maximise the trustworthiness of my research and specifically the credibility of my findings, will be triangulation. Traditional views of triangulation in qualitative research suggest that it

has risen as an important methodological issue in naturalistic and qualitative approaches to evaluation [in order to] control bias and establishing valid propositions. (Mathison, 1988; 13)

Here we recognise that traditional quantitative, mathematical and scientific approaches are fundamentally incompatible with this interpretive epistemology. Likewise, Healy and Perry (2000) discuss naturalistic research settings where data are collected from multiple perceptions within a single case and they advocate triangulation of several data sources in order to verify conclusions.

This concept is, however, being moderated and to some extent expanded upon by more contemporary approaches. One key debate is centred upon the uncertainty surrounding

the role of triangulation in qualitative research, especially where its key mechanisms are insufficiently well defined.

It carries a systematic ambiguity when transferred to the domain of social research methods. (Erzberger and Kelle, 2003; 461)

Recent notions of triangulation often focus on three perceived weaknesses of earlier models (Hammersley, 2008). These earlier models suggest that a key role of triangulation is to validate the researcher's interpretations whereas more recent thinking suggests that it is in fact the development of these ideas rather than their actual confirmation where triangulation can prove useful. Also, there has previously been an assumption that triangulation could provide a near certainty of truthfulness and yet this notion is being eroded in favour of a more tentative view that it can merely suggest or imply that findings may be legitimate. Equally, triangulation appeared to treat some sources of data as more reliable or more trustworthy or simply of better quality than others, a view which a number of contemporary researchers are keen to question (Hammersley, 2008).

I have employed a number of different data collection methods including conversational interviews, focus groups, questionnaires and reflective writing activities and I also collected data from multiple groups of participants including parents, teachers and pupils. Consequently, I needed to consider carefully if and how I defined these as triangulation. I needed to explore to what extent these different methods would help me to develop and refine my conclusions and I was certain to avoid any excessive assumptions of certainty or assurance.

Thus it became apparent to me that in designing my piece of qualitative, case study research, I needed to bear in mind that conventional meanings of reliability and validity ought to be reconceptualised into newer, broader notions of trustworthiness, rigor and quality

in order to reflect the multiple ways of establishing truth. (Golafshani, 2003; 8)

3.15 Data collection methods

The constructivist researcher often chooses to employ a set of personal, interactive approaches to data collection. These methods match the underlying assumptions about the social construction of reality where exploration of participants' views is best

achieved through personal interaction between researcher and respondents (Lincoln and Guba, 2000). This dialectical approach (Adler, 2000) empowers the researcher to gain multiple perspectives on an issue. This in turn delivers a more detailed interpretation of meaning because it allows ideas to be compared and contrasted through dialogue. When an idea is juxtaposed with another contradictory, opposing or conflicting notion, both parties are forced to re-evaluate their earlier positions (Cupchik, 2001) and deeper, richer, more meaningful findings emerge.

From historic conversations with parents at this school I was aware that many had previously told me that they can lack confidence in expressing their views, especially in pressurised situations or when talking to teachers. This suggested to me that some group discussions, where they could share their ideas with other parents and support each other in a relaxed atmosphere, would be one appropriate method for collecting some of my data. Where group discussions were not possible, perhaps due to parents' not being able to meet at a mutually convenient time, a relaxed, informal, individual conversation might also help them to feel at ease.

3.15 (i) Conversations with parents

(See appendix 6 for a checklist of conversational topics). Hence, I considered that my use of unstructured, conversational-style interviews could add a spontaneous dimension to this process and also allow my perhaps slightly nervous parent participants to help set the pace, direction and flow of our discussions (Lodico et al., 2010).

In emphasizing features of mundane conversation, conversational interviewers strive to facilitate a research environment in which participants feel free to participate in extended discussions of research topics in a less hierarchical environment than that convened in structured interview settings. (Roulston, 2008; 1)

This statement captures perfectly what my intentions were. Moreover, I was also aware that informal, conversational interviews can prove beneficial in exploratory studies and that they often typify on-going, participant enquiry fieldwork (Berry, 1999).

Within this conversational model, I found it useful to employ aspects of the guided interview approach (Berry, 1999) with my parent participants and hence I prepared in advance a simple checklist of relevant topics whilst leaving myself sufficient freedom to

explore responses as I deemed necessary. Originally devised for a doctoral studies project over thirty years ago, this technique

allows for in-depth probing while permitting the interviewer to keep the interview within the parameters traced out by the aim of the study. (Wenden, 1982; 39)

I also noted Patton's (2002) advice and avoided asking several questions together. This was in order to reduce the need for parent participants to struggle with any unnecessary interpretation of complex questions.

However, uppermost in my mind was my determination to ask as many genuinely open-ended questions as possible. This would reduce significantly any tendency for me to pre-determine responses and thus enable participants to respond in their own terms (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011).

In conducting these conversational interviews, I also found it useful to talk about parent participants' direct, concrete experiences of homework first before following these up by discussing suggestions, feelings and views in more detail (Seidman, 1998). Then, having already established a context for debate, I would be better positioned to enable more lucid expressions of opinion. Similarly, some funnelling of the questions (Cohen et al., 2011) had also been planned in advance as I thought it would be beneficial to move from broad, open ended questions in the early stages of conversations towards more specific topics as the conversation developed and participants' confidence rose.

As I conducted these discussions with parents, I also strove to clarify and extend the meanings of my participants' responses (Kvale, 1996). This helped to ensure that I was accurately interpreting their views and avoiding any misunderstandings either on my behalf or on theirs. My use of supplementary questions such as 'are you saying that...?' or 'does this mean that...?' or 'can you tell me a little more about what you mean by that...?' allowed participants to confirm or deny, elucidate or develop their own statements and most importantly my interpretation of those expressions.

There was a fine line to tread between probing for information whilst couching my questions in a tone and manner which would give no unnecessary cause for concern. I was aware that in the eyes of parent participants I had a dual role as both researcher and

headteacher and I did not want to cause parent participants to think that I was taking a critical view of their parenting skills because of the questions I asked or the manner in which I asked them. This reinforced my choice of an informal, conversational style for our discussions which I hoped would allow views to be exchanged without the need for direct, intrusive questioning.

Perhaps the most important aspect of the process was to ensure that a rapport was established from the very beginning of each interview (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). I was keen to be clear about the nature and the purpose of our meeting from the outset, ensuring that the term 'conversation' was used in preference to the term 'interview' which I planned to avoid throughout. This was to help put parent participants at their ease. I planned to explain my desire to record our discussions and I decided to show participants my data recorder, explain briefly how it worked and confirm that they would be happy to consent to its use. I checked that these parents felt comfortable and happy before beginning our conversations.

I determined that during the discussions I would give verbal and non-verbal signals to show that I valued participants' opinions and feelings and appreciated their responses. Equally, I determined that I must demonstrate that I was listening actively to their views so that

a good contact is established by attentive listening, with the interviewer showing interest, understanding, and respect for what the subjects say. (Kvale, 1996;128)

Also, showing clear, respectful, social communication skills in

[a good interview] allows subjects to finish what they are saying, lets them proceed at their own rate of thinking and speaking. (Kvale, 1996; 148)

Whilst planning how to conduct our conversations, I recalled that my role was to collect data and not to let any of my own potential prejudices or biases affect this process of exploration and discovery. (Cohen et al., 2011)

I was aware that other parents might like to share their views with me but might not be able or willing to do so conversationally. Many of our parents go out to work, some working hours which are not conducive to day time conversations. For this reason, I

also designed a short questionnaire about homework to give everyone who wanted to, the chance to participate. (See appendix 6)

3.15 (ii) Parent questionnaires

It was my intention to design a short, qualitative style questionnaire to allow parents to reflect upon some of the main issues arising from my review of the homework literature. I did not want this to become an onerous or a daunting task for parents rather a chance to contribute with some reflections on a number of key themes around homework in general and their experiences of homework at this school. (See appendix 6 for examples of completed parent questionnaires.)

Because my research was all about exploration, I decided to use open-ended questions, allowing respondents to give their views in ways not pre-selected by me as the researcher. This approach allowed for

the possibility of discovering things that were unsuspected and enable[d] some respondents to challenge the sort of assumptions that may have been made. (Hannan, 2007; 2)

Whilst the supposed disadvantage of such open-ended questioning is that computation can prove challenging in the data analysis stages (Munn and Drever, 2004), this was not an issue for me. My entire methodology was based upon interpretive approaches and consequently analysis of all my collected data, as I will show later, followed a process of categorisation.

Noting Robson's (2002) advice, I was particularly keen to frame my questions in a manner that made them easy to understand and easy to answer. I also ensured that the questionnaire was sufficiently brief as to encourage as many responses as possible.

My desire to elicit a reasonable response rate was founded upon the need to ensure that responses were representative of the overall parent population across the school (Munn and Drever, 2004). I was well aware that my respondents were under no obligation to complete and return these questionnaires and I wanted to make it as easy as possible for them to give their views and then return them either directly to me, to the school office or via their child's class teacher. I also stressed that by completing a questionnaire, parents were ensuring that their voice was being heard and their homework views would

be read and duly considered and used to inform any new homework practices the school eventually introduced. This, I felt, was crucial in order to secure parental commitment and participation. I was also alert to the view that it is helpful to design ease of completion into the format, in order to make them as simple as possible to undertake.

You need to convince members of your target group that it is worth their while to complete and return your form - tell them how much it matters, how it will have real consequences, how they can find out the results. (Hannan, 2007; 2)

In designing the layout of the questionnaire, I opted to ask just five, broad questions, each designed to allow participants to answer in their own words and to offer an extended response each time. I employed a basic funnelling technique (BMRA, 2003) beginning with broad questions about homework and participants' views about its purposes and benefits before focusing in on parents' own roles and their likes and dislikes about homework.

Whilst I did not formally pilot the questionnaire within the parent population at this school, I did, however, consult with a small group of parents at another local school and sought their views about its design and accessibility. This small exercise helped me to check other people's ability to understand and complete the questions easily (Oppenheim, 2000). Two areas of potential confusion were highlighted as a result of this process and consequently I was able to amend these before distributing the finished questionnaire to the parents at our school.

Candidly, I do admit to having had a few concerns about employing questionnaires as a qualitative research tool. Whilst I did indeed find that they yielded some quick responses and whilst they were relatively easy for me to distribute across the entire parent population, they posed some obvious anxieties too. They left no room for further debate or discussion and did not allow me to explore in any further detail the responses given. All these issues could be addressed in my conversations, but the questionnaires themselves were finite and the responses they contained were fixed and static. Also, despite the open-ended question design, there was inevitably a degree of specificity to the questions which could not be dynamically reframed. Essentially, participants could only respond to what was being asked (Gillham, 2008). I also wondered whether the questionnaires might only appeal to parents with either extremely positive or extremely negative views about homework and whether, as a result, the data collected might be a

poor representation of parents' views more holistically. It is a familiar criticism of questionnaires that people with more archetypal, neutral or dispassionate views are typically less inclined to offer a response; often they may feel that is simply not worth doing (Mellenbergh, 2008).

On balance, I decided that, in order to reach a wider group of parent participants, the questionnaire was well worth distributing. I also reasoned that if extremes of view were stimulated then this would be no bad thing. I welcomed all responses and at this stage in my research I had insufficient information to be able to judge soundly which opinions would represent the extremes of view and where the mainstream vision was to be found. I wished to explore all opinions and I would only be in a position to construct a meaningful framework for homework once the fullest possible range of feelings had been considered.

3.15 (iii) Children's reflective writing

As I considered how to include children from our school in this research, I decided to begin by giving all our ten and eleven year old pupils the opportunity to reflect, in writing, upon some homework issues which were important to them. I designed a simple reflective writing task with five open-ended questions about homework, constructed to enable the children to give their own views in their own words (see appendix 6 for examples of this reflective writing). This would provide me with a broad spectrum of opinion which I could explore in more detail in focus group activities once I had established a number of themes emerging from their written thoughts.

I based this reflective writing enquiry around five distinctive, child-specific concepts identified from within the published literature. Specifically, these concepts were about the children's homework preferences, their thoughts about the value of homework, what they thought of homework as a tool for learning, whether they enjoyed their homework tasks and where and when they did their homework.

Encouraging these children (who have experienced homework at this school for anything up to seven years) to share with me their reflections was a crucial aspect of my research design. I wanted to secure their involvement in any future decision making resulting from this current research process and include their ideas as fully as possible. Researchers and practitioners who strive to include pupils' views

encourage children to take the initiative in pursuing their interests, engendering a sense of control over the environment and one's ability to transform it (Epstein, 2003; 36).

Naturally, I was aware that young children's memories and explanations can sometimes differ from one another and also from those of adults (Epstein, 2003). I did not intend that their reflections would necessarily lead to any notion of absolute truth about homework, even though it was the children themselves who actually undertook and experienced the homework activities. Rather, I wanted to enable the children to think hard about their homework and to tell me whether they thought it was valuable, helpful and meaningful or irrelevant, wasteful and extraneous. I wanted to hear their homework stories and to allow them the chance to explain their feelings about it. Furthermore, I intended that the children, as major contributors to the homework process, should be afforded every opportunity to be involved in the shaping of this school's framework for homework. Their reflections would shape our future planning.

Engaging children in planning and reflection makes them more than mere actors following prescribed roles. It turns them into artists and scientists who make things happen and create meaning for themselves and others. (Epstein, 2003; 36)

Schon's (1983) significant contribution to reflection as a research tool has since been adapted and extended in order to make it more widely applicable to a number of research designs. Numerous action research projects for example, cite an adjunct to traditional reflection-on-action models by applying a reflection-for-action approach (Thomson, 2012). This involves thinking more broadly about the implications of what may already have happened and using this knowledge to prepare for the future innovation.

Piantanida and Garman (1999) have undertaken some of this adaptive thinking and, working on Schon's (1983) original proposals, they have designed a particular version of reflective thinking which more fully meets the needs of interpretive research designs. Specifically, they advocate reflection about the meaning of concrete experiences and they align this with reflections on associated theory.

Cognisant of these approaches, I anticipated that through the children's writing, I should be able to connect their own direct, recollected experiences of homework with their own broader, conceptual reflections about homework as an entity. Hence, my decision to

intersperse questions based on their experiences such as ‘what is your favourite sort of homework and can you say why?’ with more intangible enquiries such as ‘do you think homework helps you to learn and why do you think so?’

Indeed, Piantanida and Garman (1999) proposed that using reflection by recollection enabled researchers to evoke specific events and create detailed recounts. Merging this tradition with conceptual reflection enabled these histories to be connected with broader theoretical concepts. Consequently, recollection and introspection blend into dialogue with literature, enabling relevance to be systematically drawn from experience.

What researchers bring to the inquiry is as important as what they discover as they live with the study (Piantanida and Garman, 1999; 144)

My ambition was therefore to begin with my own understanding of the homework literature, blend this with the children’s own, direct experiences of homework at this school and embrace their innate, distinctive, feelings about what homework could and should be for...their own, embryonic theoretical models. These nascent cognitive models which I wanted to discover from the children will have been derived from many sources, including their conversations with their parents, the feedback from their teachers and perhaps most persuasively of all from the actual undertaking of homework at this school over many years. The only participants in this research who have actually been charged with completing the homework tasks are the children themselves and I was determined that their voices should be heard.

However, this initial reflective inquiry would need to be extended into a conversational research approach if I was going to probe further into the thoughts and feelings which the children had shared with me through their writing.

3.15 (iv) Children’s focus groups

Focus groups are widely used in research across many different social clusters and also in cross-cultural and conceptual development research. One of the most common reasons for using focus groups is because of their collective, co-operative design (Barbour, 2007). For this reason, they are well suited to research with people who find it difficult to articulate their thoughts easily; they also provide collective influence to marginalised people (Liamputtong, 2010).

There are two distinct types of focus group. Highly structured focus group meetings are often employed in market research and product testing within commercial environments whilst more flexible, loosely constructed focus groups have emerged through the social sciences (Morgan, 2002).

Because my pupil participants were encouraged to talk amongst themselves instead of answering any questions which I directly posed, my own role was primarily to facilitate their discussions rather than to direct them (Krueger and Casey, 2009). This is a characteristic approach within focus group research because it enables the participants' own particular views to emerge largely undiluted by the researcher's idiosyncratic contributions.

The aim of focus groups in social science research is to understand the participants' meanings and interpretations. (Liamputtong, 2010; 3)

This was an important consideration for me because I was keen that my own position as the children's headteacher should not be seen as exerting any unintentional influence over the children's comments. I wished to avoid any tendency to suggest to the children that a particular view might constitute a preferred response.

Indeed, it was clear as I planned this work that a focus group was a particularly appropriate choice for any researcher seeking to reduce the power differential between himself and his participants. A focus group approach not only helps to reduce this imbalance in power relationships (Liamputtong, 2010) but it also removes the tendency for the researcher to hold the voice of authority and instead helps create meaningful findings from multiple voices (Madriz, 2003). Focus groups allow participants to take more control over the debate and allow the researcher to listen to indigenous voices.

The interaction between participants themselves substitutes for their exchange with the researcher, and this gives more prominence to the points of view of the respondents. (Liamputtong, 2010; 4)

This suited my purposes precisely. I was keen to give voice to the children, give them the opportunity to define what was interesting, significant and important about their experiences of homework and allow them the chance to develop and explore, in their own words, some of the topics which they themselves introduced through their earlier reflective writing activity.

This approach enabled the children to be more involved in this research project than either interviewing or reflective writing alone would have allowed. As a researcher, this afforded me an opportunity to appreciate the way the children experienced the reality of their own homework and hence it allowed me

to get closer to the data (Ivanoff and Hultberg, 2006; 126).

The discussions about homework which took place between the children themselves were intended to provide me with the chance to learn about issues which might not have emerged at all, had I conducted proceedings along the lines of a group interview. (See appendix 6 for a list of our focus group discussion topics).

As Gaiser (2008) explained, it is the very nature of the discussions between the participants themselves in a focus group that allows significant emphasis to be placed upon the ideas of the participants, rather than the perspectives of the researchers.

Focus group interviews allow group dynamics and help the researcher capture shared lived experiences, accessing elements that other methods may not be able to reach. (Liamputtong, 2010; 4)

This suggests that the focus group researcher should be well positioned to reveal features of understanding that might otherwise remain covert in traditional interviewing.

Nevertheless, I was also aware that criticism can surround focus group research, particularly where discussion topics or social situations might seem inappropriate or problematic. For example, Smithson (2008) warned that some research topics could be unsuitable for focus group discussions because they might be too sensitive or too personal. I was not concerned about homework as a discussion topic per se, although I was attentive to the fact that some children might hold strong or opposing opinions and I wondered whether this might lead to some internal squabbling within the group (Jowett and O'Toole, 2006). This, I felt, would depend partly upon the type of homework topics discussed but more significantly on the dynamics of the group of children as a whole. I remained confident that, knowing the children well, I should perhaps anticipate some unexpected and lively discussions but I felt it unlikely that this would lead to any serious problems emerging between the children as individuals. Again, I was mindful of the need to select these pupils carefully in advance. Research has shown that within any focus group, the attitudes and dispositions of a few

participants have the potential to unduly influence the discussions within the group as a whole (Willis et al., 2009). These might be participants who hold particularly strong views or who have dominant or forceful personalities. (Hopkins, 2007; Krueger and Casey, 2009). Equally, the collective dynamic of a focus group can influence the level of honesty, disclosure and conventionality of the ideas expressed by its members (Hopkins, 2007). In extreme circumstances, some participants might even feel too daunted or overwhelmed by other members to participate themselves. Equally concerning for me was the thought that some quieter pupil participants could simply choose to support the ideas put forward by more dominant members of the group (Stewart et al., 2007). If this happened, the integrity of the data produced could be severely compromised by the social construct of my group. Any significant reluctance amongst my pupils to participate actively in the discussions could lead to their conversations becoming stilted and as a consequence little in-depth understanding might be generated (Willis et al., 2009). I needed to ensure that the children were sufficiently confident and adequately motivated to want to play an active role in proceedings. This would require some form of selection criteria and this is discussed in more detail in the section on participant sampling later in this chapter.

Morgan (2002) advises that focus group researchers can derive confidence in their chosen approach or even decide to pursue alternative data collection methods, by asking themselves

how actively and easily the participants would discuss the topic of interest.
(Morgan, *ibid*; 17)

I imagined that the children would have plenty to say about homework and that there may well be differences of opinion within the group as a whole. I remained confident, however, that any disagreement would remain good natured and that the pupils would probably enjoy being able to debate the issues between themselves. I did not foresee any serious obstructions which would prevent their active participation or their friendly, discursive interactions.

3.15 (v) Group interviews with teachers

I chose semi-structured group interviews as the most appropriate tool to collect the views of my teacher participants (see appendix 6 for a summary of interview findings).

Once again, I wanted to place a high value on personal language as the type of data which was important to my social constructivist methodology (Newton, 2010). This face-to-face interviewing was selected because I wanted to gain an in-depth understanding of the teachers' experiences and views about homework. This research was primarily focused around my desire to gain new insights (Gillman 2000) and I wanted to encourage teacher collaboration in the research process. I was also aware that

being involved in research...is still a very long way from being accepted as a core element of teacher professionalism. (Swann et al, 2010; 567)

Indeed, most of the teachers at this school had never had any direct involvement with research activity and I was keen to ensure that their experiences were positive. Hence, I recognised the supportive, collegial nature of group discussions together with the collaborative qualities of research data which group interviews would encourage (Ritchie and Lewis, 2003). I also maintained a solid belief in the teachers' ability to reveal to me a better understanding of the social world and specifically the culture of the homework within this school. Semi-structured interviews and group interviews in particular are entirely consistent with both participatory and emancipatory approaches (Banfield, 2004). I hoped to use my new understandings to develop a framework for homework that would encompass teachers' ideals and, if possible, free colleagues from some of the shackles of existing homework practice which previous, anecdotal discussions and the homework literature had suggested that teachers experience.

Because I understood that

The success and validity of an interview rests on the extent to which the respondent's opinions are truly reflected; the interviewee's "voice", communicating their perspective (Newton, 2010; 4)

I knew that I needed to understand the teachers' own constructions of homework reality. I wanted to ask them questions which enabled them to inform me about homework in their own terms and in sufficient depth. Conversely, I was also aware that the validity of such interviews are called into question if leading questions are asked and if the researcher's own predetermined ideals influence the content of the responses or the topics being discussed (Gubrium and Holstein, 2009). Consequently, I based my questions on the themes which emerged from my review of the literature and these were further informed by the responses I received from pupils and parents. However, I

attempted to structure the questions in an open-ended fashion and I left plenty of scope to allow teachers to expand on their answers and develop their own thoughts as the interview progressed. It has also been argued that this same potential for susceptibility and complication within research interviews can also help to generate both richness and depth within the extracted data which makes the process worthy of the risk taking (Stacks and Salwen, 2010). It could also be reasoned that, in embracing such a participatory approach as a group interview where the findings or at least the transcribed conversations are co-created, the internal validity and the general trustworthiness of the research increases (Newton, 2010).

My biggest concern in preparing to interview the teaching staff was linked to Denscombe's (2007) research which explained how interview participants can respond very differently depending on their own personal perceptions of the researcher conducting the interview. This interviewer effect can incorporate many factors.

In particular, the sex, the age, and the ethnic origins of the interviewer have a bearing on the amount of information people are willing to divulge and their honesty about what they reveal. (Denscombe, 2007; 184)

To this list, I would add the fact that the interviewer is the school's headteacher and as a result any uncertainty around honest disclosure could be heightened if teachers perceive the need to tell me what they feel they ought to say rather than what they actually want to say.

These demand characteristics of research interviews (Gomm, 2004) explain how participants' statements can be influenced by perceptions of what the interviewer appears to require. For this reason, I needed to be entirely transparent about my motives for conducting the interviews and reassuring about my desire to hear what the teachers honestly believed. This, I hoped, would enable the teachers to feel secure in providing honest opinions, regardless of whether these might contradict current homework practices or professional standpoints.

Ultimately it would be my responsibility to extract meaning and interpretation from the interview data I gathered (Newton, 2010). I would seek to identify statements which I felt were convincing and reliable. I was prepared to discover tensions between participants' statements and my interpretations of those statements when I sought

respondent validation for my analysis (Bryman, 2004) and I was prepared in case any teacher participant asked me to withdraw their initial statements. In reality, this process of validation proved relatively simple as I was able to produce a succinct, written analysis of our discussions which teachers were able either to confirm or in one case to offer supplementary information. This in turn allowed me to clarify my own thinking about what I had been told and it added yet more depth to my understanding. This process, I believed, lent additional credibility to my overall research methodology.

3.16 Research population and sampling

Non-positivist research models seldom attempt to derive representative samples from their overall populations (Silverman, 2011). Instead, they attempt to include a range of participants from within the case being studied. My participants, all of whom were either pupils, parents or teachers at our school, would, I hoped, prove themselves to be the most abundant sources of information about homework at this school. Consequently, these participant groups were selected as a purposive sample (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011) for this exploratory inquiry.

Purposeful sampling means that the researcher is looking for participants who possess certain traits or qualities. In this sampling method, the researcher considers the aim of the research and selects samples accordingly. (Koerber and McMichael, 2008; 464)

Non-selected stakeholder sets at our school included support staff and governors. I took the view that, whilst these two groups were involved in a range of school activities, their associations with homework practices were very limited and therefore I decided not to include them within my nominated participant groups. This gave me additional time to focus my attention on those individuals who either set or completed the homework or who provided the environment for the homework to be undertaken. Through my decision to narrow the research architecture somewhat and focus my data collection activities on those groups directly associated with homework activities, I was aiming to implement Giacomini and Cook's (2000; 480) suggestion that the purpose of an effective qualitative study should be to offer a 'window-like' or a 'mirror-like' vision about the particular phenomenon being examined; overgeneralization due to a lack of care in defining the research population should be avoided (Koerber and McMichael, 2008).

My chosen approach was then to invite volunteers from within each selected population group (parents, pupils and teachers) to participate in my research. Essentially, I defined this as a form of convenience sampling, an approach also variously referred to as accidental sampling (Burnard, 2004) or opportunistic sampling (Barton, 2001). This convenience method has been described as incorporating

participants who are readily available and easy to contact. (Higginbottom, 2004; 15)

Whilst this definition emphasizes the availability of participants, I still found it necessary to work hard to recruit potential contributors, especially for my conversational interviews with parents. I was fortunate that some ‘snowballing’ (Higginbottom, 2004; 12) occurred whereby a number of parent participants discussed their conversational experiences with other parents who then also volunteered to participate. In some cases, I asked parents who were easy to contact to mention the research to their friends and in this way my sample was able to expand. In one or two cases I approached parents directly myself. These were parents I knew quite well and had enjoyed numerous conversations with them about many different matters at school in the past. They were parents whom I knew may have time available to talk to me. On the whole, however, volunteers who responded to my letters home constituted the major section of my particular convenience sample. Some returned my reply slips, some telephoned me to give assent and others sought me out in person.

A convenience sample is a matter of taking what you can get. It is an accidental sample. Although selection may be unguided, it probably is not random, using the correct definition of everyone in the population having an equal chance of being selected. (Koerber and McMichael, 2008; 464)

Convenience sampling is certainly not a panacea for every qualitative sampling dilemma and much depends on the research question and the overall research design. Nevertheless, it can provide a useful exemplar for many projects (Koerber and McMichael, 2008). I did, however, remain aware that one significant challenge when using convenience sampling is the temptation to generalize beyond this narrow, expedient sample (Stebbins, 2001). I acknowledged the potential limitation of confining my research conversations to those parents, pupils and teachers who wanted to engage in the debate. There could be other individuals from within these stakeholder groups whose views were not represented but which could form a distinctive set of perceptions.

This, I concluded, was certainly a possibility, although by making many entreaties to participate I felt that I had done everything possible to provide opportunities for engagement.

Conversely, and entirely pertinent to my study, whilst convenience sampling could be regarded as a study limitation, it was also capable of generating vivid highly meaningful data. This was because

Paradoxically, the same close relationship between researcher and research site that makes a sample convenient often grants the researcher a level of access to and familiarity with the sample that guarantees a richness of data that could not be attained if the sample were less familiar, and therefore less convenient, to the researcher. (Koerber and McMichael, 2008; 463)

As I planned my sampling strategy, I was heartened to consider that at our school I knew all the teaching staff well. I knew most of the children quite well and I knew a reasonable number of parents fairly well too. If successful convenience sampling is linked to familiarity with the participants then my choice of this approach should prove to be a sensible decision.

I faced a rather different dilemma in selecting pupils to participate in my focus group discussions. Understanding that focus groups require active, discursive participation (Greenbaum, 2000), I was keen to recruit pupils capable of holding such a discussion. I needed children who had something to say and equally importantly I needed them to possess sufficient communicative confidence to be able to debate and discuss the issues with their peers. Usefully, this included the overwhelming majority of pupils and I decided to recruit them from year groups five and six, the oldest pupils at our school. These pupils had already undertaken up to seven years of homework at this school so they would have plenty of experiences upon which to draw. Rather than select the children myself and risk unconsciously skewing the sample somehow, I asked their teachers to nominate children whom they considered suitable by virtue of their personalities, communication abilities and social skills. In the event, this sample included children with a broad range of abilities, interests and backgrounds and an equal selection of boys and girls. Some were very able pupils, some had some special educational needs and some had disabilities.

This was essentially purposeful sampling because the children all possessed the types of character or personality trait which would help them to engage with the focus group approach. It would, in my view, have been unethical to put children into these groups if their personal, social or emotional development had been insufficiently mature to allow them to enjoy the experience. All the children chosen by their teachers had also volunteered to participate and as such, the selection process also included an element of convenience.

In considering these issues of sampling and population, I found it useful to remind myself that in practice, qualitative research methods generally require some degree of flexible, pragmatic implementation. There is some overlap between different sampling methods and the balancing of these techniques is dependent upon the research question, the data collection methods and the overall aims of the study being undertaken. I found it useful to take account not only of the domestic, social and developmental characteristics of my different participant groups and the individuals within these groups

but also [of the] temporal, spatial and situational influences, that is, the context of the study. (Marshall, 1996; 524)

3.17 Feasibility study

As a precursor to my research, I took the opportunity to undertake a brief pilot activity in which I circulated a questionnaire to all the parents at this school, seeking their views about the benefits and drawbacks of homework from their own particular perspective. The questions were deliberately broad as I hoped to elicit a general picture of parental views which I could later follow up in depth. I also wanted to check whether there was enough interest or indeed scope to carry out this project at this school.

The term ‘pilot study’ is used for two main purposes in educational research. It can often refer to feasibility studies, described as

small scale version[s], or trial run[s], done in preparation for the major study. (Polit et al., 2001; 467)

It can also be the trialling of a particular research instrument (Baker, 1994). Crucially in my context, I was not so much concerned with trialling the research instrument because in my large scale research I planned to make use of conversations, interviews

and discussions instead of a questionnaire. However, I was also aware that one advantage of conducting a pilot study was its ability to signal where failure might occur. Specifically,

where research protocols may not be followed, or whether proposed methods or instruments are inappropriate or too complicated. (Van Teijlingen and Hundley, 2001; 1)

Consequently, whilst the polarised and often contradictory opinions which my findings uncovered illustrated the breadth of the task that lay ahead of me, I was nevertheless encouraged to learn that there would be no shortage of areas within the homework debate for me to explore. Furthermore, there would be no lack of parent participants eager to share their ideas with me. For me, there was one additional reason for my pilot study and that was to demonstrate to my school's governing body that their funding support for this thesis (governors authorise my course fees) will be of benefit to our school. Having shared the raw data I collected with governors, they were now more convinced than ever that this was a project well worth pursuing. Typical responses from parents included a range of unenthusiastic comments such as 'homework is a burden and it takes away family life' or 'it's another chore to fit in' to more positive affirmations including 'it allows us to be involved with our child's progress' and 'it's a special time to share with my child'.

This pilot study had shown me that there was an undoubted need for the formulation of a consistent model for homework at this school and that parents must be closely concerned with its creation. Amongst our parents, I would need to build a sense of psychological ownership (Pierce et al., 2001) engagement and involvement with this model if parents were going to feel able to support it.

3.18 Data analysis approaches

Attempting to analyse the lengthy, unreduced, raw text extracted from my interviews, focus groups, qualitative questionnaires and reflective writing tasks appeared at first to be a daunting and cumbersome task. One of the most significant challenges facing qualitative researchers in the data analysis process is that their collected data

is sequential rather than simultaneous, making it difficult to look at two or three [concepts] at once. (Miles et al., 2014; 108)

Analysing numerous lengthy texts carefully is challenging. Qualitative narrative can be difficult to organise, unwieldy and has the potential to overwhelm the researcher. Consequently, I decided that as a significant first step towards understanding my collected data, I would arrange it in the form of a visual display. Taking advice from Miles et al., (ibid, 2014; 108) I was keen to ‘you know what you display.’ There were numerous advantages in organising my data in this format. These included increasing the validity of my interpretations by applying a systematic, organised and visual lens and by being able to view my data together in the same format and on the same page at the same time.

Credible and trustworthy analysis requires, and is driven by, displays that are focused enough to permit a viewing of a full data set in the same location and are arranged systematically to answer the research questions at hand. (Miles et al., 2014; 108)

Crucially, and for purposes of clarity and transparency, I should state that in employing the term, ‘full data set’ I did not mean to imply that I could physically set out my entire body of collected transcripts, notes and records. Instead, this visual depiction became a summarised, concentrated representation of the data which I had developed after reading and re-reading the complete range of evidence I had gathered.

The display I created was a visually formatted presentation of evidence, methodically drawn, which eventually enabled me to categorise my collected data in a way that made sense to me. This process helped me clarify the central concepts within my data and allowed me to compare, associate, contrast and differentiate the views from different participant groups and from individual participants within each group.

Although such displays may sometimes be busy, they will never be monotonous. (Miles et al., 2014; 108)

This is because the opportunity to draw conclusions appears greater than within an extended text; displayed concepts can be arranged with a greater sense of coherence which in allows careful comparisons to be made, differences to be noted, patterns observed, themes identified and trends recognised (Miles et al., 2014).

Whilst the positivist researcher can make use of specific mathematical algorithms and statistical techniques, qualitative analysts are far more likely to benefit from their own

crafting of data display formats, because each piece of research is unique in character, design and situation (Miles et al., 2014).

This approach would not suit every qualitative researcher and not every analyst is a visual thinker. However, acting largely upon the advice of Miles et al. (2014) I certainly did find the technique helpful. Displaying my distilled data in this systematic fashion enabled me to develop my own appreciation of its intrinsic value and meaning. The process challenged me to consider my research questions and to think about which segments of my data were the most useful in helping me to answer them. Furthermore, producing this visual display also challenged me to reflect upon the full relevance of all my collected information. Upon reflection, I considered that this was probably because it provided opportunities to organise my evidence coherently.

At this stage, it is pertinent to acknowledge my adoption of an appreciative inquiry stance when applying my research findings to the creation of my framework for homework. In order to develop a fruitful, productive and useful framework which would benefit all members of our school community, I was mindful of the need to look positively upon the information I had gathered.

Parents, pupils and teachers had all given generously of their time to assist with this research. Consequently I was hopeful that utilising the constructivist principle of appreciative inquiry, the notion that thoughts and actions emerge from productive relationships (Lewis et al., 2008), would enable all stakeholders to feel that their efforts had been appreciated. Appreciative inquiry (AI) is a positive way to embrace change and improvement across organisations. It is founded upon the defining principle that

Every organization has something that works right—things that give life when it most alive, effective, successful, and connected in healthy ways to its stakeholders and communities. (Cooperrider et al., 2008)

Appreciative Inquiry, therefore, can be seen as an attempt to identify the positive and to associate this positivity with approaches which amplify dynamism and intensify the vision for change.

However, this did not imply any attempt to hide, disguise or ignore views and conversations which might have disagreed with any emerging themes. Homework is

itself the subject of wide-ranging debate; opinions about it are often strongly held (Rudman, 2013) and views are often divided. Consequently, my selection and designation of the themes needed to allow sufficient breadth to be capable of containing a spectrum of opinion; this had become clear from my research conversations. Even so, taking the opportunity to raise contradictory, even negative perspectives on emerging themes with my participants served to reinforce the final selection of categories as well as adding depth to our discussions.

Hence, as I constructed my framework for homework, I began to consider how to site my findings within a positive, supportive structure. Rather than focusing upon any negative, detracting or sceptical views, my framework needed to accentuate a positive outlook and focus on the many positive views which participants had shared with me. After all, these represented the overwhelming majority of opinion. Appreciative inquiry aims to discover the best that people and their institutions have to offer. I intended that this approach would reinforce this school's ability to capture and enhance positive potential for improvement in our homework routines.

3.19 Creating and organising my data analysis matrix

The creation of my data analysis matrix (see appendix 3) was a critical step which helped me to identify and record the key vocabulary extracted from my data collection activities and to organise this information first into sub-categories and then into predominant themes. I already had a short list of possible or likely themes identified from my reading of the homework literature but I remained entirely open-minded as I searched for emerging categories from my research with pupils, parents or teachers.

As I read and re-read the interview transcripts, focus group data, the completed parent questionnaires and pupils' reflective writing submissions, I noted what I considered to be eighty-six different examples of key vocabulary as used by my participants; I recorded this information in the first column of my matrix under the heading 'key terms.' Once transferred to this visual format, the recurrent use of some terminology stood out very clearly and I began to notice patterns and repetitions. In this way, ideas for sub-categories began to emerge from my collected data (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012), sometimes as I was reading them through and sometimes after I had worked with the data for a while. I found it useful to record the key terms on individual sheets of

paper and manipulate them physically, testing out different headings for sub-categories to see where they would fit most comfortably. This required a trial-and-error approach but it proved a useful, pragmatic solution to the challenge of thematic identification and refinement (Denzin and Lincoln, 2011). Essentially, I was discovering this to be an iterative, evolutionary, incremental process; raw data was developing, through cognitive submersion, repetition and pattern, before emerging as a set of thirty, clearly visible, recurring sub-categories which I have presented in the second column of my matrix under the heading ‘sub-categories developed from key terms.’

My next step was to distil these thirty sub-categories into a smaller list of manageable, inclusive, holistic themes which I could present under column three of my matrix using the heading ‘predominant themes.’ This process once again involved the physical manipulation of potential titles and the arranging of the different sub-categories under various headings until five workable, feasible, achievable major themes, capable of incorporating all the required sub-categories, were identified.

This matrix also encouraged me consider how my emerging themes linked to my research conversations and these comments are noted in column four under the heading ‘researcher comments.’ I further identified links between my emerging themes and a number of associated, theoretical frameworks and I recorded this thinking in column five of the matrix under the heading ‘theoretical concepts.’ This process was to prove valuable in planning my next chapter, a presentation and exploration of my findings.

The matrix was essentially a tool for organising and presenting the connections between participants’ ideas, sub-categories, predominant themes and associated conceptual frameworks. Within the matrix I addressed these different sets of ideas and I used this thought process to distinguish relationships, to consider connections and peculiarities and to organise all of this information starting with eighty-six key terms and concluding with the identification of five predominant themes. The matrix represented a set of collected ideas, initially extracted directly from my participants but arranged, organised and presented according to my own analytical decisions. This process in qualitative, constructivist data analysis, ensures that

the researcher has looked at the data segments in the... preceding columns, checked to see whether they co-vary in some patterned way, and drawn a second-order generalization. (Miles et al, 2014; 109)

This practice of inductive inference (Miles et al., *ibid*) allowed me to arrange my collected data in one place. This made it easier to work with, easier to view and interrogate and it allowed me to analyse, cross-reference, compare, contrast and generally make sense of the information I had collected. This was a critical step in preparing for a thorough investigation and interpretation of the views my participants had shared with me.

Such analytical matrices are not designed according to any fixed set of rules. The process requires some creativity and a systematic approach (Miles et al., 2014). I did, however, discover that my understanding of my own collected data began to grow as a consequence of the process of construction. There could certainly have been other approaches which might have served as useful alternatives. Nevertheless, the concern is not whether the researcher is constructing a 'correct' matrix but whether the matrix which has been designed is helpful either to the process of finding answers or suggesting favourable new approaches to understanding the data. (Miles et al., 2014; 110)

By referring back to my research questions, by keeping in mind the literature I had read and by considering the interconnectedness of concepts within the data, I used this matrix to develop my list of predominant themes and to show how these themes had emerged from my research activity as well as evidencing their links to theory and scholarship. I was now well placed to begin presenting, discussing and analysing my findings.

*Some people really hate homework,
They say it's like an annoying little brother.
But I quite like it when it's fun.
Like research on the i-pad,
To learn about stars or the sun.
Jemma (age 11)*

Chapter 4: Presentation, analysis and discussion of findings

4.1 Introducing the themes

In this chapter, I present the main findings from my research. The data have been collected from forty-four parent questionnaires, conversational interviews with fourteen parents, two semi-structured group interviews with a total of twelve teachers, two focus groups with a total of twelve children and sixty pieces of children's reflective writing. These data were analysed and transferred onto a thematic matrix (see appendix 3) where sub-categories, major themes and theoretical frameworks were identified using a process of cognitive immersion, reflection, categorisation, elimination and refinement. Five major themes were identified;

1. Meaningfulness of homework
2. Aims, values and purposes of homework
3. Roles and responsibilities
4. The homework environment
5. How relationships underpin success with homework

Consequently, in this chapter I have taken each theme in turn, discussed its importance to stakeholders and explained how participants' perceptions coalesce or diverge. These themes form the basis of my new framework for homework which is presented in chapter six.

4.2 Meaningfulness

Pupils were keen to explain to me that they valued their homework most when they found the tasks to be meaningful. They objected strongly to work which they felt was 'pointless' particularly when they felt that it was either too hard, too easy or disconnected from their classroom learning or from anything that they were interested in. Typical comments included 'It's OK but it could be more fun', 'I like being creative so doing a maths sheet is boring especially if it's just for more practice' and 'I have to spend thirty minutes of my spare time just doing sentences and it's a waste of time'.

Parents echoed these views with comments such as ‘Is it only so the school can get better results?’ and ‘if it really helps my child to learn something new that’s great but why do we get a puzzle or a game to play?’. In addition, meaningfulness for many parents involved being able to understand why a particular task had been set and also how homework as an entity was intended to benefit their child more broadly.

So for children, meaningful homework is homework they enjoy and feel they are benefiting from. This view emerged strongly from our focus group meetings where children emphasised the importance of ‘enjoyable tasks’ and spoke about how ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’ homework makes learning at home seem ‘worthwhile’, ‘sensible’ and ‘benefits me’. This reflected the opinion of almost every pupil participant who completed a piece of reflective writing where phrases linking enjoyment and benefit to meaningfulness were ubiquitous. Phrases such as

It’s a good thing usually because when it’s fun it helps you learn at home as well as at school (pupil J)

and

I like it when I enjoy it and if it’s a maths game maybe so it’s learning and it’s fun at the same time and it helps me get better at it. Boring stuff just turns me off doing it. (pupil D)

For parents, the meaningfulness of tasks is often associated with their relevance to their child’s educational needs but, crucially, the rationale for setting all homework needs to be much clearer. This reasoning, a common theme identified in 82% of questionnaire responses and in 94% of research conversations, also involves understanding ‘what’s in it for us?’ (parent D) as well as their children. In other words, it is not only the children who invest valuable time doing their homework, but so do those parents who assist, support and monitor its completion. Parental views about meaningless homework tasks are encapsulated in phrases such as ‘lack of challenge,’ ‘too hard,’ ‘too easy,’ ‘unclear instructions,’ ‘no benefit to learning,’ ‘child doesn’t understand it,’ ‘no link to class work’ and ‘takes ages to do but I can’t see what is being learned.’ As one parent told me in a research conversation

If there doesn’t seem any point to it and especially if mine [children] are bored by it then there’s no reason to get them motivated and they end up not doing it at all (Parent C)

If homework at our school is to be supported by children and within families, the relevance and meaningfulness of the tasks set will need to be established by the teachers when they set the homework and made apparent to those concerned with its completion and accomplishment. Given the nature and depth of these opinions it is difficult to disagree with Kelly's (1999) declaration that without a sense of meaningfulness, it is easy for anyone involved in education to become disengaged from work and from learning (Kelly, 1999). In homework terms, this includes not only the pupils themselves but also their parents.

Indeed, it has been shown in a recent study in southern African educational environments that psychological meaningfulness is an important topic in the debate about education (De Klerk-Luttig, 2008) and without it human beings are prone to lose spirituality which in turn can lead to a loss of spontaneity. Hence, the presence of psychological meaningfulness is a vital ingredient in the ability to become inspired by our experiences and to engage more fully with our learning activities (Wolhuter et al., 2012).

When a child or his or her parents feel excluded from an appropriate understanding about the meaningfulness of homework, this can equate to a feeling of marginalisation. One parent told me

I don't understand why teachers even set homework. If we haven't got the time to help he has nothing to hand in and everyone notices. What's it all for? (Parent A)

A significant work by psychologists Stillman et al. (2009) reported that such feelings of exclusion from functional understanding can cause people to suffer an apparent loss of significance. Moreover, if an individual considers himself or herself to have been excluded then their ensuing sense of purpose, meaning, usefulness and self-worth can all appear diminished as a result.

As an educator, I feel strongly that pupils and their families must be given every opportunity to feel included and involved in homework and that by making the meaningfulness of homework apparent, their engagement and active participation can be enhanced.

How then does the theme of meaningfulness apply to other participants' views about homework at this school?

Pupils told me repeatedly, through their reflections and in their focus groups, that their homework was at its most meaningful when the tasks were ‘fun’ and ‘interesting’ and when they related to ‘the stuff we are learning in school’. Some children complained that too much writing was ‘boring and we do that all the time at school anyway’ and ‘it’s best when you can do it on the computer and it’s like a game or something’. Choice over their tasks, especially when teachers set project work

that we can do in our own way so maybe make a model or design a board game about the Romans or whatever we like (pupil B)

was seen by many children as the most meaningful, engaging and creative type of homework activity.

Choice theory in learning is an area of some controversy. Its principal exponent and creator, William Glasser, was an American psychologist whose ideas were focused around personal choice, responsibility and transformation. His theories, however, remain controversial in the mainstream worlds of both clinical and educational psychology. Glasser (1990; 1998) was keen to apply his ideas to the social world and particularly to educational contexts.

One contemporary advocate of Glasser’s (1990) learning choice theory and himself a practising high school teacher in the United States (Sequeira, 2007) explains that the true challenge of teaching is to enable students to learn progressively in a manner which continually

maintains and fosters their interest. (Sequeira, 2007; 41)

Glasser’s (1990) learning choice theory, we are told

invites us to move from assessing for memory toward assessing for analysis, creativity, and real-life usefulness. Instead of asking students to recall who did something, what they did, and where and how it was done, I ask them to analyze, evaluate, create, suppose, apply, implement, put into practice, and show use. (Sequeira, 2007; 41)

Here it is fascinating to note that these are exactly the sorts of homework activities that the children at our school told me that they enjoy the most. Responses such as ‘doing some art’, ‘designing something’, ‘making a model’, ‘solving puzzles’, ‘teaching someone at home how to do the grid method’, ‘thinking of an invention’ and even ‘making my own puzzle for my dad to solve’ were typical of the tasks the children both

liked to be given and craved to be given more frequently. Indeed, children in both focus groups agreed unanimously with this opinion and one participant in focus group two summed up the views of her peers when she offered

We get all this fun homework but only sometimes. If we had this most of the time or maybe [if] every homework [task] was like this I think everyone would learn more from it and want to do it. (pupil A)

These activities speak to us of a homework curriculum which is at once relevant to young children's interests and also pertinent to the learning they are already undertaking in their classrooms. In order to provide memorable and engaging homework activities it is apparent from my research that teachers need to prioritise homework which is useful and applicable to the lives, interests and imaginations of their pupils.

Glasser's (1990) learning choice theory is currently being implemented in a group of establishments across the globe known as the Sudbury Model Schools. Taking their name from Sudbury Valley School in Massachusetts, these schools are not officially connected to each other, rather they form a loose network of independently run but mutually supportive educationally establishments (Ellis, 2004).

Operating according to the principles that children are naturally curious, that the most effective and longest-lasting learning occurs when that learning is initiated and pursued by the pupils themselves, that all children are creative and should be encouraged to develop their own, unique talents, these students not only devise their own learning activities but they are also responsible for creating their own learning environments. Within each school, the children are invited to play, learn and develop according to the concepts of a participatory democracy (Schugurensky, 2003).

There are, however, several criticisms of the Sudbury Model, including concerns about the quality of education received, the potential for children to miss out on learning about some of the things they will need to know in their adult lives, lack of progression in learning due to limited teachers' planning, limited opportunities for cultural and particularly multi-cultural learning and concern that parents may lack the skills needed to continue this process of guiding their own children to make sensible decisions or important life-choices (Peramas, 2007; Rowe, 2002).

Less controversial, however, is the notion that giving young children sensible and balanced opportunities to make choices about their learning activities can benefit their

development enormously. It is entirely possible that some of these ideas could be successfully applied to homework at our school in order to make it more meaningful for the children.

One of the key concepts in the Early Years Foundation Stage, the curriculum for the youngest children in our primary school, is centred upon teachers planning learning in which pupils can follow their own interests, choosing from amongst a range of different classroom activities (Moyles, 2007). There are many reasons why giving children of all ages choices about their learning is important to their development. A favoured argument is that this is the beginning of children learning how to take control over themselves and their lives (Palaiologou, 2009). Children should be given opportunities to exercise autonomous thought so that they do not grow to maturity still dependent on adults or overly susceptible to peer-pressures (Gartrell, 1995). Without learning to exercise choice, children may come to doubt their own abilities (Jones, 2006) and be fearful about taking the risks that lead to high quality learning and personal development (Maxim, 1997).

If our homework activities can offer children more choices, we are encouraging them to practise the skills of independence and responsibility. In contrast to the Sudbury Model School's approach, it would seem sensible to control, monitor and direct these choices to some extent in order to ensure that homework tasks relate to the school's curriculum and link homework to class-based project work. Exemplifying this approach, one teacher told me

If it's a history topic on invaders and settlers, the homework might be to make a model of an invasion ship or to do some research on the internet or maybe a word-search about it (teacher D).

This does seem to be exactly the sort of homework children want and if we can do more to explain to parents why we are doing it then there could be considerable scope for expanding this directed choice model more widely across the school.

However, giving children choices in their homework can do more still. Choice builds self-esteem and self-esteem grows when children learn to be successful in doing things for themselves (Grossman, 2008). Indeed, a number of parents told me that they like to see their child achieving and they feel that they can be part of this when they help their own child with homework.

I can see what she's learning about and it [homework] gives me the chance to see what she can do and help her so we kind of do it together, then we can both feel good about getting it right (parent E).

This ability to conceptualise homework as an aid to building self-esteem and satisfaction in children and, fascinatingly, in their parents too, was a rather unexpected finding. It was not an isolated example, however, and the notion of 'succeeding together' was a recurring leitmotif across many of my conversations with parents. This could prove to be a valuable notion in the mind of the teacher who, when devising homework activities, also considers how that homework can assist personal growth and development.

A child who has a solid sense of self-worth can make a poor decision, evaluate it calmly, rethink the situation, and make a different choice...Either way, he [sic] has made his own choice. (Grossman, 2008; 4)

Children in my study frequently told me that they like to solve problem and do puzzles as part of their homework but that they do not get much chance to do this. These activities are valuable aids to a child's cognitive development (Grossman, 2008). Children learn to develop new, imaginative and unique cognitive permutations and they can learn the skills of convergent thinking by contemplating perhaps one preferred answer but practising divergent thinking to understand that there may be multiple solutions. If we want our young children to grow to adolescence making wise decisions about a range of personal, moral and social issues we will have to provide them with plenty of opportunities in their early education to make meaningful choices and to experiment, problem solve and investigate (Featherstone, 2008; Morrison, 1997). From the research evidence I gleaned from our pupils, these activities should be prioritised if we are to make homework as meaningful as possible. Work would need to be done with parents in order to explain the school's rationale for this type of homework and to counter the occasionally expressed view that

at least if it's a worksheet he can do it quickly and it's all over and we don't have to worry about it (parent B).

This type of opinion was not unique, neither was it by any means a majority view. What it does suggest is that my conceptual framework for homework will need to include a clear statement on why homework is meaningful for children, how teachers should endeavour to make it meaningful and how parents can use their position as co-completers of homework to derive their own personal satisfaction from the process. It is

entirely reasonable that without a proper understanding of the meaning of homework, children and also their parents are likely to reject it or expend only a minimal effort in completing it.

Teachers told me that some recent homework innovations, setting work to do at home in preparation for a lesson at school, was one way in which they already tried to make homework meaningful for children and families. These ‘flipped learning’ approaches, discussed in some detail in chapter two of this thesis, are seen by teachers as

a great way to get children and parents to talk together about a topic so that the children come to school full of ideas about what to write. The only problem is about quarter of the class don’t do it (teacher C).

This statement raises a number of questions, particularly about a possible disconnection between teachers’ reasons for setting these preparatory tasks and the school’s homework communication systems. During my research conversations with parents, I raised this issue on many occasions. Typical responses included

Oh, I didn’t know that was what it was for (parent H)

and

It’s only talking about something so we do the proper homework first and sometimes we don’t get round to the talking bit (parent F).

It is hard not to conclude that, whilst teachers consider these activities to be meaningful preparation for forthcoming learning, more needs to be done to explain the rationale behind them if families are to be actively supportive. Interestingly, pupils discussed this talk homework in their focus groups and they indicated that it does help them to produce more worthwhile results in their literacy lessons.

If I forget to do it then I can never think of anything good to put [in writing] (pupil C)

and

When I’ve practised at home with someone it gives me good ideas and I get better feedback when it’s marked (pupil E).

However, whilst many pupils enjoy doing this work at home, others reported that it could be difficult persuading a family member to do it with them.

My mum's too busy but sometimes we do it when she's making the dinner (pupil G).

If our school is to maximise the potential to make homework tasks meaningful by tailoring some of them directly to successful participation in a related lesson, then communicating the purpose behind these activities will be critical. Parents are unlikely to have had direct personal experience of this sort of homework from their own childhoods so it is little wonder that they do not always understand their relevance to modern classroom pedagogy. As one particularly astute pupil told me

maybe our homework could be to explain to our mums why talk homework is good for us (pupil F).

I find this statement particularly satisfying because, reflecting on my dual role as both researcher and headteacher, it provides a vivid illustration of the strong voice which this study has given to my pupil participants. This could also be a suggestion well worth pursuing. Parents have told me that one reason that they can feel disenfranchised and marginalised from homework routines is because, they

...don't know about all the new teaching methods in maths like how you teach multiplication and division (parent I).

This in fact, was a widely held and much discussed topic in my research conversations; it was frequently offered by parents as an explanation for uncompleted homework and to explain a general feeling of malaise over homework in general and mathematics homework in particular.

If it's maths homework he'll probably need help but I struggle with it myself because I don't really know how to do it and what I remember learning in maths is all different from how they do it now (parent G).

Very occasionally, a teacher might set a homework task that requires children to explain a concept to their parents. This could apply to any area of the curriculum and any concept and one teacher told me about her success with this approach.

If I feel that one group has almost completely grasped a new concept like how to find thirty per-cent of a quantity for example and they just need some final reinforcement, I ask them to explain it to someone at home. This requires them to think it through again because to teach something to someone else you really have to think how it works yourself (teacher A).

In mathematics this has the additional benefit of transferring skills via children to their parents who can themselves benefit from the explanation. Learning by teaching is not an entirely unexplored concept amongst teachers although its use in English primary school classrooms is not common. Exponents argue that it is a useful tool to help students develop a more secure understanding of new topics and that it encourages the active use of a student's knowledge and skills (Perkins, 1992). As an alternative to traditional reinforcement and repetition-style homework which our children, through their focus groups and their reflective writing, told me they seldom enjoy, this type of homework can provide children with opportunities to apply meta-cognitive skills such as reflection, internalisation and thinking about their own learning (Schneider and Artelt, 2010). Consequently it has the potential to encourage pupils to explore their own thinking and direct it consciously towards the predetermined goal of knowledge transfer. Metacognitive work allows children to become more efficient learners because it challenges them to evaluate their own understanding and to contemplate their own developing learner-confidence (Zohar and Ben David, 2009).

My framework will need to exemplify opportunities for choice, enjoyment, meta-cognition, flipped learning and personal satisfaction which can be embraced not only by pupils but also by parents, if I am to make homework a meaningful experience for everyone.

4.3 Aims, values and purposes of homework

It would not have been surprising if teachers, pupils and parents had questioned the intrinsic value of homework in this research. These opinions would have echoed the views of commentators, theorists and researchers who have often stated that homework is thought to be of doubtful value (Rudman, 2014, Hallam, 2006). Indeed, this aspect of the literature has been explored in chapter two. Consequently, when a child wrote

...it [homework] doesn't help me because usually we've already done it in class so it's easy and boring (pupil H).

I did not treat this statement as unexpected. What was unexpected, however, was the fact that this was the only comment from any participant which questioned the fundamental value of homework. As I have discussed in the previous section of this chapter, views about the efficacy of various homework tasks are questioned and the process as a whole is not always made as meaningful to pupils or parents as some teachers would like it to be. The value debate at this school, I have discovered, is

centred round the different attributions given to homework's worth and purpose. With the single, notable exception of the quotation from pupil H (above), every participant expressed the view that homework is valuable. What was interesting was the fact that they had many different ways of articulating what these various values represented for them.

Crucially, it is the nature of these sundry notions of homework's aims, values and purposes that have been worthwhile exploring.

There was some support for the view, common across all participant groups, that homework can indeed have a positive, direct effect on academic learning. It was predominantly the pupils themselves who made the strongest case for homework helping them to learn more effectively. They found that specifically tailored tasks such as spelling homework, times tables, maths games, maths activities on the computer, grammar work and research for projects supported their learning and helped to make them more confident learners. Comments such as

when you do it again at home it sticks in your head so you know you will get it right when you do it again maybe in a test (pupil K)

and

it reminds me what I learned in the lesson and I really understood it better when I tried to do it again at home (pupil I)

speak to us of the value of practising a specific skill or learning about a new concept which appears to give the children more academic confidence, perhaps through recognising that even in a non-classroom environment they can manage to recall and apply their new learning.

Asked to explain more about this, children would often point to the role their parents played in helping to re-explain something which they had not quite mastered initially.

Your mum or dad can explain it cleerer [sic] and it's only me not the whole class so it makes better sense then (pupil N).

The role of parents in the homework process will be explored in more detail later in this chapter, but this example serves to illustrate one of the reasons why this child feels that homework helps him to learn more efficiently.

Teachers themselves echoed these sentiments and they too believed that when homework is completed regularly and to a good standard this can have a positive impact on a child's academic skills.

You can see in writing lessons in year five and six that those who have done their homework get the best results. They've got more ideas to write about and the content's better because they rehearsed it in their talk homework (teacher E).

When they do their phonics homework in reception and key stage one their reading is so much better. You can see the difference between the children who do this all the time and where others don't (teacher B).

This is strong evidence of teachers, right across our primary age range, believing that homework in this school can play a pivotal role in raising attainment. It is not statistical, quantitative evidence but it represents a strongly held belief about the value of homework's link to more effective learning.

The suggestion is that homework not only improves learning confidence but, with the appropriate tasks being set and a regular commitment to completing them, it can also help children to make better academic progress than their peers who do not do their homework. Teachers have told me that those children who do their homework regularly and take pride in doing so are the very children who are most likely to reach their potential as academic learners. One teacher compares these committed homeworkers with other children who do not regularly or proudly complete their homework.

You can see the difference in my class. The ones you always have to chase up and it's always last minute and poorly done, they are my underachievers (teacher F).

Even with these perceptions so plainly articulated, it is not possible to claim a direct link between homework and attainment; there are so many other variables in a child's life which this study cannot possibly account for. Nevertheless, teachers believe that those same attitudes which allow children to become successful learners in the classroom and which underpin their desire to learn are more apparent in those children who produce regular, good quality homework.

If regular, high quality, homework completion could at least be an indicator of academic success then what did participants think about the value of children being given even more of it? Here, participants were unanimous in their view that the current balance was about right. For pupils, the prospect of getting more homework was anathema.

I need my own time it can't be just work every minute (pupil L)

was a typical, and not unexpected expression of their views. Eleven out of the twelve parents interviewed also felt that a small amount of homework, increasing slightly towards the top of the school, represented an ideal situation; this, they felt, was valuable and helped children to learn. More than this, however, and any suggestion of an increase on current practice, was seen not as being more chance to learn but positively detrimental to learning. Statements such as 'it'll turn them off learning', 'she has clubs after school' and 'we'd have no time to do other things as a family' were most parents' thoughts. One parent represented an obvious exception to this view and she told me that she would like to see 'a lot of homework provided' because she and her son

love learning together and what I have to do is add my own activities to supplement what the school gives because it's not enough (parent K).

I was not surprised to encounter variance in parental opinion about homework amounts but I was prepared for these discrepancies to have been far more striking than they actually were.

Whilst parents, pupils and teachers identified homework as a contributor to academic progress, the most strongly evidenced validation of homework was the role participants felt it played in the personal, social and emotional development of their young children.

Parent after parent espoused its value in teaching their child about responsibility, independence, meeting deadlines, accountability, determination, self-discipline, structure, preparation for life, personal organisation, work ethic, forming good habits, learning routines and so on.

Here, I recognise a possible difference between perceptions of the aims, values and purposes of homework for primary aged children and those evidenced in secondary schools and colleges where much of the existing research has been carried out. The development of these personal attributes might be viewed as more central to a school's mission in a primary school because these skills are embryonic in children of this age. Parents and teachers may be more mindful of the need to deliver a homework curriculum which is nurturing and cherishing and centred upon the holistic needs of the whole child. It is possible that the parents of these younger children might also be more acutely conscious of the advantages of helping their child to develop good personal attributes whilst still at such an impressionable age. If so, this might go some way

towards explaining their view that homework is an extremely valuable tool for this task. One parent reflected the views of many others as she commented

I like to use it [homework] to help me support, guide and teach these skills as necessary (parent J).

There is considerable evidence from literature to support the value of the early development of these personal qualities within the home environment. Researching into the socialisation of young children in middle class Californian households, one such study describes the importance to families of developing strong personal and social competencies amongst their children.

We propose that recognizing social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance as keystone properties of responsibility supports an argument that children's routine work at home enables not only social but also moral responsibility. (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009; 391)

Whilst this Californian study is not a report about homework, it nonetheless epitomises some of the particular personal and social skills which parents at our school recognise as achievable through homework activities.

It is interesting to note that these parents' views about the significance of developing positive routines and practices in the primary years reflect back to the Aristotelian observation that

It is of no little importance what sort of habits we form from an early age it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world. (Aristotle 1976; 32)

For Aristotle, 'hexis' or habit was the root of virtue, a commodity which was highly valued and which citizens were expected to work to possess. (Knight, 2007)

The theme of homework responsibility was given multiple explanations by parent participants. There was the notion of generalised responsibility with children remembering to do their homework and remembering to hand it in on time. There were also more specific and detailed responsibilities which children, as they grew older at this school, were expected by their parents to do for themselves. These included timetabling when they would do their homework, finding a quiet place to do it, asking for help when required, ensuring they understood the homework task and asking their teachers or parents for further guidance if they needed it. There was also the issue of homework quality and this was another aspect of the debate where parents' comments

and teachers' views coalesced. Homework should not merely be done but it should be done well.

If I let them give me scruffy, half completed [home]work it sends the message that anything goes and you don't have to put any effort in. That's not what I want them to learn (teacher H).

Teachers and parents told me that they value well presented, thoughtful, accurate homework.

Now that he's in Year five I expect him to be responsible for making sure it's done properly. I'll still monitor it but he needs to learn that it's down to him (parent L).

Children were also aware of the expectation that they would not only do their homework but do it well, even though, by their own admission, they did not always conform.

Sometimes I can't really be bothered like if it's not something I like and sometimes my mum'll [sic] make me do it again or I might have to stay in at school and copy it out again (pupil L).

Some parents told me that they are aware that whenever work is undertaken at home and handed in to a teacher, this has the potential to reflect either positively or negatively upon the family as a whole. These parents, I suggest, are consciously using homework as a tool to instil respect, responsibility and a sense of pride in their children. This is a powerful argument in support of the value they attribute to homework in the primary school. As anthropological research into children's roles in other household activities has previously suggested

Members of families and communities have the responsibility to educate their children into awareness of the conduct and judgments of others and into knowing when and how to display respect. (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009; 408)

Having established that parents really did value homework, I was interested to learn more about the reasons why. With this in mind, one subject we discussed was a hypothetical move towards the abandonment of homework. What if our school took the decision to set no formal homework at all? Would this not reduce pressures on families, I enquired, and what, if anything would participants miss about homework if it no longer existed? The response to this question was unanimously, in fact robustly in favour of retaining homework and in many cases it opened up a new and rather unexpected avenue of discussion. One of the most important reasons for valuing

homework, and an explanation given by almost a third of my parent participants, was the opportunity it affords, not only to learn more about what the child is studying at school, but to spend some quality time learning together as parent and child. Homework, especially it emerged, in families where there is either an older or a much younger sibling, allows these parents to plan and prioritise ‘a special time together each week’ (parent M) with their primary aged child.

On a Wednesday my husband takes our eldest child swimming and my daughter and I sit down together and do her homework and talk about what she’s doing at school and maybe about her friends and everything, but it’s the homework togetherness thing that gets it all going. Maybe it’s a good excuse for some ‘us time’ and it’s the homework that sets the scene because also I learn to see what she understands so I can have a better conversation with the teacher because I understand what she’s finding hard (parent M).

These sorts of statement, not all quite as expansive as this one, nevertheless surprised me because I had not expected that parents would be so flexibly using homework routines as a means of strengthening familial bonds and sharing positive, emotional experiences.

We do his homework and talk about the things he has been doing in class this week. It helps us celebrate his successes. He can lack confidence so it shows him all the things he has achieved (parent P).

In fact, we can look to studies emerging from clinical psychology to offer interesting insights into the benefits of these positive emotional experiences. Positive emotions have been shown to broaden children’s thinking, reduce anxieties and assist with their social and emotional development. (Barish, 2012)

As parents, our enthusiastic responsiveness to our children’s interests is the surest way to engage them in meaningful dialogue and interaction, and a first principle of strengthening family relationships. (Barish, 2012; 64)

Some parents, it appears, are finding value in the dialogue engendered by homework because it provides a window into their child’s world at school. One practising clinician describes this interest-taking as the psychological equivalent of good nutrition.

Good psychological nutrition is essential to emotional health and helps promote psychological immunity. And we know that these moments are important in the lives of our children - because children tell us about them. (Barish, 2012; 64).

These discussions about intra-family relationships, personal development and accountability lead us inevitably towards an exploration of the specific roles and

responsibilities which members of each participant group fulfil as part of the homework process at this school.

4.4 Roles and responsibilities

Perhaps the most fascinating part of this theme is the discussion about how parents in this school perceive their particular responsibilities for homework. This, it appears, has a tendency to change as the child grows older although this is not universally true.

In one sense, it is possible to identify two distinctive positions; there are parents who believe that their role is to be active participants in the homework process and those who believe that their role is to encourage their child to do their homework independently, because this, they felt, was one of the purposes of homework. It is perhaps more accurate, however, to understand this as a continuum rather than a polarisation. Whilst my research conversations established that the vast majority of parents saw themselves as philosophically attached to one end of the spectrum or the other, there was usually a practical, flexible, pragmatic approach which often had to be applied even if this ran contrary to their theoretical stance.

In general terms, the younger the child, the more readily the parents expressed an interest in doing the homework together. By year six however, the final year of primary school, things had often changed and these parents and indeed their children, were far more likely to view homework as the child's almost sole responsibility, with the parent offering a light touch monitoring role which sometimes amounted to little more than an enquiry about what homework he or she has been given and whether it has yet been done. My evidence for this came initially from my conversations with parents. Not only was it evident that over 80% of the parents of younger pupils who were interviewed were concerned with delivering hands-on, practical help with their children's homework but in addition, parents of older pupils were able to trace their own journey of homework support through a narrative of steadily diminishing support. A typical view was

In years one and two I was obsessed with doing it with her but as she got older we've made it more about her taking responsibility. I'm still there if I'm needed but my job now is to oversee it but she has to be the one responsible (parent N).

Pupils themselves recognised the change in their own and in their parents' homework responsibilities over time. In one focus group meeting, an older pupil told his peers

Now I'm in year 6 I'm allowed to do it on my own in my bedroom. Last year it was the kitchen table and I do it mostly by myself now and that's better. My dad says it's my job now to get it done (pupil M).

The evidence from these data would suggest that most parents see their role changing to reflect the growing maturity and independence of their children. Nevertheless, it is difficult to rule out personal, parental preferences for involvement. This is because there were certainly exceptions to this tendency towards declining adult participation; two parents of older pupils retaining a strong, collaborative involvement and one parent of a much younger child was content to develop these independent learning skills from an early age.

Beyond this, it is difficult to generalise. A key observation I would make is that parental perceptions of their role varied considerably, usually in line with their view of the aims, values and purposes of homework itself. Consequently, comments ranged from

It's all about responsibility and being independent so I only help if he really gets stuck (parent S)

to

It's something we always do together. I might not be needed but I like to sit with him so we can do it together and that way I feel involved and informed (parent O).

We are aware through existing research that parents can indeed

support student motivation and performance in homework through interacting with the school about homework, establishing physical and psychological structures, overseeing the homework process, and responding to student performance on homework assignments. (Walker et al., 2004; 1)

My study, however, has shown that in our school this level of parental engagement is only undertaken by some parents, and more commonly by parents of younger children. Others, and certainly those who explained their view that homework is about developing independence, take a more passive role. This finding challenges me to ensure that my conceptual framework references the value of participation and parental involvement and asks parents to consider how they might strike a balance between promoting independent learning at home and ensuring that a degree of supportive collaboration is also present.

As far as the children themselves are concerned, there is very little confusion about their understanding of their own role. As I have previously mentioned, pupils equate homework with learning and they know that they should do their homework, hand it in on time and do it to the best of their ability. They also explained to me that there are various reasons why they do not always manage to achieve these aims and these included 'there's not enough time', 'I forgot and no-one reminded me', 'sometimes I don't always understand what to do' and 'my mum and dad were too busy to help me'.

This suggests to me that, given the fact that these are all primary aged pupils, they may not always receive the consistency of support at home that they need in order to ensure that their homework is done. This school as a whole, I suggest, could also do more to pre-empt homework problems by providing particular opportunities for those children who need extra support, to receive it from a school-based homework facility. I have explored this idea in more detail later in this chapter.

As far as the teachers themselves are concerned, one of their main concerns, and a concern expressed by all teachers and by parents too, is the challenge of providing feedback to pupils about their homework.

In their questionnaires and again in our conversational interviews, parents used phrases such as 'never marked,' 'need to know how he's done,' 'where's the marking?' and 'why do it if it's not marked?' to express their frustration.

Teachers told me that they

simply do not have the time to mark every piece of homework (teacher G)

and they signalled their awareness that this can be

upsetting for parents because they [parents] feel that they and their pupils spend a lot of time completing homework and they are confused about what happens to it next (teacher J).

Teachers described two approaches to this problem. Homework, they explained, is often either self-marked or peer-marked by pupils during lessons. This solution is effective, they believe, both in terms of the efficient use of time and because it enables the children themselves to become involved in the evaluation of their own work. What was considerably less clear to many participants was how this process is communicated to parents.

A second, and very recent approach is to invite parents into school at the end of a half term to view the homework and to listen to the children in the class as they explain what they have been doing in their homework and show any artefacts, models or projects they have made. Currently, this practice is still developing and it is not common across all classes. Those teachers who have trialled this work reported feeling that pupils and parents enjoyed and benefited from the opportunity. There could be considerable scope to extend this type of homework feedback which appeared to have the potential to benefit teachers, pupils and families. One pupil commented

Our mums came and some dads or grans and we told them all about what we'd been doing and our models. At the end they all clapped (pupil O).

This is an innovative approach because not only are the children receiving positive feedback about the effort they have put into their homework but they are actually putting that feedback to good use themselves by practising their own skills of communication and presenting to an audience.

Who would dispute the idea that feedback is a good thing? Both common sense and research make it clear; Formative assessment, consisting of lots of feedback and opportunities to use that feedback, enhances performance and achievement. (Wiggins, 2012; 10)

In addition to these roles and responsibilities, parents, and to some extent the teachers themselves, are also responsible for shaping the environment in which homework takes place. Discussions with all participant groups about the homework environment proved to be a rich source of information.

4.5 The homework environment

Children's explanations about where they do their homework and their views about how and where they would prefer to do it, ranged widely. The diversity of usual homework situations included, 'in front of the TV,' 'in my bedroom on my own,' 'round my nan's house,' 'under the TV,' 'at the dining room table,' 'stroking my dog because he helps me get good ideas' and 'in the lounge with mum listening to music.'

The most common locations, however, were the dining table, the kitchen table or in the child's bedroom. Bedroom homeworkers tended to be those children who completed their tasks independently and the kitchen or dining table enabled parents to become more closely involved. Intriguingly, these conversations also allowed some

dissatisfaction to emerge from a few of children. One commented, ‘on Saturdays when I’d like to be playing out’. This same child, in a view expressed by approximately ten percent of pupils, told me that a homework club at school would be better. This, some felt, would provide them with help and support if they got stuck and it would free up their weekends which would now become homework-free.

For many parents, however, the thought of a homework club was problematic and for a few, it was actually abhorrent.

There’s no way I would let mine go. I’d never know what he was learning about and I wouldn’t be so involved. He’d probably like to go with his friends but I wouldn’t be happy about it (parent T).

Others, however, were less concerned, feeling that it would remove some of the pressure from an already busy domestic life.

I’d use it sometimes, particularly if we had a lot going on at home. Plus, there’d be someone there, maybe a teacher, who could help with the maths better than me (parent Q).

I was interested to learn about one specific homework initiative which two families have launched. Once a week these families, each having more than one primary age child and also some older children, meet at one of their houses and all the children sit down together and do their homework at the same, large table. The older children help the younger ones and the parents, mothers in this case, help, support and monitor all their homework activities. These parents stressed the collaborative, social benefits of this approach which they believed turned homework from a chore into an enjoyable, friendly and sociable activity. Remarkably, except where we discussed school-based homework clubs, these were the only parents who expressed views about co-operative homeworking involving collaborators from outside the immediate family.

Renowned for their influential studies and publications into working together, these researcher brothers concluded that

Working together to achieve a common goal produces higher achievement and greater productivity than does working alone is so well confirmed by so much research that it stands as one of the strongest principles of social and organizational psychology. (Johnson and Johnson, 1994; 40)

Whilst it would be unreasonable to suggest to all parents that they should institute this sort of arrangement, my framework can certainly espouse some of the benefits when

children undertake their homework with others. Research, as identified in chapter two, is pragmatic about collaborative homeworking. There can be many benefits for children but parents will want to be reassured that their own child is not becoming either too dependent or too depended upon by his or her co-collaborators.

Although teachers' involvement with the homework environment may be more limited than parents' they do, nevertheless, have the opportunity to influence matters through the conversations they regularly have and, potentially, by arranging specific homework-management meetings with parents and children together. This suggestion originated from a very recent meta-analysis of twenty-four homework management articles retrieved from the EBSCO, ERIC, and Scopus databases by a researcher from Mississippi State University. The author recognised that homework faces competition from a range of potentially more desirable activities and that completing it can be quite a challenge, even for students who find their homework meaningful and interesting. He advises that

it would be important for teachers and families to work together to coordinate homework management strategies...the importance of such a coordination is further substantiated by the empirical findings that these features of homework management strategies are separate yet related features. (Xu, 2013; 102)

This notion leads me to consider the last of my key homework themes, namely the relationships between and amongst stakeholder groups and how these underpin homework practices at this school.

4.6 How relationships underpin success with homework

In the words of one teacher participant

Homework only works when there is a genuine, tripartite relationship with teachers, children and parents all doing their best to make it work. Otherwise, what you get is teachers setting good homework that never gets done or maybe if the tasks aren't appropriate children don't see the point. Either that or for whatever reason parents don't support it so it's badly done or not handed in at all (teacher D).

In my focus group activities, some children explained to me that they appreciate being able to ask their teachers for more help if they don't understand a homework task and they felt positive that this help would be forthcoming with a few rare exceptions.

Unless I forget to ask or maybe she says to come back at playtime but I forget or she's maybe not there (pupil Q).

They also spoke to me about the support which some of them feel they need at home. Here, their concerns were about getting older and being expected to work more independently and also about the challenges of eliciting parental support in a busy household. One child commented

Everyone thinks because I'm older now I should be able to do it myself but sometimes I forget or put it off because of a club or something then there's no time and I get into trouble at school (pupil T).

Parents too, commented on the need for open, trusting, positive relationships with teachers to make homework effective. A small number of concerns were raised. These included some parents' own low levels of self-confidence when approaching teachers over individual homework issues, about the need for further guidance to help them support homework and about practical matters such as homework marking or homework set during school holidays which some parents disliked.

Existing evidence from research can help teachers address these issues especially where parents feel that homework routines and expectations are not being communicated effectively.

Parents need to feel that they are active participants in partnership with practitioners. We know that parents want to remain in control of their family lives [and to] be listened to ... Relationships are at the heart of this process. For a parent lacking in confidence and trust to access services, forming a warm and positive relationship with a practitioner can be a bridge to available help and information. (Roberts, 2009; cited in National Quality Improvement Network, 2010; 9)

Davis et al. (2002) had previously advocated that those schools and other institutions which work closely with parents should develop their own partnership model and that this should include a number of key constituents; a common aim; working together; complementary expertise; mutual respect; open communication; sharing power and negotiation.

Consequently, I have ensured that the core message of this strategy was incorporated within my devised framework for homework. This should guide parents about what they can expect from teachers and remind teachers that parents may not always find it easy to approach staff at school, no matter how open and welcoming we aspire to be.

As a school, we need to ensure that we demonstrate empathy for families by showing in our conceptual framework that we understand how homework can present difficulties, especially when parents are facing challenging times in their lives. One teacher told me

A parent came to see me and told me about a difficult situation they are facing, including the child. She was worried about the homework not getting done but she also wanted to keep the routines as normal as possible. We agreed that I'd give the homework as usual but I would understand if the quality wasn't there or if it wasn't done sometimes. I think she felt better once she'd explained and we'd discussed it all (teacher C).

Parents know their children better than their teachers do. They understand how to engage and interest their child at home and they know how to choose an appropriate time, a routine or a strategy that will enable their child to produce good quality homework. My framework has suggested some possible approaches which parents might find useful, together with some helpful tips about creating a positive climate for homework, but it has avoided prescription.

Research advises practitioners to work within the context of an equal relationship and to make good use of parents' strengths and skills as well as the knowledge they possess about their own child. (Braun et al., 2006). To me, this suggests that our school should do all it can to provide direction, advice and support about homework and especially about practical issues involving homework completion, environments and routines. The school can use its new framework for homework to suggest a number of possible strategies, but ultimately teachers will need to rely on the talents and expertise of parents to set a positive climate for its eventual completion.

The teachers themselves have much to contribute to this homework partnership, not least through

the knowledge and experience that the helper [practitioner] brings to the work to complement the parent's existing knowledge and skills, both in building the relationship and in providing information and support. (National Quality Improvement Network, 2010; 9)

Nevertheless, these discussions lead me to consider where the notion of power lies within this tripartite, homework relationship.

Henderson (2006) investigated power relationships within Scottish primary schools for her doctorate thesis with the University of Stirling. In her qualitative study, using family conferences as her primary data collection method, she offers a number of interesting

views about the position of power and influence around homework completion. The level of parental engagement with, and hence family support for homework, she offered, is strongly associated with the nature of the intra-family relationships.

I became aware that social relationships appeared to play a significant role in the homework discussions and patterns of power were exposed through the family's story of their engagement, or not, in the homework process. (Henderson, 2006; 169)

Henderson (ibid) acknowledges Lawrence-Lightfoot's (2003) advice to schools that parents and teachers should be allied in the mutual desire to raise, guide and teach children. However, she also contrasts this statement with her own finding that, in reality

poor communication, disparity of provision, a lack of parental confidence and changing social situations [are] factors which appear to inhibit parental involvement, regardless of the power relations which existed within the families, opening an enormous chasm between the borderlands of home and school. (Henderson, 2006; 171)

Homework, she argued, offered the pupils in her study the opportunity to manipulate this situation and

create an even greater divide to suit their individual needs and/or wants and/or desires. (Henderson, ibid; 171)

This finding demonstrates that, despite their young ages, primary school pupils still have power to distort the homework process towards their own goals. Furthermore, it supports some of my own evidence especially where pupils in my study occasionally admitted to employing avoidance tactics of their own.

Once I really didn't want to do it so I told my dad I didn't have any and then at school [I] said we had to go away at the weekend (pupil R).

This sort of scenario would only become common if the gap between home and school were sufficiently wide as to preclude the possibility of parents or teachers contacting each other to seek clarification.

Here, I identify a clear need for the introduction of my conceptual framework; it at once values parental perspectives about homework and simultaneously offers some practical suggestions together with a strong rationale to help elicit their meaningful engagement.

Intriguingly, however, Henderson's (2006) major finding was that

the subject/teacher was the biggest single determinant for completing homework...Pupils capitalised on their observation of teachers' practices as they had clear knowledge of which teachers requested to see the completed homework on a regular basis or not, which teachers checked it on a regular basis or not and which teachers made helpful or obscure comments on the completed homework. (Henderson, 2006; 178)

Henderson (ibid) further noted that the pupils in her study also exploited their own parents' homework practices

as all pupils, even the most compliant, devised a whole range of imaginative and creative ways in which to gain control of completing their homework to suit their own perceived needs and/or wants and/or desires. (Henderson, ibid; 178)

My conceptual framework, based upon the data I collected from all my participants, has been able to describe the various roles and expectations of teachers, parents and pupils in the homework process. This was deemed necessary in order to bring clarity and transparency to our homework practices.

One working model which serves to exemplify successful home-school collaboration is the Pen Green Partnership. Based in Corby, Northamptonshire, this early years' setting and associated research facility employs a 'Parents Involved in their Children's Learning (PICL)' (Whalley, 2007; 8) approach to partnership working. Established twenty-eight years ago, the centre's philosophy is underpinned by an ethos which respects parents as co-educators of their children. Indeed, one of its core principles is the desire to redress the imbalance of power between parents and professionals (Whalley, 2007). Emphasising the need to establish genuine equality in parents and staff relationships, it is the parents themselves who are acknowledged as those who seek the best for their children because as the people who know their children best. Parents and staff at Pen Green share information through reflecting on videos of each child from home and in the nursery and they work together in order to support each child's learning by means of a developmental partnership (Whalley, 2007).

It would be unrealistic to suggest that our school could mirror the same practical approaches which work so well in this pre-school setting. Nevertheless, based upon my research conversations with pupils, parents and teachers, my conceptual framework has benefitted from emphasising the key role played by parents in the homework process. It is anticipated that as this framework becomes established, so the opportunities for

parents to become more closely involved in homework practices will, in turn, benefit all our children.

*It's homework time again today,
Write a poem or maybe a rap.
I had an idea, but it vanished away,
Like water runs out from a dripping tap.
Paul (age 11)*

Chapter 5: Conceptualising homework; key issues in the debate

5.1 Setting the scene

This chapter builds upon my research findings as it explores the conceptual foundations which led to my creation of the framework for homework at our school.

The framework itself (see chapter six) is intended to be used as a guide for our teacher practitioners and to advise and support our pupils, parents and families. This chapter, by way of contrast, informs theorists, researchers and academics who may be interested in understanding the links between existing homework literature, my own research findings and the subsequent formulation of the framework.

However, before I discuss my new conceptual understanding of homework at this school, it is important to reflect on the research process itself and to acknowledge the successes and limitations of my enquiry.

5.2 Critical evaluation and limitations of this research

...the distinguishing mark of all 'good' research is the awareness and acknowledgement of error ... [to] minimize the effect such errors may have on what counts as knowledge and that what flows from this is the necessity of establishing procedures which will minimize the effect such errors may have on what counts as knowledge (Oakley, 2000; 72)

Throughout my research I maintained some concerns, not surrounding the contributions made by participants, but rather regarding the potential for contradictory views held by those stakeholders, particularly parents, who did not choose to take part.

Whilst I did manage to secure the active involvement, either through conversation or questionnaire, of forty-two parents, this meant that the parental views within approximately eighty eight families remained unexplored. Those forty-two parents who did participate represented approximately thirty two percent of the total number of families at our school. I freely accepted the legitimacy of parents who chose not to participate, although I had hoped that a slightly larger percentage might have

volunteered their availability. Reassuringly perhaps, I have no anecdotal evidence to suggest that these unrepresented opinions would have differed significantly from the views of the parents who did participate; I simply have no evidence either way. This, I accept, is the nature of the research process.

I was pleased that I did offer the opportunity for parents to participate using a qualitative questionnaire because this, I believe, encouraged the involvement of parents who would have found it difficult to make time for a conversation. Because the questionnaire used an open-ended questioning technique, I was able to gather a range of opinions from the results even though I was not able to follow up any responses directly with their authors. I was able to develop some of the ideas presented in the questionnaires in my discussions with other parents and this increased the relevance and applicability of our conversations; it provided a range of scenarios to help stimulate our dialogues. Indeed, using different sources and forms of data to prompt debate in exploratory interviews is a well-established research approach (Clough and Nutbrown, 2012; Wengraf, 2001).

The research conversations which took place with parents turned out to be either conversations with one parent at a time or sometimes with two parents together. This was to fit in with parents' own timetables and wishes and particularly to accommodate their availability between other child-care or work-related demands. The informal, conversational style of our discussion was certainly the correct choice; a number of participants commented afterwards on the ease with which the conversation flowed, often suggesting that the experience had not been as daunting as they had perhaps imagined that it might have been. This served as a useful recognition that there had been some success in my attempts to democratize the research process, to promote equality of participation and to

reduce power differences and encourage[s] disclosure and authenticity between researchers and participants. (Karnieli-Miller et al., 2009; 279)

Similarly, the opportunities for children to write down their reflections of their homework experiences as well as to discuss these in more detail in focus groups, allowed the pupils plenty of time to communicate their thoughts to me. I cannot guarantee that what they told me always represented their true opinions because these must have been tinted to some extent by knowing me in the role of their headteacher.

Nevertheless, having assured them that what I wanted to hear was how they really felt about homework, I am content that what they recounted to me represented a reasonable, realistic explanation of their views. My experience as both a researcher and a headteacher is that with primary age children, once they know that they can speak freely, they generally do so. Research evidence supports this perspective and reassures practitioners that the problems encountered by not involving children in studies that involve them mean that their own views and beliefs cannot be fully appreciated.

Interviews, even with young children, can produce unique, detailed and trustworthy accounts, which can be used to improve understanding on a variety of issues. (Gill et al., 2008; 374)

My decision to select pupil participants from the final two years at our primary school meant that these children had experienced more homework than any other children at our school. Nevertheless, the absence of views collected from younger pupils might have resulted in some imbalance of opinion. It is possible that, as children move up through the primary school, their ideas about homework may change. Nevertheless, I felt that it was more practical to work with these older pupils whose superior communication skills enabled me to collect more detailed information using reflective writing and focus group discussions. With younger children, different (more age appropriate) data collection tools would probably have needed to be devised and this might have made my research unreasonably complex and time-consuming, leading potentially to little or no difference being identified in my findings. However, this inability to triangulate pupils' views across the full primary age range remains a potential weakness of this study.

I was largely unsurprised by what the teachers told me. Their opinions triangulated with themes in academic and popular literature and also with my pre-existing professional experiences of teachers' views about homework. The lack of a conceptual framework for homework and a paucity of understanding, particularly about parents' homework ideas but also about the role parents are expected to play in homework completion, were all problematic. These factors often combined to make the planning of homework tasks challenging, whilst professional uncertainty and frustration about chasing up uncompleted homework caused further complications.

In terms of my overall research design, I understood that evaluating, analysing and interpreting qualitative data within a socially constructed framework would always be difficult.

According to Hacking's (2000) work on the interpretation of constructivist findings, socially constructed claims do not always represent clear notions of either inevitability, or about which practices should be abolished. Interestingly in my research I discovered no extremes of position and no appetite for either the abolition of homework or for the acceptance that homework's problems were simply unavoidable. Whilst variance in the amount of homework children should receive and confusion about roles and responsibilities abounded, there was much more common ground than I had expected to find.

A common activity when analysing qualitative data within a social setting is the use of comparisons (Creswell, 2008). Homework routines, tasks, environments, timings, purposes and practicalities were all discussed. The examples participants provided, the themes they referred to, the way these were described and even the form of words they used were all compared with each other, often following multiple readings of collected narratives and by re-listening to recorded interviews. In this way, I was able to establish a more sophisticated understanding of the socially constructed realities I was learning about (Holstein and Gubrium, 2012). This was a vital part of my process in constructing my interpretation of the data and again as I created the conceptual framework for homework. Consequently, the framework itself has been shaped by my understanding of the data I collected and these data, in turn, fully support the content of the framework.

I was also grateful for the advice found within appreciative inquiry models (which I introduced in chapter three) because these helped to direct me towards a position where I could feel that the application of my overall research design had led to a series of positive, applicable findings. According to one leading exponent

Appreciative Inquiry (AI) is a method for studying and changing social systems (groups, organizations, communities) that advocates collective inquiry into the best of what is in order to imagine what could be, followed by collective design of a desired future state that is compelling. (Bushe, 2013; 1)

Hence, I focused my attention on using my findings to produce a positive, forward-looking framework for homework and one which emphasises the desire on the part of

all participant groups to see homework succeed and become more effective. Hence, whilst structuring my research conversations around a genuine exploration of views, I was also keen to learn how homework could be made more meaningful and more relevant in this school. I was not disappointed because, as I demonstrated in chapter four, a great many positive approaches and opinions were indeed discovered which I was able to apply to my framework for homework.

Some methods of analysing and evaluating situated social reality and subsequently offering a range of solutions, are based upon a deficiency model and I believe that I was successful in avoiding these. Such approaches tend to focus more exclusively on what the current problems are, why things have gone wrong and about what needs to improve. Whilst keen to give all participants the opportunity to share their views openly with me, I wanted my completed framework to contest notions of deficiency in order to provide a workable, affirmative, whole-school resource to support everyone involved in homework.

Because parents, pupils and teachers had all been involved in this research, I was hopeful that the constructivist principle of appreciative inquiry, the notion that thoughts and actions emerge from productive relationships (Lewis et al., 2008), would enable all stakeholders to feel involved and appreciated. The aim of my appreciative inquiry approach was to stimulate new ideas and to generate new possibilities for action. Essentially, when researchers adopt a positive outlook, sustainable change is more likely to result. With a positive research climate established, participants become more open to new ideas and solutions are likely to be more creative and long-lasting (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

It will take time before I can judge the extent to which I might have been successful; patience will be required and I will need to wait to see whether stakeholders judge the conceptual framework to have been a success.

5.3 Conceptual frameworks

Conceptual frameworks are common across many professions and academic disciplines and they are often used to highlight essential structures and to provide professionals with meaning and definition. In education, for example, they offer guidance to teachers and headteachers about how they should act or about why they act as they do and they are often grounded in research, study and theoretical understanding. Fundamentally, a

conceptual framework embodies the type of approach professional educators employ in order to devise their curriculums, their programmes of study, their professional development opportunities and their assessment outcomes. They also suggest a rationale or a logic through which an institution can be held accountable to its stakeholders. Useful definitions of conceptual frameworks are to be found in many industries and across different spheres of learning. This model, from health education, is a typical example.

[Conceptual frameworks are] a group of concepts that are broadly defined and systematically organized to provide a focus, a rationale, and a tool for the integration and interpretation of information. Usually expressed abstractly through word models, a conceptual framework is the conceptual basis for many theories, such as communication theory and general systems theory. (Mosby, 2009; 416)

The homework challenge facing headteachers in English primary schools is accentuated by the lack of any useful, professionally relevant, empirical or agreed conceptual framework for homework. As discussed in chapter one of this thesis, there are no government guidelines for homework and each school is charged with deciding upon its own homework policies and procedures. As discussed in chapter two, literature provides a range of likely theoretical starting points but these are contradictory, inconsistent and often irrelevant because they have been created for secondary schools and colleges in very different educational systems, typically in the United States or in Asia.

5.4 Existing conceptual models

There are, however, three interesting though tangential, conceptual approaches which offer useful reference points for my study, elements of which I introduced in chapter two. Cooper et al. (2001) presented their work, 'A Model of Homework's Influence on the Performance Evaluations of Elementary School Students' in the *Journal of Experimental Education*. Using a sample of four hundred and twenty eight elementary school (primary age) pupils drawn from a large metropolitan public school district and working with their parents and teachers, they proposed a statistical model of the influence which homework has on these children's in-class academic performance.

Employing a quantitative research design and in particular a structural equation modelling technique, the authors examined relationships among variables which included academic ability, student and family background, time spent on homework activity and the amount of homework which the students reported completing. Their modelling of these collected elementary school data revealed several interesting

findings. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the likelihood that a student would complete his or her homework tasks was positively related to the elimination of distractions by parents during the homework completion. Also, positive peer attitudes, higher academic ability and positive parental views about homework were all related to increased parental support for homework. Interestingly, the report also suggested that a pupil's own attitude toward homework was largely unrelated to either academic ability or home or community factors but positively related to the parent's attitude towards homework. Finally, academic levels appeared to be unrelated to the pupil's own attitude toward homework but these assessment grades could be anticipated by the amount of homework the child completed. The authors reported that

parent facilitation proved to be an important mediator of the relation between student norms, student ability, and parent's attitude toward homework and classroom grades. (Cooper et al., 2001; 189)

Their study suggested a number of useful steps towards a conceptual framework which might prove useful to educators keen to develop effective homework models with other young children. Crucially, their findings revealed the vital role parents played in supporting homework at elementary school level. Indeed, positive parent involvement in homework was found to be the strongest predictor of academic success. Additionally their conclusions demonstrated that parental support for autonomous, self-directed and independent homeworking was closely related to academic success and, conversely, that direct instructional involvement by parents mirrored poor academic results. Sensibly in my view, the authors suggested that parental teaching probably did not lead directly to poor attainment by pupils, but instead poor attainment probably caused parents to become more closely involved in direct teaching. This suggests that parents alter their level of involvement with homework in response to the aptitudes of their children.

As I explain later in this chapter, my qualitative study of homework at Maylandsea Primary School supports Cooper et al.'s (2001) finding that parental involvement is a key factor in an effective homework model and that a child's attitude towards homework is not necessarily related to his or her academic ability. However, my own findings contest the notion of a link between parental support for homework and academic ability, suggesting instead that levels of understanding about the meaningfulness of particular tasks and the value of homework per se are far more likely to influence levels of parental interest. Furthermore, my study builds upon Cooper et

al.'s (2001) model by exploring young children's attitudes towards homework and linking these to their own perceptions of meaningful homework tasks and in particular to notions of choice, interest and fun.

Equally, my study extends ideas about families supporting homework by exploring parents' views about the value of homework as a tool for maximising personal development; my findings show that parents do not merely adjust their level of intervention in response to their child's academic ability (Cooper et al., 2001) but because they are deliberately influencing the development of autonomous strategies which they feel are important for the personal growth of their child. I also acknowledge Cooper et al.'s (2001) view that homework completion is related to classroom success but I re-conceptualise this notion and challenge the idea that assessment grades can be anticipated by the amount of homework completed. My study demonstrates that, whilst those pupils who regularly fail to complete their homework are viewed as underachieving by their teachers, this does not imply that if all children did more homework their achievement would improve. Contrarily, I found that the steady accumulation of a positive homework routine, supported by parental interest and evidenced by a curiosity for learning at home, helped children feel well prepared for the next lesson; it is this approach which my model presents as characteristic of homework's positive contribution to successful learning.

A second conceptual approach, in some ways more directly relevant to my own study, was proposed by Hughes and Greenhough (2002) at the University of Bristol. Their project explored homework practices in both primary and secondary schools. The research, funded by the Economic and Social Research Council was titled 'Homework and its contribution to learning' and it sought to identify some of the conditions under which the influence of homework upon learning was either enhanced or reduced. The project took place during a period of great interest in homework amongst parents and teachers because homework guidelines for primary and secondary schools had recently been introduced by the Labour government and the role of these guidelines in helping to raise educational standards was being widely discussed. Employing a broad, qualitative, socio-cultural methodology, the study took as its sample four contrasting secondary schools and four of their feeder primary schools in the Bristol area of England. A range of data collection methods was used including interviews with pupils, parents, teachers and headteachers and lessons were also observed and homework documents analysed.

As I mentioned in chapter two of this thesis, findings from the four primary schools showed a diverse range of opinion by parents with the majority being opposed to homework.

In general, these parents felt that children at this stage were too young for homework, and that their out of school time would be better spent on other things. (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 38)

The authors' conclusions are not clearly divided across key stages so it is not always possible to differentiate between issues in primary and secondary schools. In general terms, however, they discovered that participants believed homework to be a useful tool for extending the school curriculum and helpful for the development of independent learning. They also uncovered a symbolic value with homework being viewed as a sign of a good school. However, in marked contrast to my own findings from one primary school some twelve years later, came their finding that

those most closely involved in the day-to-day practice (teachers and students) were much less enthusiastic about it than those who were more distant (parents, headteachers, and politicians). (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 41)

In fact, they reported that a typical view from teachers was the feeling that they were being asked to set homework despite their own pedagogic judgements that this was not always necessary or appropriate.

In these schools at this period in recent history, Hughes and Greenhough (2002) found that few participants had considered the nature of the homework tasks being set. Again, this contrasted with my own findings where all stakeholders showed strong awareness of different tasks and judged the overall value of homework by their perception of the efficacy of these particular activities. In this Bristol study, homework tasks were found to be essentially a series of formal learning activities to be completed away from the classroom with little consideration given to their ability to engage, motivate or develop students' broader skills.

Interestingly, and unlike my own findings, the authors discovered virtually no evidence of collaborative tasks being set, and they called for

some discussion of whether homework should be more of a collaborative activity, involving family and friends far more than it seems to do at the moment. Again, if this is the intention, then it needs to be addressed far more explicitly – for example, by setting homework tasks which encourage peer collaboration, by finding ways to enable parents to support homework, and by

using homework to create more links between the school curriculum and out-of-school life. (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 42)

Indeed, though clearly a largely underdeveloped area in the context of these schools, my own research built upon this identified weakness in prevailing homework models as I took the opportunity to explore these issues further in my case study school.

Perhaps of greatest significance for Hughes and Greenhough (2002), their project suggested that the newly implemented (but subsequently withdrawn) national homework guidelines for primary schools did raise significant issues for their schools at that time. The fact that many primary schools in England had no history or culture of homework in 2002 might well have led to their finding that many of the teachers and parents they interviewed were resistant to homework. As my conceptual framework explains later in this chapter, the homework context I encountered was markedly different.

My third and final exemplar of a conceptual framework, authored by Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) is a literature review centred around one specific aspect of homework practice, the involvement of parents. Indeed it is titled 'Parental Involvement in Homework', and I initially introduced this work in chapter two of this thesis.

The authors' rationale was to understand why parents involve themselves with their children's homework, how they do so and how their involvement influences student outcomes.

Findings suggest that parents involve themselves in student homework because they believe that they should be involved, believe that their involvement will make a positive difference, and perceive that their children or children's teachers want their involvement. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; 1)

As far as my work is concerned, these findings set the scene for further exploration in a specific school environment. My own research extended this rather general series of parental aspirations by relating these ideas to a concrete scenario. In this way, I was able to add more detail and depth to their findings and explore some of the complexities surrounding them.

In common with my own work, Hoover-Dempsey et al. (ibid) discovered that parental involvement in homework is multi-faceted. It can include establishing structures and routines for homework, actively working alongside a child and helping children to

develop good learning strategies at home. The authors also acknowledged the role teachers can play in helping to advise and support parents about homework problems and this is also an important aspect which emerged from my own research.

However, Hoover-Dempsey's (ibid) conceptual outlook was not phase-specific, encompassing research from all phases of education and it concentrated solely upon institutions in the United States. As such, its findings are interesting and informative for the English primary school theorist and practitioner but not exclusively relevant.

Consequently, current theoretical positions and pre-existing conceptual frameworks offer much by way of background and guidance to the contemporary theorist in pursuit of new models for homework. My own research was informed by these ideas but not constrained by them. What I had identified was the need for a conceptual model for homework, specific to this modern, English primary school and taking into account the views not only of parents but of teachers and the pupils themselves.

5.5 My conceptual framework for homework

I have constructed an action-oriented framework, whose primary purposes are to guide, support and inform parents, prospective parents, pupils, teachers and governors about this school's view of homework. This conceptual framework is unique because it has been empirically constructed in line with the collected views of these primary school pupils, their teachers and their parents. This has allowed my model of homework to filter out those elements more commonly associated with secondary age study such as examination preparation and highly subject-based tasks. Instead I have been able to present, uniquely, a model of homework tailored to the social, emotional and developmental needs of younger children and located within the specific sociocultural landscape of one English primary school. Whilst this conceptual framework has been personalised around the views of stakeholders at one school, I suggest that there may be opportunities for other primary schools to recognise its value, perhaps as a template or a prototype, which could be adapted to meet their particular requirements. What follows is an exploration of the key components of my framework, supported by a depiction of those theoretical and conceptual assumptions which have underpinned its development.

I have produced a diagrammatic model of my framework (see page 172) to help illustrate the interconnectedness of homework's key tasks with its core principles. This

illustration has at its centre, the tripartite relationship between pupils, parents and teachers.

5.5 (i) Homework is valuable; it supports learning and child development

The value of homework is twofold and both aspects are equally important. To begin with, it was clear from my research that all stakeholder groups believed homework to be a valuable aid to learning. Teachers were certain that when children did their homework properly, carefully and regularly, they performed better in their lessons. Teachers told me that they understood, through experience and through working with children on a daily basis that those pupils who took their homework seriously performed better at school than those who did not. The children themselves were also very clear about this. They described how doing their homework made them feel more confident at school. They also explained that when they did not do their homework they were more likely to become confused because they had not taken the opportunity to reflect upon their learning at home. Parents too felt strongly that homework helped their children to learn more effectively. Many parents described how they enjoyed finding out what their child was learning at school and they explained that they discussed homework with their child knowing that these conversations provided worthwhile opportunities to consolidate learning; talking about homework with their child was a popular approach which many parents employed in order to support learning at home.

The idea of homework making a valuable, even a direct contribution to learning has been widely discussed in the literature. Whilst studies such as those by Kralovec and Buell (2001), Solomon et al. (2002), Bennett and Kalish, (2006) and Kohn (2006, 2012) have questioned the value of homework as an aid to learning of any sort, others including Hattie (2008), Hughes and Greenhough (2002), Dettmers et al. (2009) and Sharp et al. (2001) have cautiously documented potential academic advantages, particularly in secondary schools. One study involving both English primary and secondary schools concluded that

Homework has the potential to make an important contribution to classroom learning [although] in practice this potential is not always realised. (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 36)

Nevertheless, the authors further inferred that in their participating primary schools, the effectiveness of homework as an aid to learning was being diluted because the nature of

the homework tasks being set were inappropriately matched to the learning interests of these younger pupils. Furthermore, they similarly reported that opportunities for collaborative learning across families were also being neglected and

there is a real danger that this is being replaced by a more individual-based version of homework similar to that practised at KS3. (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 39)

A particular strength of my conceptual framework lies in its recognition that homework for primary age pupils must be tailored to their developmental circumstances as young children rather than predicated on outmoded, historical and customary notions of traditional homeworking borrowed from secondary school practices.

My conceptual model asserts that when appropriate and engaging tasks are devised by teachers and understood by pupils and parents and when their meaning is clear, then homework does indeed have a positive impact on learning. I must be transparent of course in acknowledging that this assertion is made, not on the grounds of statistical representation, but because this is what the pupils themselves, their parents and their teachers all strongly hold to be evident to them as experienced exponents of homework at this school.

The challenge, indeed the unfeasibility of supporting these types of statement with quantitative data linking homework completion to pupil progress and attainment statistics is well documented (Cooper, 2001; Hallam, 2006; Rudman, 2014; Trautwein and Ludtke, 2009). My own conceptual positioning does, of course, stand in marked contrast to some existing notions and it represents a particular challenge to quantitative studies which have struggled to build evidence for a causal relationship between homework and increased student attainment (Chen and Stevenson, 1989b; Cool and Keith, 1991; Kohn, 2012; Smith, 1990). Nevertheless, it confirms and indeed augments findings from other studies which discussed in positive terms the role which homework can play in helping pupils to make good academic progress. (Cooper et al., 2001; Hattie, 2008; Hong and Milgram, 2000; Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; Trautwein et al., 2009; Xu and Corno, 2006). My conceptual position is based securely upon the findings from my research with the pupils, parents and teachers at one primary school; it will be important for others to consider potential similarities and differences in stakeholder

perspectives within their own institutions if they wish to adopt my framework for use in their schools.

Homework is equally valued in this primary school because of its capacity for supporting the personal and social development of young children. Some of these personal attributes, such as developing good learning habits and organising work and leisure time, are particularly beneficial to academic achievement although my parent and teacher participants view their growth as skills for life, not merely skills for learning. This is perhaps to be expected in a primary school because teachers are very likely to understand their role as educators in a broader sense and not simply to see themselves as teachers of the academic curriculum (Badjanova, 2014).

Homework builds personal responsibility and as children mature and move from reception class to year 6 in the primary school they should be given more responsibility for planning and completing their homework independently. Doing homework independently is a skill which develops slowly in children with practice and over time. Parents have an important role to play in judging how much help and support their own child needs with homework and to develop strategies which lead towards increasing self-regulation.

Whilst these aspects of homework are already broadly recognised in the theoretical literature (Rudman, 2014), homework studies have tended to focus on the development of skills for learning rather than skills for life. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) in their literature study of parental involvement in homework, asserted that

Parents' homework activities may focus on the child's development of learning processes and self-awarenesses conducive to achievement in general. Such activities may focus on helping the child assume developmentally appropriate independence for managing learning tasks. Parents' activities in this category may also enhance the child's self-management skills (e.g., for coping with distractions) and the child's skills in regulating emotional responses to homework and related learning tasks. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001; 203)

Nevertheless, parent participants in my study, perhaps appreciating the young ages of the children involved, viewed opportunities to encourage responsibility, independence, resilience and deadlines through homework as developmentally, not only educationally desirable. They viewed these as personal qualities which doing homework allowed them

to improve because these were skills appropriate to their current social and emotional readiness. Again, this is likely to be a reflection of the fact that this study was carried out in a primary school and consequently the value of homework as a tool for personal growth may be regarded very differently from its perceived value to parents of older students.

This concept in my framework builds upon an early idea from Cooper and Nye (1994) who reported that homework has the potential to foster independence and personal responsibility amongst students with learning difficulties. When interested in their homework, these students were reported to be learning about self-discipline, self-direction and independence. In my framework, these qualities are identified as transferable skills, which are well-suited to the development needs of primary aged children of all abilities.

My conceptualisation that well designed homework which is appropriately understood by parents can have a positive impact on pupils' personal development, endorses recent thinking by Horsley and Walker (2013). Using vignettes to illuminate homework practices in Australian primary and secondary schools, they offer case studies and a review of research on homework to argue in favour of a reconceptualization of homework to satisfy the learning and development needs of students and to make homework more productive. Their work argues that too much homework in Australian schools is repetitive with an unwarranted focus on practice-tasks meaning that, consequently, it does not contribute effectively to learning. In fact, my own framework still recognises the value of practice tasks as part of an overall strategy for homework but recommends that largely, homework which pupils find enjoyable, creative and engaging is more successful. Also, Horsley and Walker (ibid) claim that homework is often too complex and too challenging for students to complete unaided and they further suggest that homework tasks should aim to develop pupils' broader, personal skills, which they argue are often difficult to develop through classroom learning alone. My findings support the notion that homework should be well matched to pupils' skills and academic abilities but they also challenge the idea that pupils should always be able to do their homework without support; my framework advocates co-operative learning within families as a significant aid to the development of team-working skills and in order to provide opportunities for parents to collaborate with and to discover more about

their child's learning. Nevertheless, I am aware that the cultural settings for our two projects are very different and I acknowledge that much of Horsley and Walker's (2013) study is located within areas of significant social disadvantage. Homework, they report (ibid), is too burdensome for most families to undertake. My parent participants, contrastingly, were usually keen to be involved as long as they felt the tasks to be meaningful and the workload proportionate. This adds weight to our jointly held opinion that contextual factors exert significant influence over approaches to homework. Indeed, supporting the very notion which underpins my own study, Horsley and Walker (ibid) maintain that homework is a cultural practice and as such there are likely to be different approaches, different priorities and different ways to promote effective homework routines in different schools. Fascinatingly, their work also recognises the central need to

develop teachers' understanding, capacity and motivation to make homework more personal and meaningful. (Horsley and Walker, 2013; 143)

My own conceptual framework is strongly supportive of the idea that schools should place particular onus upon teachers to ensure that parents and pupils understand how homework tasks are relevant to their students' needs. My conceptualisation responds to issues of personalisation by warranting that the tasks teachers offer primary age pupils should be primarily fun and engaging, and contain opportunities for choice.

5.5 (ii) Making homework meaningful

Successful homework in the school I have studied is homework that parents and pupils find to be meaningful. Whilst there is no argument in the published literature to dispute this statement, there are many existing conceptualisations of what meaningful homework might be. Few researchers would wish to argue with the following statement, for example.

Meaningful homework should be purposeful, efficient, personalized, doable, and inviting. (Vatterott, 2010; 15)

My framework finds no argument with these fundamental principles, although it does seek to extend existing notions of meaningfulness to include a fuller exposition of the views of pupils themselves. This is critically important for homework in a primary school where young children's conceptions about meaningful learning activity reflect their developing interest in learning more about themselves and the world around them.

Children want homework to be fun and they crave opportunities to exercise some degree of choice over their homework. When teachers set projects for homework, for example, children might choose how they present their homework, perhaps by making a model or a designing a power-point presentation or producing a drawing. The essential theme is that if pupils can choose to some extent, then they are more likely to feel a sense of purposeful engagement with the task. Young children described how much they enjoyed undertaking research as part of their homework. If a class topic is about Africa, for example, children benefit from choosing an African animal or an African country to research. This type of homework links choice, technology and research activity and children can be directed to present their findings in an interesting way; this again allows pupils to exercise choice. These tasks are motivational for young children; they offer positive perspectives and encourage enjoyment of learning. If young children can experience a sense of ownership through the personalisation of their own homework they are more likely to enjoy their work and complete their tasks.

As a teacher once said, "I never heard of a student not doing his work; it's our work he's not doing." When we customize tasks to fit student learning styles and interests, the task becomes theirs, not ours. The goal of ownership is to create a personal relationship between the student and the content. (Vatterott, 2009; 87)

Whilst it may be unrealistic to suggest that all homework tasks can involve choice, certainly all tasks should be designed with a clear purpose and this purpose needs to be made evident to the child. Teachers need to explain carefully about the task so that, for example, clarifying how 'practising putting punctuation into these sentences will help you to structure your own writing more effectively', would be useful information for child and parent alike. Consequently I have ensured that in my framework, tasks designed for practice or reinforcement have not been eradicated but their uses have been contextualised. Reinforcement, corroboration and repetition activities can feel frustrating to young children (Tomlinson, 2008), especially when they are presented in large segments. Children complained to me about getting too many worksheets, too many sentences to write out and too many spellings to learn all at once. Literature reminds us that in the classroom such tasks prove more useful when disseminated in small amounts, a few at a time spread over a week or two at school (Marzano et al., 2001). Lots of practice might well be beneficial for some pupils but distributing these learning opportunities thoughtfully in the homework we set is likely to be more effective than trying to achieve everything in one sitting.

Whilst acknowledging that there remains a place for some carefully planned, practice and reinforcement tasks within homework routines, my framework recognises that homework is unlikely to realise its potential as a contributor to either learning or personal development unless young children view their homework positively. Naturally, this requires teachers to ensure that their pupils understand why a particular task has been set and to allow them to make choices about their homework. Nevertheless, whilst understanding homework's rationale and exercising choice are unquestionably important issues, there is one further, crucial consideration when devising homework for primary age pupils.

A better way forward would be for teachers to ensure that homework is enjoyed, valued, and not seen as a disliked, solitary activity. A challenge for the education profession is to move from viewing homework policies in terms of time spent by students and tasks to be completed to developing a view of homework as an opportunity to truly encourage seamless learning across home and school contexts. (Warton, 2001; 161)

These concepts of enjoyment, pupil engagement and linking learning across home and school have all influenced the development of my own conceptual understanding of homework. My pupil participants called for homework tasks which they could enjoy and which would help them to learn; one of their favourite activities was homework which they could do using computers. The capacity for technology to support homework, to excite children and to open children's minds towards new learning horizons is a powerful instigator of learning.

Surprisingly perhaps, studies exploring the use of computer technology and homework are uncommon, although one such project did compare computer-based and traditional mathematical learning by fifth grade students (the equivalent of Year 6 pupils in an English primary school) in a North American elementary school. In terms of learning alone, the authors reported that

In this group of 28 students, students learned significantly more when given computer feedback than when doing traditional paper-and-pencil homework. (Mendicino et al., 2009; 331)

As access to technology in classrooms and in pupils' home continues to increase, primary school teachers have increasing access to a multitude of tools capable of enhancing children's learning and motivation. The report concludes on a positive note, asserting that in mathematics, with computer-based homework

students can learn more than they would by doing their homework with paper and pencil. Students get immediate feedback on their answers and help when they need it. In addition to better learning results, teachers can take advantage of the convenience of having homework automatically graded and recorded. Students can also benefit from Web-based homework because they may take their homework more seriously when they know it will be graded. (Mendicino et al., 2009; 343).

Consequently, my framework highlights the many opportunities which exist at our school for children to do their homework using computers. These tasks are not limited to traditional content learning but extend into tasks such as research, preparing a presentation for the class or writing a story with images, music or animation. A necessary caveat is that teachers must remain sensitive to the children who may not have easy access to these technologies at home by considering presenting such opportunities as choices alongside traditional methods of homework presentation.

Amongst other worthwhile, meaningful and engaging tasks which my framework proposes, is homework which requires children to act as experts and teachers. This involves some re-conceptualisation of the traditional view that the child is always the learner and the parent is the expert. A task such as 'Explain to an adult at home what a square number is,' is one example of how homework can assist the development of oral communication, promote learning-based conversations at home and help children to reinforce their own understanding of a new concept. Indeed, one suggested benefit of homework is its ability to promote communication within families (Cowan and Hallam, 1999). Equally, when a child is asked to explain something to another person, that explanation helps the child to understand it more securely. Homework such as this, where the child is given responsibility for teaching a concept to family members, is a recognition that homework tasks can be meaningful to pupils and parents because of their capacity to reinforce learning without recourse to repetitive exercises which children often dislike.

My framework also advocates the use of flipped-learning homework activities. Flipped learning is a relatively new approach to the conceptualisation of learning cultures where the student prepares at home for learning in the classroom.

Flipped Learning is a pedagogical approach in which direct instruction moves from the group learning space to the individual learning space, and the resulting group space is transformed into a dynamic, interactive learning environment

where the educator guides students as they apply concepts and engage creatively in the subject matter. (FLN, 2014; 1)

Our school's existing 'Talk Homework' is one example of an activity that requires children to prepare for the next writing lesson by discussing content and ideas at home, in advance. Such preparatory homework activities help stimulate children's thinking (Berrett, 2012). They also invite the inclusion of families in practical, but short and seldom onerous participatory tasks and they help to ensure that pupils feel confident about impending class-based learning. This is meaningful homework; it is directly linked to on-going teaching and learning, it promotes collaborative activity either with parents, siblings or friends and teachers report that children who complete these tasks regularly make better progress in their written work. Moreover, one study examining the application of flipped learning within a higher education institution in Nashville, Tennessee concluded that

Although students' thinking about their own learning is not an inherent part of the flipped classroom, the higher cognitive functions associated with class activities, accompanied by the on-going peer/instructor interaction that typically accompanies them, can readily lead to the metacognition associated with deep learning. (Brame, 2013; 2)

Whilst more generally associated with some college or university teaching models, my framework proposes the suitability of flipped learning for modified deployment as part of a primary school's homeworking structure. The concept of a flipped classroom has been developed to embrace concepts including active learning, pupil engagement and the effective use of learning time and resources (Tucker, 2012). The intrinsic value of flipped learning lies in the rescheduling of teaching time into a workshop culture where students can applying their understanding and interact purposefully, often through practical activities, with fellow students and teachers. This encourages collaboration and team-working to take place more efficiently and at least one study (Brame, 2013) indicates its potential to develop deepening levels of learning amongst participating pupils.

Homework must also be meaningful for parents. Homework has the capacity to provide many opportunities for parents to learn about their children's academic life at school. To make the most of this, my framework urges parents to show a strong interest in their child's homework and to seize opportunities to talk about learning with their child. This

is an important consideration for parents because it shows their children that their homework and indeed all their learning is valued and respected (Carpentieri et al., 2011). Children love it when their parents are interested in their learning.

In this regard, my framework for homework does not differ markedly from some previous findings. Indeed, my findings echo other studies (Carpentieri et al., 2011; Desforges and Abouchar, 2003; MacNaughton and Hughes, 2008; Xu and Corno, 2003) which have reported that parental involvement in homework is related positively to successful learning and also to a number of personal characteristics such as resilience, time-management and organisational competence which are considered beneficial to making good academic progress. Nevertheless, my conceptual framework offers a view which contrasts noticeably with other studies (Cooper, 1989; Glaeser-Zirkuda and Fuss, 2004; Hock and Krohne, 1989; Levin et al., 1997) which have questioned the value of parental involvement in homework, often on the grounds of the interruption it can cause to family life or the lack of parental skills in supporting some homework tasks and even the tendency for some parents to over-structure, over-control or give negative feedback to their children. Such interactions have been shown to be stressful for students and to have a negative effect on achievement and motivation. My study found that, whilst some parents and some pupils did indeed find some aspects of homework stressful, these stressors were confined to occasional and infrequent incidents only and they did not detract from either pupils' or parent participants' core views that homework was overwhelmingly beneficial and that learning was enhanced as a result of parents' involvement.

This issue does, however, lead me to consider the particular roles and responsibilities which different stakeholders undertake within my conceptual framework for homework.

5.5 (iii) Roles and responsibilities

Parents' homework responsibilities

My study highlighted confusion amongst participants about the roles and responsibilities of parents as they discussed with me their attempts to support homework. This confusion surrounded uncertainty about the extent to which the school expected homework to be completed independently by pupils or undertaken with adult support. This very issue has also been highlighted in the homework literature and

notably by Hughes and Greenhough (2002) who described a similar situation in their study of a small group of English primary and secondary schools.

Parents held different views on whether they should check their child's work or not. Some monitored their children's work quite closely while others found such a practice undesirable. (Hughes and Greenhough, *ibid*; 5)

Consequently, my framework has been able to address and clarify this issue by asserting that there is much to be gained from parents' active involvement in homework. Furthermore, my framework indicates that all parents, supported by advice from teachers where necessary, are responsible for moderating their levels of involvement to suit the learning and development needs of their children. Parents know their own children better than anyone else (Berger and Riojas-Cortez, 2004). They are responsible for helping their child to develop these good learning habits by ensuring that skills such as responsibility, resilience and independence improve over time. The parental role is foremost about taking an interest in the child's homework and helping the child to establish a good routine for homework completion. How this is achieved will vary enormously from household to household and from child to child. A key consideration for the parent is likely to be the child's own level of interest and motivation.

Here it is worth pausing briefly to consider the concept of learning-centred motivation. Distinguishing between extrinsic and intrinsic motivation has become a recognised feature of many learning-centred theoretical models (Ormrod, 2012). Despite a multiplicity of definitions, intrinsic motivation is broadly defined as the habitual inclination to become engaged in learning because learning itself is understood by the student to be valuable, interesting, enjoyable or satisfying (Ryan and Deci, 2000). In contrast, extrinsic motivation is commonly explained as an intention to engage with learning in order to obtain particular benefits other than those offered by the learning itself (Steel, 2012). Extrinsic motivational characteristics are generally associated with the desire to achieve a good academic grade or to win the approval of teachers, parents or peers or, of course, to avoid negative consequences such as low examination results or sanctions imposed by teachers or parents. Clearly, the possession of intrinsic and extrinsic motivational characteristics are not mutually exclusive (Marinak and Gambrell, 2008) although it is generally assumed that, for most students, either one predisposition or the other prevails.

My framework recognises these individual differences between young children. Whilst attempting to secure their intrinsic motivation by offering interesting and rewarding homework activities, it also alerts parents to the differing levels of homework support they are likely to need to offer to their child on different occasions. Essentially, my framework presents parents with a positive invitation to become involved in homework by illustrating how rewarding and meaningful that involvement can be. At the same time, however, it demands more of parents than existing conceptual models because it asserts that parents need to accept responsibility for guiding learning at home if their children are to maximise the opportunities which homework is offering. Parents at this school are ready to accept this responsibility and some suggested that this could be elucidated in our guidance. At the same time, parents also look to the school to provide clear help, advice and support on an individual basis when they need it.

Some support for this approach is to be found in a study of secondary age students in German schools which employed statistical, self-report data to explore the relationship between parental support, student motivation, and the students' own emotions during homework activities (Knollmann and Wild, 2007). The authors concluded that the students' different emotional reactions to either homework autonomy or directed, instructional parental support

might merely reflect the well-known finding that students who have a negative self-concept of their ability prefer structured learning environments, while students with positive self-concepts of their own ability prefer increased learning autonomy. (Knollmann and Wild, 2007; 65)

Developing this statement further, the report explains that

students with extrinsic motivation seem to feel better when parents provide a strictly organized learning environment, thus ensuring that their extrinsic intentions (e.g., avoiding failure) are met. (Knollmann and Wild, *ibid*; 72)

My parent participants told me that they will usually know if their own child needs to be given clear direction and support coupled with a high level of encouragement and monitoring in order to establish good homeworking habits. Conversely, parents also reported to me that they can judge whether all that their child requires is a small amount of support, coupled perhaps with the occasional enquiry such as, 'Did you get much homework this week?' This might be all that is needed if the child is, for example, an

older, self-motivated learner. Partnership between home and school is a recurring theme in the educational literature and particularly in early years and primary education. Nevertheless, this concept of partnership between parent and teacher is under-represented in existing homework literature. My conceptual framework seeks to challenge and simultaneously to empower parents by asking them to think carefully about the type of involvement they deem most appropriate for their child. It also supports this process by confirming that teachers will help and advise them; homework works best when families and teachers support each other.

...teachers are really the glue that holds the home/school partnerships together. (Patrikakou and Weissberg, 1999; 36)

My framework confirms that there is no one, single approach that must be employed by all parents but it does make it clear that quality parental support for homework requires judgements to be made and interest in homework to be shown.

When parents desire and choose to be a partner with their child's teacher, the positive effect grows exponentially. This positive and nurturing atmosphere is the best recipe for success. (Education Equals, 2013; 1)

Parents however, cannot take sole responsibility for their children's homework success. Teachers also play a major role in the process.

Teachers' homework responsibilities

Teachers are responsible for planning homework activities. This means that they must be certain that the tasks they plan are well matched to the children's abilities and relevant to their learning needs (Epstein, 2001). They need to ensure that a balanced amount of homework is set, not too much or too little.

Furthermore, my conceptual framework asserts that they also need to make the homework interesting and fun with sufficient opportunities for pupils to research, to choose and to be creative. Meaningful homework will not emerge without careful planning and consideration by teachers about the twin values of improving learning and supporting personal development, which our learning community recognises as key constituents of quality homework at this school. Meaningful homework is homework which the children themselves enjoy and which families believe to be beneficial for their children's learning and development. Consequently it becomes each teacher's responsibility to plan homework which is purposeful, interesting, varied and useful and

where the tasks themselves promote choice, collaboration, preparation, research and creativity; these are descriptors which our pupils associate with meaningful homework. This concept expands upon an idea from one of the very few studies to examine teachers' roles in homework preparation.

Teachers should strive to design high-quality homework so that students who complete their assignments will, in fact, benefit from their efforts. (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; 185)

Hughes and Greenhough (2002) considered, albeit tangentially, aspects of teachers' homework preparation and found that, especially in secondary schools, teachers of mathematics, languages and humanities often devised homework instinctively, usually towards the end of the lesson in order to provide practice and reinforcement. Teachers of science and English, however, tended to develop their homework tasks, again often responsively, earlier in the lesson. In many cases, the authors discovered that the process of setting the homework became a distraction from the lesson itself and

This meant that the homework assignment was not always communicated as clearly or effectively as it might have been. In some of the parent interviews it was commented that the students did not always manage to get the homework down fully. (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002; 4)

My study acknowledges these potential weaknesses in homework preparation routines. It also builds upon earlier work by Esroy and Anagun (2009) who stated that that effective homework planning and the process of communicating about the task to pupils and parents are critically important features of quality homework routines with younger pupils.

Furthermore, Tas et al. (2014) have recently published details of a study based upon survey data collected from one hundred and sixty-eight middle school science teachers in Turkish schools. Exploring the homework practices of these teachers, the authors used structural equation modelling and concluded that

Teachers who placed value on homework were more likely to communicate with parents about homework and communication with parents facilitated students' homework completion. (Tas et al., 2014; 45)

My own study recognises that parents in our school are likely to embrace and support homework when they and their children are given clear information by teachers about the purpose of the task and when guidance is given about how to do the homework as well as being given sufficient time to complete it. This can be seen as a challenge to

some documented practices (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002) which have noted teachers' inclinations to devise homework tasks ad hoc rather than incorporate them into longer term planning strategies.

Regrettably, it is apparent that research into the role of the teacher in the homework process is extremely limited (Tas et al., 2014) and consequently there is little empirical evidence to help me locate my own findings beyond this point. One North American based project was helpful, however. Epstein and Van Voorhis (2001) drew on data from existing studies into different aspects of homework to explore the relationship between students' homework completion rates, the amount of time spent doing homework, parental involvement in homework and the teacher's role in the homework process. They reported that

When teachers design homework to meet specific purposes and goals, more students complete their homework and benefit from the results and more families remain involved in their children's education limited. (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; 191)

My framework acknowledges this implied need for an improved understanding of the aims and purposes of homework in order to provide guidance for teachers. Simply setting homework is not good enough; homework must be designed and in order to do so teachers must be well informed about its agreed intentions. My framework provides this information and in addition, by enlightening parents, pupils and teachers simultaneously, it reduces the potential for ambiguity between stakeholder groups.

Marking and feedback on completed homework remains a contentious issue. A contemporary study has reported that concerns about a high marking commitment adversely influence middle school science teachers' homework practices and limit the amount of homework they are prepared to set.

Class size negatively predicted the value teachers attach to homework. (Tas et al., 2014; 62)

Because of limited time, it can be very hard for teachers to provide feedback on every piece of homework, unlike when they mark children's class books and provide extensive feedback to the children. In a report commissioned by the Department for Education, leadership consultants Hay McBer (2000) signalled their expectation that homework, especially in secondary schools, would be securely embedded in classroom

practice and that it would be marked for the benefit of students. No supplementary guidance was given about how this was to be accomplished.

The effective teachers ensure that homework is integrated with class work, is tailored to individual needs and is regularly and constructively marked. (Hay McBer, 2000; 15)

However, my framework does address this issue because my research demonstrated that it is of fundamental importance to pupils, parents and teachers. I recognise the need for teachers to provide feedback on homework and I argue that this can be accomplished in a variety of ways. These can include ensuring that children know the results of spelling tests and times tables tests when pupils have been practising these at home. Teachers can also arrange for children to mark and reflect upon their own homework (self-marking) and to look at each other's homework (peer marking) and this can be an efficient and interesting way for the children themselves to be involved in the assessment of their own homework.

Peer marking and self-marking not only help to make efficient use of teachers' time (Loddington, 2008) but they have also been shown to improve students' understanding across a range of disciplines as well as helping to improve metacognitive skills (Sadler and Good, 2006). Further justification for my application of these techniques to homework marking, stem from conceptualisations which present them as integral to the creation of a cooperative classroom environment where pupils support each other rather than simply competing for the best grades (Orsmond, 2011).

Equally, my framework advises teachers that when a project has been set for homework (for example, 'Find out about The Romans and produce a model or a folder to show what you have done') teachers should invite parents to come into school to look at the projects and to hear the children describing their work and explaining what they have discovered. This can be an extremely positive, practical and efficient method of providing feedback which, simultaneously, encourages and promotes children's communication skills. Developing oral communications skills and providing opportunities for pupils to speak in front of different audiences are a high priority across primary and secondary schools.

Speech, language and communication underpin cognitive, emotional and social development and are crucial skills for learning and life. It is still generally

assumed that most development of speech and language happens in the early years. (Hartshorne, 2011; 4)

Indeed, a purposeful focus on speech, language, and communication is viewed by many commentators as critically important if schools are to enable adolescents to become socially as well as academically successful (Conti-Ramsden et al., 2009; Snow et al., 2007; Spencer et al., 2009). This can only strengthen my proposal that opportunities for primary age pupils to practise speaking to an audience should be made available through homework-related assessment opportunities, especially if these can be integrated into normal classroom practice.

Teachers are also responsible for setting the tone for homework in their classrooms. My framework clarifies that setting firm expectations that homework will be done, explaining to pupils why it is important and communicating effectively with parents about homework, especially when any issues or concerns emerge, are all core expectations of teachers.

Mine is not the first framework to propose such expectations for teachers. Links between homework design and the high expectations of teachers were proposed in one influential report for education ministers. Describing outstanding practice in high performing secondary schools, the authors reported that

There were significant correlations of climate with high expectations, time and resource management, planning and homework. (Hay McBer, 2000; 31)

However, literature advises us that the most effective way for teachers to ensure that their homework is completed is by communicating effectively with parents. Sometimes an individual parent will want to talk to the teacher about homework. This may be about the purpose of the task, about how a particular technique is taught, about how to encourage their child to be more responsible with homework or about a family crisis which is impacting on homework. Here, the teacher needs to listen, offer support, advice or encouragement in the spirit of partnership. These expectations are, of course, merely a reflection of an effective teacher's daily work with parents. My framework is further characterised by teachers' setting high quality homework tasks, carefully designing these to comply with the school's understanding of homework's aims and carefully matching the content to the needs of their pupils.

Students' personal investments [in homework] also may be influenced by the strength and clarity of teachers' messages and expectations for good work, and by whether the design and content of the homework are well matched to students' increasingly diverse skills and interests. (Epstein and Van Voorhis, 2001; 184)

By the time children leave primary school, their homework habits should be securely established because this helps them to continue being responsible, independent learners, able to take full advantage of all the educational opportunities that lie ahead of them. Hence, and with this aspiration firmly embedded, what does my framework demand of the pupils themselves?

Pupils' homework responsibilities

As children get older and move up through the year groups at this primary school, this conceptual model establishes an expectation that they will take an increasingly responsible and independent approach to their own homework. Pupils are responsible for knowing what homework they have and when it needs to be done. They are responsible for asking for additional support from their teachers and parents especially if they do not understand what to do and they are responsible for ensuring that work is completed with a good standard of care and presentation. Teachers will not accept poor quality work in class and neither will they do so with homework.

Children are also charged with particular responsibilities for taking a positive, industrious approach. Teachers invest a good deal of time planning and preparing homework tasks and they do this in order to help the children learn and develop. The child's role is to adopt a constructive mind-set and to co-operate with their parents and teachers in an open, honest way. Completing their homework on time and to a good standard is a sure sign that the child is maturing, developing independence and responsibility and wanting to learn.

Very little has been written about young children's homework responsibilities in the academic literature. In their study, Hughes and Greenhough (2002) commented that secondary age students appeared to act strategically in deciding which homework they would expend the greatest efforts to complete and where they could succeed without

trying too hard. The authors also expressed surprise at the extent to which even these teenage students were extrinsically motivated by various rewards and star charts.

Warton's (2001) study of students' own views about homework found it necessary to return for evidence to a much earlier report by Chen and Stevenson (1989b) in which one hundred and nineteen U.S. high school students were asked to rate the reasons why they took the amount of time they did on their homework. Responses varied between pragmatic explanations that the task itself required a certain amount of time to be completed, to the idea that their parents expected a certain time to be taken, regardless of the task. Only a tiny minority of students mentioned actually enjoying the tasks. Chen and Stevenson (ibid) subsequently posited that this evidenced a predominantly extrinsically motivated approach to their homework.

It has also been argued that by focusing more on positive attitudes to learning and by encouraging ever greater student responsibility and autonomy, a more intrinsic homeworking interest will develop (Bryan et al., 2001; Xu and Corno, 2006; Xu and Yuan, 2003). In support of my own conceptual assertion that pupils, even at primary age, need to be given clear guidelines about their own homework responsibilities, (yet simultaneously contradicting of my own view that tasks can be made appealing and engaging) one report concluded

It is time students also were encouraged to understand why they are required to complete a task that, for so many, is unpleasant. (Warton, 2001; 163)

Here I acknowledge the contribution which Dweck's (2006) work has made towards my thinking in this area. According to Dweck (2006), every person can be placed on a continuum and ordered in linear fashion based upon where their inherent notions of ability lie. In an educational context, some students are likely to believe that their success emanates from their own innate ability; these students are described as possessing a fixed mindset. Others, who contrastingly suppose that their achievements are based on effort, hard work, learning, and application are categorised as having a growth mind-set. Children in particular may not necessarily be aware of their own mindset, but their teachers can readily identify this trait by observing their reaction to setbacks. Fixed-mindset pupils are afraid of failing because it confirms their negative view of their own abilities. Growth mind-set pupils, meanwhile, understand that their achievements can always be improved. My framework is offered to stakeholders at our

school alongside positive affirmations from pupil participants themselves, their teachers and their parents that homework will certainly help them to fulfil their own potential as learners. We may not be able to change the fundamental mindsets of all our children but, at this critical time in these young children's development, it is incumbent upon us all as educators to explain how positive attitudes can impact favourably upon each child's unique potential.

In a growth mindset students understand that their talents and abilities can be developed through effort, good teaching and persistence. They don't necessarily think everyone's the same or anyone can be Einstein, but they believe everyone can get smarter if they work at it. (Dweck, 2012; 2)

Research has also demonstrated that young children often feel more positive about their educational experiences when they are given opportunities to work, talk and learn cooperatively (Gilles and Adrian, 2003; Sharan, 2010; Siltala et al., 2007; Tsay and Brady, 2010). I have been keen to relate these ideas to homework and consequently my framework establishes the need to offer more opportunities for children to undertake some of their homework co-operatively.

5.5 (iv) Homework as a social activity

I conceptualise that doing homework with friends, family members or at a homework club increases the likelihood that the homework will be completed. Hoover-Dempsey et al. (2001) recognised that parents who read with their child find that this activity is doubly advantageous because it also

offers parents a way of explicitly valuing children's schoolwork and valuing learning. (Hoover-Dempsey et al., *ibid*; 6)

Moreover, my framework responds to an interesting observation by Warton (2001) who reviewed the literature concerning students' homework views. She concluded that most children receive homework tasks which are not conducive to cooperative learning and she further asserted that they often experience negative emotions about homework as a consequence.

Homework completed alone — the most common experience — was viewed significantly more negatively than homework completed in more social settings. The effect of the social context with regard to the meanings attached to homework cannot be ignored. If it is constructed as largely a solitary, independent activity it risks being viewed in a negative light because of the setting, possibly regardless of the academic content of the task. (Warton, 2001; 159)

For these reasons, my framework attempts to allay some parental concerns about the efficacy of children collaborating together over homework tasks. It also encourages teachers to feel confident about planning tasks which are specifically designed to be undertaken cooperatively and it applauds the efforts of a small number of parents who are already developing their own inter-family homeworking structures.

To this end, our school also intends to prioritise the establishment of its own homework club. This is intended to alleviate pressure on any parents who are experiencing difficulties in supporting homework and to provide dedicated opportunities for children to undertake homework collaboratively. Studies by Train et al. (2000) and also by Sharp et al. (2001) both found that headteachers, parents and pupils shared positive feelings about their newly-established homework clubs. Nevertheless, it will be important to monitor the impact of our new club carefully, especially in the light of studies which have presented a more ambivalent picture of their worth. Keith et al. (2004) for example, reported that homework undertaken at school-based homework clubs evidenced no discernible impact on American high school students' learning. Also, albeit rather more positively, Cosden et al. (2001) analysed the findings from ten studies of homework clubs across the United States and concluded that their success may actually lie in their ability to arrest any potential diminution in a student's academic performance rather than lead to any noticeable increase.

5.6 Summary remarks

This is a framework which has been designed in order to meet the needs, expectations and homework practices of one English primary school's learning community. It has been empirically informed and simultaneously, conceptually refined with reference to existing theory and scholarship. As evidenced throughout this chapter, it acknowledges current understanding, re-examines some aspects of contemporary thinking, challenges some assumptions and extends a number of features of existing homework models.

However, the evident limitation of this work is that it is simply one case study of one school and understandably it presents one highly situational, socio-cultural, contextual model for the design, organisation and completion of homework. Its relevance will be most strongly appreciated by the children who attend this school, their families who live

in this community and the teachers who work here. As a study it is neither longitudinal nor statistically quantified but its findings do reflect the ideas and opinions of all those stakeholders who kindly agreed to participate by sharing their views with me.

I confidently anticipate that other primary schools, especially those situated in similar localities or with comparable community demographics, may be interested in reading this framework and considering how they could adjust it in order to suit their own particular circumstances.

In order to assist other interested theorists, I have devised a diagrammatic model of my framework (see page 172) which illustrates its key conceptual features. This model evolved as a result of my research findings which I discussed in chapter four and my conceptual analysis of homework at Maylandsea Primary School which I have presented in this chapter. My diagrammatic model places the '*value*' of homework at the centre of my conceptualisation, facilitated by the tripartite '*relationships*' between teachers, pupils and parents; these relationships are of critical importance if homework is to be successful. Surrounding these fundamental relationships in my diagram are the core principles of homework which parents, pupils and teachers expounded in my research conversations. These incorporate notions of '*choice*', '*engagement*' and '*fun*' together with concepts describing how homework is seen by stakeholders as '*relevant*', '*developmental*' and '*meaningful*' to pupils and families. The outer band of my model comprises the key tasks which teachers should set for homework and these are described as the key tasks. These key tasks are identified as '*applying*', '*co-operating*', '*making*', '*discussing*', '*preparing*', '*reflecting*', '*planning*', '*designing*', '*creating*' and '*reinforcing*'. These are the tasks which engage and enthuse pupils and which teachers and parents described as making homework valuable and meaningful for learning and personal development.

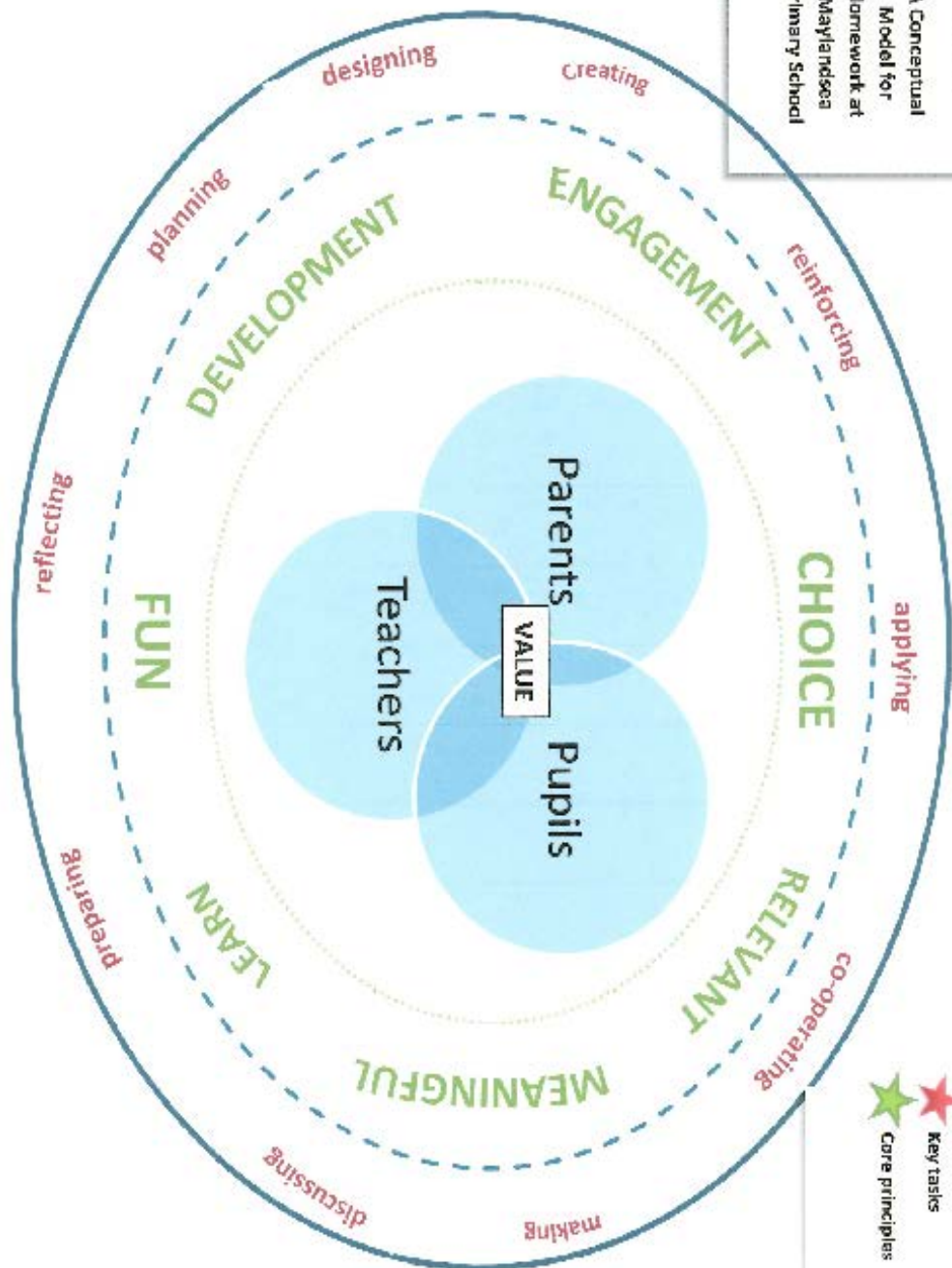
5.7 Moving forward

Much was learnt as I undertook this study. I have been particularly pleased with the success of the collegiate, informal, inclusive approach I have taken in order to engage stakeholders; indeed, this framework could not have been written except through participation. In my capacity as a headteacher there will be many more areas of school development where this methodology can be implemented. Also, as a researcher keen to

influence educational practice, I am planning to author a short paper about my study, focusing on the process of insider-research.

In chapter six, in addition to presenting my framework for homework, I also discuss my plans for its implementation, evaluation, refinement and development.

Figure 1:
A Conceptual
Model for
Homework at
Maylandsea
Primary School



*Don't be a fool, 'coz homework's cool,
Especially when you follow the rule.
'Just ask, if you're stuck.'
Chloe (age 9)*

Chapter 6: Supporting families and teachers: A new framework for homework

6.1 The significance of this framework

What follows is the framework for homework at Maylandsea Primary School. This is a significant document because, whilst English primary schools have generally operated their homework routines according to various assumptions, historic practices, traditions and conventions (Rudman, 2014), this framework has been derived empirically. As such, it represents a new, holistic approach to the formulation of a primary school homework policy. The framework has been designed to meet the needs of primary age pupils, their teachers and families in the context of this specific educational community.

6.2 Presenting the framework: ensuring accessibility and clarity

The need for a framework for homework at this particular school has also been well documented in the introductory chapter of this thesis. Homework at this school has been a contested concept with teachers unsure what sort of tasks to set, parents confused about the aims, values and purposes of homework as a whole and uncertain about their role in the homework process. This had resulted in pupils themselves not always completing their homework and teachers feeling tentative about whether and how to follow up on these issues. Essentially, this was viewed by senior leaders as a cycle of self-perpetuating confusion; clear guidance, positive direction, informed leadership and affirmative support was required (Rudman, 2013). The responsibility for devising homework policies and practices has been delegated to individual schools and for many this has proved challenging.

We trust head teachers to set the homework policy for their school. They know their pupils best and should be free to make these decisions without having to adhere to unnecessary bureaucratic guidance. (DfE, 2012b; 1)

As I scripted this framework for homework I considered that, as an applied instrument, I needed to ensure that it exhibited a number of key characteristics; it had to be clearly understandable, accessible, available, logical, consistent and coherent. It would be read by many different families from many different educational and social backgrounds and by newly qualified and experienced teachers as well as by governors and classroom

support staff. For these reasons I decided to avoid using technical, pedagogical or complex language wherever possible and I wrote the document with a broad readership in mind. The framework has been designed to be accessible to older pupils and a simplified, child-friendly version has also been created which should be helpful for parents to share with younger children (see appendix 5). A diagrammatic mind-map of the framework has also been produced (see page 185) to further support stakeholders.

It will be important to present the completed framework to the wider school community and to ensure that it becomes an accepted part of our practice. In addition to making the document available for easy reference on the school's website, a copy will be given to all new parents as they join the school. The framework will be launched at our autumn term parents' forum meeting where there will be a presentation followed by discussion opportunities. I anticipate that the time and energy which all participant groups have invested in helping with my research will be a positive and encouraging factor in our stakeholders' adoption of this framework (Pierce et al., 2001).

At Maylandsea Primary School we believe that a parents' forum (a group of parents and teachers established to discuss a range of ideas about aspects of school life including learning, school events and pupil-related activities) offers a useful, informal way for parents and staff to come together and discuss the development of the school. We like to encourage parents to build partnerships that will promote their involvement in their child's education. (School Forum Information, 2014; 1)

All our pupils will then be given a copy to take home, together with a simple feedback form which I will use to gauge the initial reactions from families. Meanwhile, all teachers will be invited to discuss the framework in scheduled staff-development meetings and preliminary responses in the form of early thoughts and reactions will be sought.

In terms of our school's leadership protocols, governors have already studied my framework as a draft proposal and they have signalled their intention to adopt it as a formal school document.

I have also received considerable interest from eight other primary schools in our locality whose governors and headteachers are keen to consider adopting it for use in their schools.

6.3 Linking theory and research to professional practice

When comparing this chapter with other chapters in this thesis, the reader will note that a different sort of prose has been employed. The style is less formal, less academic and less theoretical; this is a deliberate attempt to ensure that its intended audience of teachers, pupils and parents find it accessible yet informative.

This does not, however, make it any less important to this thesis. It is, in fact, of central importance because in many ways it represents the most fundamental aspect of my research, namely a tool for guiding teachers and families about how and why homework is organised at this school. This framework offers a new approach for making homework successful by bringing clarity, purpose, intention and understanding to the homework process. Whilst most schools have a homework policy and some even share that policy with parents, my framework puts stakeholders' views at the heart of the school's homework system; it offers a comprehensive, socio-culturally located perspective built around a shared ethos of value, meaning and relationships across this school's learning community. Essentially, it represents an innovative solution to a long-standing homework problem. When headteachers discuss homework with teachers, pupils and parents

the point of departure seems to be, "We've decided ahead of time that children will have to do something every night (or several times a week). Later on, we'll figure out what to make them do." This commitment to the idea of homework in the abstract is accepted by the overwhelming majority of schools—public and private, elementary and secondary. (Kohn, 2006b; 1)

This thesis is submitted as part of a professional doctorate and consequently it is incumbent upon me to ensure that my academic work impacts positively upon my professional responsibilities.

The professional doctorate in education prepares educators for the application of appropriate and specific practices, the generation of new knowledge, and for the stewardship of the profession. (The Carnegie Project, 2012; 4)

Consequently, this framework is offered to my school with the intention of making homework work for all our teachers, pupils and families.

6.4 A framework for homework at Maylandsea Primary School

A Framework for Homework At Maylandsea Primary School

Background to this framework

This framework has been developed with the help of those pupils, parents and teachers who kindly shared their views about homework with me.

The children in Years five and six completed a piece of reflective writing in which they shared their homework ideas with me, telling me all about the sort of homework they like, what they think homework is for, how it helps them to learn and about when and where they do their homework. Some children also took part in focused discussions about homework and this allowed me to find out even more about what they thought of homework at this school and about how we could make homework better.

Lots of parents also volunteered to talk about homework with me and I had conversations with as many parents as possible. Other parents volunteered to complete a questionnaire about homework and this gave everyone who wanted to, the opportunity to become involved.

Teachers helped me too. They got together and discussed homework with me and this enabled me to find out more about what it is like to be the person who sets the homework activities. I also found out lots of reasons why teachers think homework is important and how they want to make homework even better for children and their families.

I have also done lots of other research about homework. I have read lots of books and articles about homework, I have been finding out what sort of homework children get in other countries and I have read newspaper articles, stories, poems and academic studies about homework.

What is this framework for?

This is not a policy or a procedure and it does not go into lots of detail about homework routines.

What it **does** do is to set out the framework which explains about homework in this school. It states what our beliefs are about homework, why we think homework is important, how teachers, pupils and parents all have an important role to play and how everyone can take responsibility for homework being successful.

This framework is here to help everyone. Teachers can find out what is expected of them, pupils can learn what they need to do and it offers advice to parents to help them to support their children with homework.

This framework is divided into five main sections.

Section 1: What is the value of homework?

a) Homework is good for learning.

Everyone has told me that they think homework is a good thing to do. Teachers are very clear about this. They can see that when children do their homework properly, carefully and regularly, they learn better. This is because practising skills such as spellings or times tables needs lots of repetition and also because tasks such as 'Talk Homework' really do help children to be better prepared for their next lessons.

Teachers know through experience and through working with children every day that pupils who take their homework seriously do better at school.

The children themselves are also very clear about this. They understand that doing their homework makes them feel more confident at school because they can remember their number facts and apply them in their maths lessons at school, for example. They also know that if they don't do their homework they might get confused more easily because they have not taken the opportunity to think a bit more about their learning at home.

Parents too, know that homework helps their children to learn more effectively. Many parents enjoy finding out what their child is learning about at school and when a parent talks with their child about their homework it gives the child an even better chance to learn. Talking about homework with a parent at home is a great way to help a child get something clear in his or her mind.

b) Homework is good for a child's personal, social and emotional development

When a child has homework, he or she is being given some responsibility. Children need to be given responsibilities because we want all our children to grow into responsible adults. As children get older and move from reception class to year 6 they should be given more responsibility for planning and completing their homework independently.

Doing homework independently is something which develops slowly, over many years.

Parents have an important role to play in judging how much help and support their own child needs with homework. Parents know their own children best.

Some parents will want to and may need to spend time sitting alongside their child, doing homework together. This can be interesting for the parent because it helps them to find out more about what the child is learning, but it is also time consuming and parents are very busy with work or with other children and with running the house.

Some parents will need to give lots of reminders and encouragement to their child to ensure that homework is completed. This should decrease as the child develops these good homework habits over time but this does not always happen as we might like it to.

Parents will need to find their own methods of developing these learning habits in their children but teachers should always be there to help and advise parents if they want to come and talk with them.

Some parents will simply need to monitor their child's homework, checking what homework has been set, when it needs to be handed in and looking to see that it has been done properly.

By the time children leave primary school, their homework habits should be securely established because this helps them to continue being responsible, independent learners, take full advantage of all the learning that lies ahead of them.

Section 2: Making homework meaningful

It is every teacher's responsibility to set homework that is meaningful for the children. Meaningful homework is purposeful, interesting, varied and useful. It should not be too hard or too easy for the child.

Children like homework to be fun and they often like it when they can have some degree of choice over their homework. When teachers set projects for homework, children can often choose how they present their homework, maybe by making a model or a power-point presentation or a drawing. The point here is that if they can choose to some extent, then they are more likely to feel a sense of purposeful engagement with the task. This is motivation and this is a good way to enjoy learning.

Not all tasks can involve choice, but all tasks should have a clear purpose and this purpose needs to be clear to the child. This might involve explaining more about the task; 'practising putting punctuation into these sentences will help you to structure your own writing more effectively', for example.

Setting homework which can be done on a computer is something which lots of children really enjoy. This school has facilities such as 'Sumdog' and 'Espresso' and homework that directs children to these types of activities is usually fun and worthwhile.

Children also like to undertake research so if a class topic is about Africa, for example, children benefit from choosing an African animal or an African country to research, simply by using a search engine at home and then presenting their findings in an interesting way.

When children are set a homework task that requires them to become teachers themselves, this is meaningful both for them and their parents. 'Explain to an adult at home what a square number is,' is just one example of how homework can assist the development of oral communication, promote learning-based conversations at home and help children to reinforce their own understanding of a new concept. When a child is asked to explain something to another person, that explanation helps the child to understand it more securely.

Our 'Talk Homework' is one example of a homework task that requires children to prepare for the next lesson. They are given a subject to talk about at home with a parent and maybe make some notes about the conversation. This stimulates their thinking and ensures that they have generated some nice ideas to write about. This is meaningful homework and teachers know that children who do this regularly make good progress in their written work.

Section 3: Roles, responsibilities and relationships

a) Teachers

Teachers are responsible for planning the homework activities. This means that they ensure that the tasks are well matched to the children's abilities and relevant to their learning needs. They need to ensure that a balanced amount of homework is set, not too much or too little. They also need to try to make the homework interesting and fun with some opportunities every term to research, to choose and to be creative.

It can be very hard for teachers to give feedback on every piece of homework, unlike when they mark children's class books and provide extensive feedback to the children. However, it is important to provide some feedback and this is done in a variety of ways. This might include ensuring that children know the results of spelling tests and times tables tests when pupils have been practising these at home. Teachers often arrange for children to mark and reflect upon their own homework (self-marking) and to look at each other's homework (peer marking) and this can be an efficient and interesting way for the children themselves to be involved in the assessment of their own homework.

When a project has been set for homework (for example, 'Find out about The Romans and produce a model or a folder to show what you have done') teachers might invite parents to come into school to look at the projects and to hear the children describing their work and explaining what they have discovered. This is an excellent way of providing feedback and at the same time encouraging parents to be involved whilst promoting children's communication skills in front of an audience.

Teachers are also responsible for setting the tone for homework in their classrooms. This means setting the expectation that homework will be done, explaining to pupils why it is important and communicating effectively with parents about homework, especially when any issues or concerns emerge.

Sometimes a parent will want to talk to the teacher about homework. This could be about the purpose of the task, about how fractions are taught, about how to encourage their child to be more responsible with homework or about a family crisis which is impacting on homework. Here, the teacher will listen, offer support or advice or encouragement in the spirit of partnership.

b) Pupils

As children get older, they are expected to take an increasingly responsible and independent approach to their homework. They are responsible for knowing what homework they have and when it needs to be done. They are responsible for asking for additional support from their teacher if they do not understand what to do and they are responsible for ensuring that work is completed with a good standard of care and presentation. Teachers will not accept poor quality work in class and neither will they do so with homework.

Children also have particular responsibilities for taking a positive, industrious approach. Teachers take a long time planning and preparing homework tasks and they do this in order to help the children learn. The children's role is to adopt a constructive mind-set and to co-operate with their parents and teachers in an open, honest way.

Completing their homework on time and to a good standard is a sure sign that the child is maturing, developing independence and responsibility and wanting to learn.

c) Parents

Parents know their own children better than anyone else does. They are responsible for helping their child to develop these good learning habits by ensuring that skills such as responsibility, resilience and independence improve over time.

In order to do this, they need to provide a calm and supportive homework environment. Their role is to show an interest in their child's homework and to help their child establish a routine for homework completion. How this is achieved will vary enormously from household to household.

Parents will know if their own child needs to be given clear direction and support and a high level of encouragement and monitoring in order to establish these homeworking habits.

Alternatively, parents will also know if all that their child requires is a much smaller amount of support, coupled perhaps with the occasional enquiry such as, 'Did you get much homework this week?' This might be all that is needed if the child is, for example, an older, self-motivated learner.

Whatever the situation, it is the responsibility of each parent to set the tempo for homework and to reinforce the school's expectations that homework is important in the development and progress of every child at this school.

Nevertheless, things do go wrong, domestic situations can change and family life is seldom easy. Consequently, there is another critical role for a parent to play. In times of stress or difficulty or for whatever reason, if parents need help with homework they should approach the class teacher in a timely manner and explain the difficulties they are facing. The teacher will listen with a sympathetic ear and between both parties a solution will be found. Sometimes homework might be the least important thing in a

child's life because a crisis has occurred. Parents are urged to talk this through with the teacher; no teacher wants to be insisting on homework when the child is in crisis.

Homework provides an exciting opportunity for parents to learn about a child's academic life at school. To make the most of this, parents are urged to take an interest in their child's homework, whatever the age of the child, and to take the chance to talk about learning with the child. This is an important thing to do because it shows the children that their homework and indeed all their learning is valued and respected. Children love it when their parents are interested in their learning.

Homework requires a tripartite relationship. Teachers and pupils and parents are all just as important as each other. Everyone needs to work together to ensure that homework is a positive tool which helps children learn and develop.

Section 4: The homework environment

This section contains some thoughts, some hints and some tips for making homework successful at home. It is not meant to be an exhaustive list and we know that what works for one family will not necessarily work for another.

Remember; parents know their own children best and each family needs to devise its own approach that supports homework in a way that suits their child best.

1. Children need to develop a good homework routine and they do best when parents take an interest in their homework
2. There is no one place where homework should be done. However, in front of the television is not recommended. Many families choose the kitchen or dining table because this allows a parent to see what is going on and to help, support, encourage and monitor the homework.
3. Some children like to have music on. This can work well as long as it is not distracting.
4. Some children like doing homework with friends. This has many advantages; it helps to make homework more fun, it allows children to discuss their work and share ideas and it encourages co-operation which is important in learning.
5. Make resources available and encourage the child to organise the materials needed. It can be frustrating trying to get your homework done and there are no pencils in the house.
6. Always be positive about homework with your child. Motivate and monitor your child's homework. Be encouraging and be available to questions and to be a good supporter of homework.
7. When your child asks for help with homework, provide guidance if you can, not necessarily the answer. This helps the child to work it out.

8. Reward the progress you child makes and praise and celebrate his or her achievements.

9. Reading homework is critically important. Parents should;

- a) ask their child to explain what has happened so far in a story
- b) check that the child understands what is being read by occasionally pausing to ask questions about the characters and the events in the story
- c) ask the child why he or she thinks a character acted in a certain way and ask the child to support this answer with some information from the story.
- d) before reaching the end of a story, ask the child what he or she thinks will happen next and why.

10. Try to set a good example. If children can also see parents reading it will encourage them even more. Children are more likely to follow the example of an adult rather than simply taking their advice.

11. If there are continuing problems with homework, please do meet with the class teacher as soon as possible to get some help and advice.

12. Learning is everywhere. Taking a child shopping and estimating the total cost of your items, working out how much change is expected, thinking about how much is saved when there is a ten per-cent reduction...these are all examples of how parents can supplement formal homework with routine, impromptu discussions that help a child learn more skills and more about the world.

And finally, here are some quotations from pupils, teachers, parents and researchers who have helped with this project. I hope you will find them interesting.

Children told me about homework:

It's a good thing usually because when it's fun it helps you learn at home as well as at school

I like choosing so we can do in our own way so maybe make a model or design a board game about the Romans or whatever we like

Maybe our homework could be to explain to our mums why talk homework is good for us

When you do it again at home it sticks in your head so you know you will get it right when you do it again maybe in a test

It reminds me what I learned in the lesson and I really understood it better when I tried to do it again at home

Your mum or dad can explain it clearer and it's only me not the whole class so it makes better sense then

My mum's too busy but sometimes we do it when she's making the dinner

Teachers told me:

If it's a history topic on invaders and settlers, the homework might be to make a model of an invasion ship or to do some research on the internet or maybe a word-search about it

You can see in writing lessons in year five and six that those who have done their homework get the best results. They've got more ideas to write about and the content's better because they rehearsed it in their talk homework.

When they do their phonics homework their reading is so much better. You can see the difference between the children who do this all the time and where others don't.

Talk homework is a great way to get children and parents to talk together about a topic so that the children come to school full of ideas about what to write.

You can see the difference in my class. The ones you always have to chase up and it's always last minute and poorly done, they are my underachievers.

If I feel that one group has almost completely grasped a new concept like how to find thirty per-cent of a quantity for example and they just need some final reinforcement, I ask them to explain it to someone at home. This requires them to think it through again because to teach something to someone else you really have to think how it works yourself.

I can see what she's learning about and it [homework] gives me the chance to see what she can do and help her so we kind of do it together, then we can both feel good about getting it right.

Parents told me:

We do his homework and talk about the things he has been doing in class this week. It helps us celebrate his successes. He can lack confidence so it shows him all the things he has achieved.

We love learning together

If it's maths homework he'll probably need help but I struggle with it myself because I don't really know how to do it and what I remember learning in maths is all different from how they do it now

Now that he's in Year five I expect him to be responsible for making sure it's done properly. I'll still monitor it but he needs to learn that it's down to him.

I like to use homework to help me support, guide and teach these skills as necessary

What books and articles tell us:

Good homework routines; We propose that recognizing social awareness, social responsiveness, and self-reliance as keystone properties of responsibility supports an argument that children's routine work at home enables not only social but also moral responsibility (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009; 391)

It is of no little importance what sort of habits we form from an early age it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world. (Aristotle circa 350BC).

Parents taking an interest in homework; As parents, our enthusiastic responsiveness to our children's interests is the surest way to engage them in meaningful dialogue and interaction, and a first principle of strengthening family relationships (Barish, 2012; 64)

Children being able to make choices about the content of their homework. A child who has a solid sense of self-worth can make a poor decision, evaluate it calmly, rethink the situation, and make a different choice...Either way, he has made his own choice (Grossman, 2008; 4).

6.5 Responses, impact and evaluation

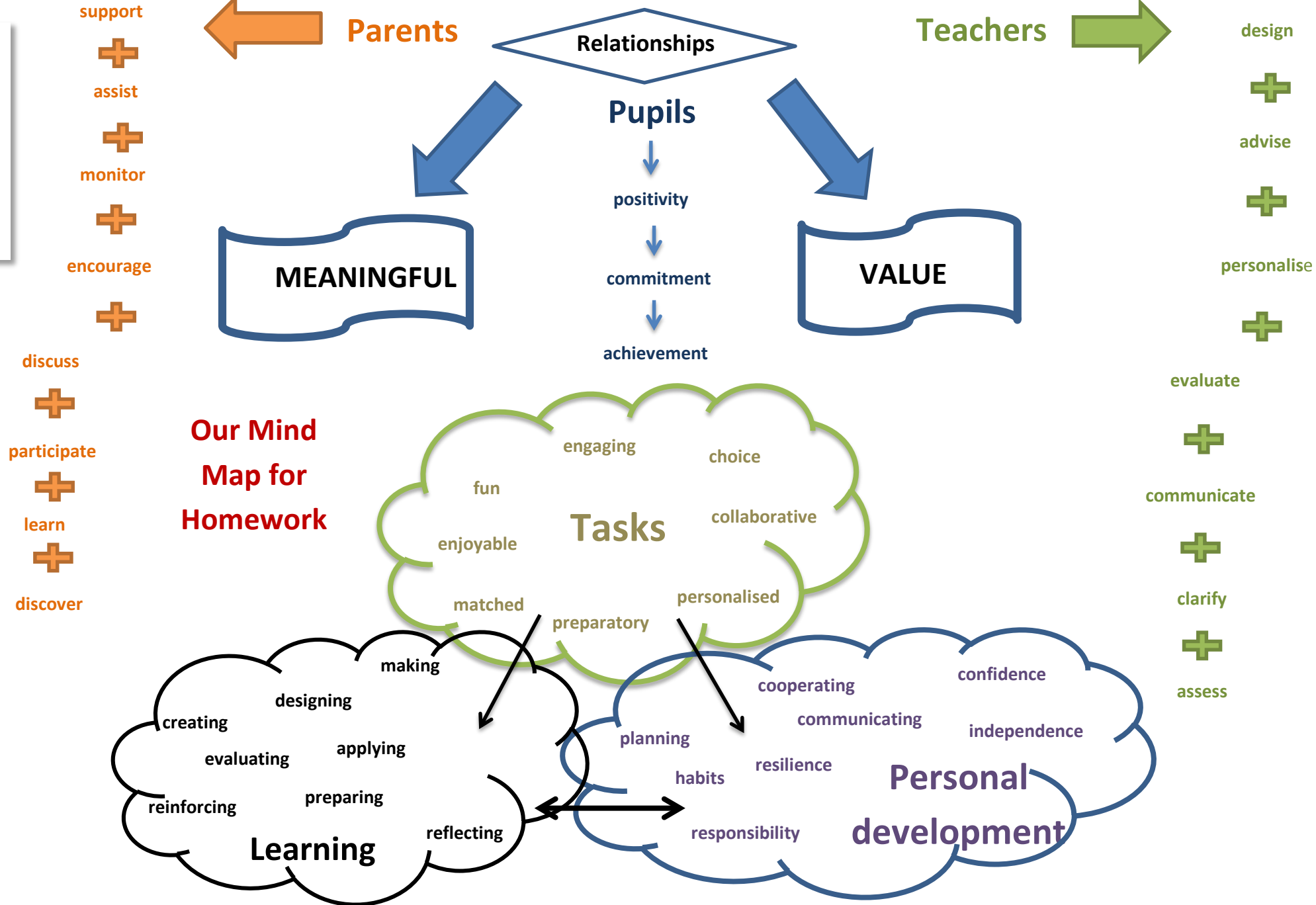
Once stakeholders have had some experience working with the framework, towards the end of the summer term 2015, further opportunities for me to collect feedback will be pursued and possible amendments or additions to the framework will be considered. Similarly, an evaluation of the impact reported by pupils, parents and teachers will then be conducted. It is well-established that only by reviewing newly implemented approaches to teaching and learning can educational leaders ensure the success of their innovations.

Within a transformative paradigm all practices and assumptions need to be revisited as the school embarks on a journey to think differently about learning and the ways we organise it. (Hipkins et al., 2008; 45)

Consequently, whilst it is my clear intention to view this framework as a positive, evidence-based, empirically derived model for homework, that does not mean that it cannot be further improved, amended, developed and upgraded in the light of experience. Indeed, this is especially relevant where those experiences derive from the very participant groups whose views shaped the document in the first place.

See page 185 for a mind-map of homework at Maylandsea Primary school to support parents and teachers.

Figure 2:
A Mind-
Map of
Homework



*A dalek ate my homework, straight out of Dr Who,
Exterminated it, then swallowed it whole,
And he didn't even chew!
Miichael (age 11)*

Chapter 7: Conclusions

7.1 Introduction

This study set out to examine constructions of homework in one primary school through the exploration of the views of pupils, parents and teachers. The findings have identified a number of different conceptualisations which stakeholders employ as they consider the value of homework for these young children. This research has also discovered the importance of meaningfulness and relevance if homework is to be supported by families. The roles and responsibilities assumed by each participant group have been elucidated and the centrality of positive relationships between these groups has been revealed. Homework routines within families of primary age pupils have been clarified and teachers' approaches to the pedagogical challenges of homework have also been explored.

The theoretical and research literature about homework in general and about homework for primary age pupils in particular, is inconclusive and sparse (Hallam, 2004; Rudman, 2014). This study sought to shed light on these issues and to answer five specific questions:

1. What is the purpose of homework for primary aged pupils?
2. What type of homework should teachers set?
3. What is the role of parents in the homework process?
4. To what extent should homework be personalised?
5. How can homework completion-rates be improved?

7.2 Empirical findings

The main empirical findings are themselves specific to each chapter of this report and these have been summarised in the presentation, discussion and analysis of findings chapter and exemplified in my conceptual framework for homework. In this conclusions

chapter my intention has been to synthesize these empirical findings in order to answer the study's five research questions.

What is the purpose of homework for primary aged pupils?

1. Homework is seen by all participant groups as an extension of classroom-based teaching and learning and when carefully designed by teachers it can help children to make good academic progress.

Pupils, teachers and parents are all firmly of the opinion that homework can be a useful mechanism for helping young children to make good progress in their learning. Nevertheless, this potential is not brought to fruition simply by the existence of homework per se, rather its academic efficacy is dependent upon the nature of the tasks set and the extent to which these tasks engage families and interest pupils.

These primary age children expressed strong opinions associating 'fun', 'interesting', 'creative' and 'enjoyable' homework tasks with positive learning experiences and categorising any 'boring', 'too easy', 'too hard' and 'repeating stuff I can already do' homework tasks as promoting disengagement and educational detachment. Given what we know about the nature of young children's learning structures, these views about homework appear entirely understandable.

Children learn by actively investigating the world around them. Assisted by adults, children have numerous ways to explore their interests. A child intrigued by construction vehicles can look in books at home or at the library. Sand box toys such as shovels, containers, and vehicles can give the child a chance to replay experiences and act out observed roles in order to construct his or her own knowledge. (Lepper, 2012; 1)

Consequently it is evident that, whilst most pupil participants felt that most of their homework was academically worthwhile, a critical factor for the children themselves was its ability to interest and inspire them or at the very least a task where they can appreciate the underlying learning intention. Children were ready to accept more routine or predictable tasks when they could understand how these supported their own learning needs.

If we just get spellings or a punctuation sheet than that can be OK if it's helpful, not if it's just the same one that everyone gets and I can already do it in like two minutes maybe (pupil J).

Parent participants' views did surprise me because of the unanimity of positive opinion about the role homework can play in supporting learning. As far as parents were concerned, factors which reduced homework's academic effectiveness were often expressed as practical, operational concerns about the organisation of homework by teachers. In this regard, a common theme was the setting of homework over school holiday periods and especially half term holidays because these were viewed as important opportunities for family days out, short breaks and holidays. Homework would be difficult to prioritise and families resented the intrusion of school work when it could not be properly scheduled or monitored.

How are we supposed to make sure that it's all done when we've only got a few precious days and my husband has a few days off and we want to go out and do things together? When that happens it's like the opposite of benefiting our children, it's just frustrating (parent F).

Other factors which reduced homework's academic effectiveness were when the task was difficult to understand for pupils or parents, when instructions were vague and when too little time had been allowed for the task to be completed. These issues, frustrating though they undoubtedly were, were nevertheless viewed by parents as exceptional rather than habitual. Homework's role in supporting learning was encapsulated in the words of one parent participant who summed up the collective position that

Mostly they [teachers] get it right. If he didn't have any homework at all it would not be good. It helps reinforce what he's doing at school and it makes him more confident about getting things right (parent H).

Homework's role in helping children to develop more confidence in their own learning abilities was a recurring concept which parents felt directly supported learning itself. Interestingly, these views are reflected in confidence-based learning theories which claim to have produced positive correlations between learning and the acquisition of new knowledge when students' confidence in their own learning skills is high (Bruno, 1993).

Teachers themselves were unequivocal in their belief that children who do their homework well are the most successful learners. This, they maintain, is because homework helps them to be better prepared for their lessons, helps them feel more confident because their basic skills have been reinforced and allows them to be better

placed to discuss, debate and relate the fruits of their homework labours within classroom activities. A typically held view from teacher participants was that

They come in with their times tables secure or their research work completed and they feel good about what they've achieved. You can tell the difference with the ones who haven't done it because it's like they are starting the lesson disadvantaged (teacher B).

None of my participants claimed that doing homework was a panacea for children who find learning difficult but all groups acknowledged the contribution it can make in assisting children of all abilities reach their learning potential.

My son has complex needs but his homework is still important because we want him to do as well as he possibly can (parent E).

2. Homework is an important tool because it promotes personal, social and emotional development in young children and as such it prepares them for life beyond primary school.

Parents in particular were stout supporters of this stance. Regardless of the homework task, the vehicle of homework was recognised for its ability to develop young children's independent, responsible, organisational, self-management skills. As children move up through this primary school, parents can measure their growing maturity through their ability to prioritise and self-regulate their own homework routines. For a few parents, this yardstick can signal disappointment and anxiety

I know that he should be doing this for himself now but unless I'm on his back all the time he leaves it all to the last minute (parent U).

Parents also recognised the importance of homework at this age as preparation for life at secondary school and beyond. Many parents commented that unless they could establish these personal development aptitudes at this age they feared for their child's ability to succeed in the world beyond formal education.

Whilst teachers and even pupils themselves acknowledged this perspective, their views were not as strongly promoted as I found amongst the parents. For teachers, the fact that parents held these views was encouraging and they agreed with them. Nevertheless, the prime motivation amongst teacher participants was to use homework to improve learning.

The children themselves wanted, above all else, to enjoy their homework and they had the least to say about its value in preparing them for life beyond school. They were happy to agree on principle when this idea was put to them, but few considered it without being prompted to do so. My experience as a teacher and as a headteacher, suggests that for most children of this age, thinking too much about the development of their own life-skills is not habitual.

3. Homework supports parents in their attempts to understand more about their own child's learning, schooling and education.

Although there was little doubt that homework could be a source of frustration within families, it also provides parents with a vivid window on their child's educational life. Parents talked enthusiastically about special times together, about sharing learning conversations and about finding out more about their own child through discovering what they could and could not do and about how their own child learns. Some parents told me how understanding their child's homework successes and difficulties allowed them to have more informed conversations with teachers because they now knew more about how their own child assimilated learning. In many households, parents described how sharing a homework task has led to conversations about other aspects of school life such as friendship groups, playtime disputes, worries, joys and relationships.

Negative feelings about homework adversely impacting upon family life certainly were reported by many parents. These however, were largely transitory concerns and confined to certain memorable occasions when the homework task was perhaps too hard or when too little time had been allowed by the teacher for it to be completed. Whilst most parents were able to recount something which they had found annoying, not a single participant believed this to be a predominant feature of their view of homework at this school.

The irresistible conclusion, based upon all my discussions and questionnaire responses was that homework tasks which are carefully designed, meaningful, relevant, clear and when the children are given enough time to complete them, support parents in discovering more about their own child and his or her daily life at school. For busy or working parents especially, who cannot easily spend time in the school, this is a clear and irreplaceable benefit which they feel only homework can deliver.

What type of homework should teachers set?

1. Homework tasks should be varied and interesting for young children and offer choices about content and presentation.

Almost every single pupil participant expressed the opinion that when homework was enjoyable, their own engagement, interest and resolve to complete it increased. Parents agreed that life at home was made easier if they did not need to pester their children to do their homework and many told me that their child's independent learning was enhanced when the homework task appealed to their child's interests. Particular types of activities which children enjoy and which teachers also thought useful included homework using computers and websites, research work, project work where children could make some choices about the content and presentation of their work, puzzles and games. Opportunities to think creatively such as inventing a new machine, designing a poster or making a model also featured as highly engaging and productive homework activities.

It was worth noting that whilst most parents agreed in principle with these suggestions, some expressed practical reservations. Sometimes, they explained, these creative tasks impacted negatively on family life because children found them too difficult to complete without support and because of this parents felt that they should be given sparingly.

At least when you get a worksheet of twenty sums, you know it can be done and you know what the benefit is. A project can last for weeks (parent E).

Teacher participants described their desire to make homework tasks stimulating and also distinct from routine class work in order for them to appeal to young children's interests. They also acknowledged some practical concerns that unless these tasks were balanced with shorter, focused, directed activities for practice and reinforcement then some of the academic value of homework could be diluted.

2. Homework tasks should be tailored to suit pupils' abilities and skills, related to classroom learning and include opportunities for children to prepare for forthcoming lessons.

One of the most common concerns expressed by pupils and parents was about homework which was either too easy or too hard. These participants explained that whilst the majority of the homework was appropriately differentiated, there were

exceptions and these exceptions caused frustration in households and undermined confidence in teachers. Children described feeling ‘angry’, ‘upset’ and ‘cross’ if homework was too easy because

I’m not stupid so why do I get maths that I could do when I was in reception?’
(pupil S).

Parents and pupils strongly challenged the value of any homework which was too hard. Parents in particular resented these occurrences because they were left feeling powerless to assist their own child and self-conscious about their own inability to explain the concept appropriately. The parent of a pupil with complex needs explained to me

What is the point of him having to research about China? He has no concept of what China is but we found some photographs on a web-site so we did it but it meant absolutely nothing at all (parent T).

Homework which allows pupils to prepare for forthcoming lessons is seen by all stakeholders as highly beneficial and worthwhile. Sometimes referred to as flipped learning activities (LaFee, 2013), these preparatory activities can take many forms. Pupils and parents recognise the immediate benefit through links to classroom learning and this also boost pupils’ learning confidences. This also allows classroom time to be used more productively and as such it enriches opportunities for deep level learning to take place.

There exists great potential to design more homework which pupils can do using computers. The capacity for technology to support homework, to excite children and to open children’s minds towards new learning horizons is a powerful contributor of learning. (Mendicino et al., 2009)

Amongst other worthwhile, meaningful and engaging tasks which my framework proposes is homework which requires children to act as experts and teachers. This involves some re-conceptualisation of the traditional view that the child is always the learner and the parent is the expert.

The use of collaborative homeworking activities should be extended. This has the capacity to provide exciting opportunity for parents to learn more about their children’s academic life at school and to encourage communication, cooperation and sharing of ideas between pupils, their peers and their families.

What is the role of parents in the homework process?

1. Parents should be active supporters and ambassadors for homework in the primary school.

My study highlighted confusion amongst participants about the roles and responsibilities of parents as they discussed with me their attempts to support homework.

First and foremost, in order to maximise the benefits of homework, it must be actively supported by parents. Parents' active, participatory support can take many forms and often involves working alongside their child, discussing the work, finding out about their learning and steadily encouraging the development the of independent homeworking skills. Crucial to this role is jointly undertaking certain shared activities, designed by teachers to facilitate parent/child collaborative learning. These tasks might typically involve doing a project together, making a model or designing a presentation. These tasks are appreciated by parents and pupils alike especially when teachers allow plenty of time for them to be completed. Parents also enjoy being invited into school to see the results of all these projects and to listen to their children give a presentation about the work their family has achieved together.

Parents should recognise the need to balance supporting and helping their child with the requirement to steadily build up the child's own independent homeworking skills.

2. Parents are responsible for helping young children to establish positive homework routines and habits and they are instrumental in negotiating with their children to establish a suitable homeworking environment.

This is critically important because homework in this primary school is valued as a tool for developing personal skills as well as being beneficial to learning. Parents recognise that they are uniquely placed to support homework routines by promoting independence, personal organisation, planning and responsibility. They further acknowledge that at primary school age, their children are ready to learn about these positive work habits but require effective parental support in order to do so. Parents also appreciate that this is not always an easy task and they are reminded that teachers will be available to advise, support and reinforce these messages with their children at school.

Homework success requires positive relationships between parents and teachers. To this end, parents should be encouraged to be proactive in seeking help when they need it and reassured that teachers will listen, understand and respond to their homework concerns in positive and supportive terms.

To what extent should homework be personalised?

1. Personalising homework, through choices about content and presentation should be extended. Personalisation is a significant stimulus for children and it engages, enthuses and motivates them to develop positive views about learning at home.

A balance must be struck between practice or reinforcement tasks on the one hand and more open-ended projects and enquiries which pupils often prefer. However, all types of homework benefit from opportunities for choice and personalisation. This is not to be confused with individually differentiating tasks but rather it implies designing homework which the pupils and their parents together can personalise. This enables families to view the homework as more meaningful for themselves and for their own children.

Currently some tasks, particularly research opportunities and projects, are personalised to a greater extent than shorter, reinforcement or preparatory activities. Teachers are encouraged to address this imbalance by designing choice into more of the homework activities they plan.

How can homework completion-rates be improved?

1. Teachers' attitudes towards homework, including explaining the importance, relevance and value of different tasks and setting consistently high expectations for its completion, are critical.

Teachers play an important role in the homework process because, in addition to designing meaningful and engaging tasks, they also set the tone for homework in their classrooms. More should be done to explain the rationale, aims and purposes of particular homework activities so that children and parents understand how and why these are relevant to learning and personal development. This could include giving parents more information about homework across each term as well as providing specific information to accompany a homework task.

When parents appreciate the meaning and value of a homework task they are more likely to actively monitor its completion and hence to feel more predisposed to helping their children establish good homeworking habits of their own.

2. The establishment of a school homework club, staffed by an effective practitioner, would enable some pupils to be more successful with their homework.

Not all parents would send their child to a homework club because many value the opportunity to share in the homework experience. For some parents, however, a homework club would remove the burden of homework supervision especially during times of family distress or high external commitment. Homework clubs also facilitate collaborative learning which may be difficult for some families to achieve at home. The presence of a staff member at the homework club to help with the homework and answer children's questions is also supported by some pupils as well as by their families.

7.3 Theoretical implications

This study implies the need to re-evaluate theoretical understanding because it challenges current notions of ambiguity and ambivalence about the value of homework (Hattie, 2008; Rudman, 2014). Furthermore, it provides new, empirical evidence showing how homework is conceptualised in a primary school. The framework I have developed strengthens arguments that homework is a valuable instrument for promoting learning and personal development. It also supports parents by confirming that homework can deliver plentiful opportunities to understand more about their own child and his or her academic life at school. I assert that when appropriate, meaningful and engaging tasks are devised by teachers and understood by pupils and parents, homework does indeed have a positive impact on learning.

Parents have more important homeworking responsibilities in my framework than in existing models. Their responsibilities include taking an active, participatory role in homework. They are challenged to use homework to learn more about their child's life and learning at school and to collaborate with their children especially in project work and preparatory learning tasks. They are asked to judge how much help and support their own child needs and to develop strategies which lead towards increasing self-regulation. Previous studies (Kohn, 2006; Kohn, 2012) have suggested that parental

involvement in homework is stressful for students and has a negative effect on achievement and motivation. My study found that, whilst some parents and some pupils did indeed find some aspects of homework stressful, these stressors were confined to occasional and infrequent incidents only and they did not detract from either pupils' or parent participants' core views that homework was overwhelmingly beneficial and that learning was enhanced as a result of parents' involvement.

My framework attempts to allay parental concerns about the efficacy of children collaborating together over homework tasks. It also encourages teachers to feel confident about planning tasks which are specifically designed to be undertaken cooperatively and it applauds the efforts of a small number of parents who are already developing their own inter-family homeworking structures.

Whilst existing literature recognises the development of learning-related proficiencies which homework can facilitate, this has generally been focused around the development of skills for learning rather than skills for life (Cooper et al, 2001; Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2004). My conceptualisation extends this notion and recognises the potential for homework to be used by parents and teachers in order to develop a broader range of personal and social aptitudes. Parent participants in my study, perhaps appreciating the young ages of the children involved, viewed opportunities to encourage responsibility, independence, resilience and deadlines through homework as developmentally, not only educationally desirable.

My framework is strongly supportive of the idea that schools should place particular onus upon teachers to ensure that parents and pupils understand how homework tasks are relevant to their students' needs. My framework responds to issues of personalisation (Sampson and Karagiannidis, 2002) by warranting that the activities teachers offer primary age pupils to do at home should be primarily fun and engaging, and contain numerous opportunities for choice. This promotes engagement and helps maximise homework completion. I recognise that homework is unlikely to realise its potential as a contributor to either learning or personal development unless young children view their homework positively.

Successful homework is homework which parents and pupils find to be meaningful. There are many existing conceptualisations of what meaningful homework might be. My framework extends existing notions of meaningfulness to include a fuller exposition

of the views of pupils themselves. This is critically important for homework in a primary school where young children's conceptions about meaningful learning activity reflect their developing interest in learning more about themselves and the world around them.

7.4 Policy implications

There is currently no national guidance to support practitioners and consequently there is confusion and uncertainty in many schools, especially primary schools, about the values, meanings and implications for designing and completing homework. In primary schools, homework policies are based upon long established, but non-empirical practices (Blazer, 2009). My study concludes that homework is a valuable resource but that its effectiveness is dependent upon the quality of the tasks set, the support and involvement of parents, the design and planning by the teachers and the engagement of the pupils. These cannot be achieved without reference to a robust model and my conceptualisation offers a positive, well-considered starting point for other schools to utilise.

It would not be unreasonable to suggest that my study might encourage schools and clusters of schools to re-examine their own homework policies and to consider how they might incorporate some of my findings into their own practice. The adoption of a framework for homework in each primary school, informed by my model but shared, discussed, and tailored to the needs of each learning community, has the potential to improve the effectiveness of homework for many children in English primary schools.

Equally, those primary schools which offer homework only as a voluntary activity and those which have decided not to set homework, might now be tempted to reconsider these arrangements.

7.5 The need for further research

This framework for homework which I have produced represents a holistic model for homework at Maylandsea Primary School; it has been constructed from my interpretations of the collected views of parent, pupil and teacher-participants. However, the following aspects of homework in a primary school fell outside the scope of this current study and would represent fruitful areas for future research.

1. A number of similar projects in schools in contrasting contextual situations such as very large or very small primaries in areas of particular affluence or high social deprivation or schools with a high percentages of pupils from more diverse ethnic backgrounds.
2. A study focusing on how new technologies can be used to enhance the homework experience in primary schools.
3. An exploration of the role of initial teacher education in preparing primary school trainees to design and manage homework routines in their classrooms.
4. An in-depth exploration of the specific, micro-level family environments where homework is undertaken.

7.6 Concluding remarks

This thesis has addressed issues of uncertainty and confusion about the meaningfulness, value, roles, responsibilities and relationships associated with homework in the primary school. By exploring the views of parents, pupils and teachers I have been able to construct a framework to guide stakeholders in this school. This framework will also be of interest to other primary schools wishing to improve the effectiveness of homework in their own schools.

Homework is complex because it encompasses numerous personal interactions, conceptions, beliefs and principles and because many of these notions are rooted in the sociocultural influences of school communities (Hughes and Greenhough, 2002).

My study celebrates homework's potential for adding value to young children's learning and personal development and as such it challenges those existing theoretical perspectives which question its value both to children and families. I assert that when homework is carefully designed around children's interests and when its meaning and value are clear it can impact positively on children and parents and assist a school in promoting high quality learning and the growth of skills for life.

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Appendix 1

Abstract from: Rudman, N. (2013) A critical reflection of self in context – first steps towards the professional doctorate. *Reflective Practice*, volume 14, number 2, April 2013, 1-13

A critical reflection of self in context—first steps towards the professional doctorate

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This paper employs a reflexive methodology in order to examine critically the author's professional context and responsibilities. It represents his first, tentative steps towards the award of professional doctorate in education. His role as a head teacher and, specifically, as an agent of change within his school, is scrutinised within the framework of his own professional practices. Issues surrounding his professional relationships with other members of the school community are analysed. In particular, his position of power and authority is explored and set alongside his perceptions of his broader social responsibility. The initial stages of his search for a fruitful focus for his doctoral studies are contextualised and a potential area for his research identified.

Keywords: reflexive practice; professional context; appreciative inquiry; professional doctorate; power and authority; social responsibility; positive leadership

Introductory comments

I am the male head teacher of an average sized, averagely-achieving community primary school in a semi-rural setting. I have been in post for six years and this is my third headship school. In total, I have been a head teacher for 16 years and a class teacher for 10 years before this. My own educational experiences led me from a state secondary school to university in the early 1980s and straight on to post-graduate teacher training. In my early 40s I returned to academic study by completing an MA (Education) degree and I have recently embarked on a four-year professional doctorate. My particular priorities in my current post include working closely with parents in order to involve them more fully in their children's learning and developing more effective strategies to link home and school.

A number of key issues are explored within this paper. These include models of leadership, developing the leadership skills of others, sharing good practice across the school, exploring relationships with colleagues and my developing role as a teacher-researcher. These subjects have emerged through a combination of my reading about reflexive practice and my subsequent critical reflections on my last six years as head teacher at this school. They have been further strengthened by discussions of professionalism and professional practice in my doctoral workshops and informed by the development priorities in my own school.

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Appendix 2

Abstract from: Rudman, N. (2014) A Review of homework literature as a precursor to doctoral studies. Research in Education, Number 91, May 2014, 12-29

A review of homework literature as a precursor to practitioner-led doctoral research in a primary school

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Research in Education No. 91

Abstract

Homework in the primary school is a subject much debated by teachers, parents and pupils. This paper offers a brief critique of key issues in the current homework debate with particular reference to research literature, theoretical perspectives, educational policy and other professional publications. Consequently, a discourse between homework in academic literature and classroom pedagogy emerges and a number of opportunities for further research are identified. Ultimately, it is argued that whilst a range of work has been published around certain aspects of homework, many complexities remain and conclusive answers are most likely to be found only within the cultural context where the homework is actually undertaken.

Key words Homework research, Homework value, Home environment, Homework motivation.

The purpose of this literature review

A thorough, sophisticated literature review is the foundation and inspiration for substantial, useful research. (Boore and Belle (2005: 1))

Indeed, the complexity of opinion documented in homework research demands both thoroughness and sophistication if this review is to provide a sound conceptual basis for future studies. Consequently, this article seeks to identify a range of key concepts central to the homework debate, to recognize gaps in the existing knowledge base and to demonstrate how future research can add to current understanding.

Introductory thoughts

As recently as twelve years ago, even a cursory examination of the scope of published literature on homework would have been sufficient to evidence one of its most significant shortcomings:

Research in Education, Number 91, (May 2012), © Manchester University Press

Appendix 3

Data Analysis Matrix

Key terms from data collection activity → identification of sub-categories → predominant themes

Data Analysis Matrix

Key terms from data collection activity → identification of sub-categories → predominant themes

Key Terms	Sub-categories developed from key terms	Predominant Themes developed from the previous two columns	Researcher comments	Theoretical concepts
active appropriate art assessment balanced boring choice chore clubs collaboration commitment communication community comprehend computers confusion creativity dads deadlines developing	engagement differentiation tasks feedback tasks engagement engagement engagement collaboration collaboration commitment communication collaboration tasks engagement tasks engagement families pressure maturity	<p>Meaningfulness choice, relevance, engagement, gender, active participation, enjoyable, personalisation, nature of tasks, pupils as researchers, teaching concepts to parents, flipped, tasks set, differentiation</p> <p>Value learning, responsibility, personal development, meeting deadlines, supports families to learn together, life skills, resilience, engaging families in their</p>	<p>Meaningfulness: This research suggests that homework must be meaningful to pupils, parents and teachers. Pupils must enjoy it (choice, projects, pupils as researchers) and understand how it can help their learning and personal development. Parents must understand the school's rationale for setting homework, how homework can benefit them as parents and how it is intended to help their children. Teachers must understand why they are being asked to set homework and what its aims and purposes are.</p> <p>Value: homework in this primary school has a trio of purposes and all have equal merit ;A) it enhances academic learning by 1) enabling</p>	<p>Meaningfulness Psychological meaningfulness (De Klerk-Luttig, 2008; Wolhuter et al., 2012)</p> <p>Stillman et al. (2009) on feelings of exclusion where meaningfulness is absent.</p> <p>Choice theory in learning: (Glasser 1990 and 1998; Sequeira, 2007; Moyles, 2007; Palaiologou, 2009)</p>

<p>discipline disenfranchises educate enforced enfranchises engagement enhances enjoy enquiry equipped families feedback flipped frequency friends fun gender growing guiding imagination independence interesting irrelevant learning life-skill making meaningful mums negative organisation</p>	<p>life-skill engagement learning sanctions commitment engagement learning engagement researchers skills roles assessment preparatory tasks environment engagement tasks development roles engagement development engagement tasks value development projects engagement roles mindsets development</p>	<p>involvement with their children's learning</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities supportive, supporting, task completion, differentiated, guidance, re-assurance, deadlines, family-sensitive, teachers to set meaningful and unambiguous and enjoyable tasks that bare varied and engaging; parents to actively participate or at least ensure they are done...best models show active involvement of parents who take an interest in what the child is doing. Expectations of parents, teachers and pupils. Positive mind-sets with pupils showing commitment to completion.</p>	<p>good preparation for future lessons (flipped) and 2) by embedding learning skills (through practice or by teaching a concept to others) B) It is a vital tool in assisting personal development (responsibility, independence, timescales etc) C) It supports parents by providing valuable and important opportunities for parents to learn more about a child's academic life and to encourage learning collaboration in the home.</p> <p>Roles, responsibilities and expectations. Teachers, pupils and parents must all know their roles and responsibilities and perform them to the best of their abilities. Homework will only be a success when this happens. Homework demands much of all parties involved. The roles are clearly defined here but not always easy to fulfil. Home life, work and domestic and financial pressures do intervene for parents; pupils rely on their parents support at this age to set the tempo and help them form good habits at this impressionable age.</p>	<p>Building self-esteem (Grossman, 2008; Featherstone, 2008).</p> <p>Children as teachers (Schneider and Artelt, 2010).</p> <p>Value Developing personal and social responsibility (Ochs and Izquierdo, 2009; Aristotle 1976)</p> <p>Responding to children's interests (Barish, 2012)</p> <p>Roles and responsibilities Parents ability to support and motivate learning at home (Walker et al.,</p>
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ownership partnership personalisation phonics pointless positive preparation preparing pressures problems process projects punishment quality quietness reading relationships relevance researchers responsibility stimulating success supervision supporting supportive talking tasks thinking timings together	commitment collaboration choice skills meaningful mind-sets flipped flipped families tasks routines choice enforcement tasks environment tasks relationships meaningful tasks development engagement engagement roles roles roles flipped meaningful value organisation collaboration	<p>Environment...to include opportunities for collaboration, homework clubs, with friends, with family, parents to provide a suitable environment and be encouraging and help children plan their homework routines.</p> <p>Relationships (tripartite where communication between all parties is positive, parents support and question if they have concerns, teachers address parents' concerns and approach parents to give guidance and support and adjust tasks to meet needs of pupils and families; pupils share learning tasks with parents and seek their</p>	<p>Teachers must do more to personalise, differentiate and be aware of precious holiday times and set a balance of homework tasks over the year. Feedback via open afternoons to review projects</p> <p>Environment: Children's explanations about where they do their homework and their views about how and where they would prefer to do it, ranged widely. Although teachers' involvement with the homework environment may be more limited than parents' they do, nevertheless, have the opportunity to influence matters through the conversations they regularly have and, potentially, by arranging specific homework-management meetings with parents and children together.</p> <p>Relationships: Quote: 'Homework only works when there is a genuine, tripartite relationship with teachers, children and parents all doing their best to make it work. Otherwise, what you get is teachers setting good homework that never gets</p>	<p>2004)</p> <p>Feedback role of teachers (Wiggins, 2012)</p> <p>Homework environments Collaborative learning at home (Johnson and Johnson, 1994; 40)</p> <p>Managing homework routines (Xu, 2013)</p> <p>Relationships to support homework Actively involving parents (Roberts, 2009; Davis et al., 2002)</p> <p>Relationship equality (Braun et al, 2006)</p> <p>Power relationship issues</p>
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topics tripartite understand up-skilling valuable writing	choice relationships meaningful collaboration meaningful tasks	involvement)	done or maybe if the tasks aren't appropriate children don't see the point. Either that or for whatever reason parents don't support it so it's badly done or not handed in at all'.	(Henderson, 2006) Partnership model in action at Pen Green (Whalley, 2007).
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Appendix 4

Table Showing the Range of Literature in this Review:
Identification of Key Texts

**Table Showing the Range of Literature in this Review:
Identification of Key Texts**

Aspect of the homework literature	Author(s) and dates(s)	Key words
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Criticisms of homework as negative and detrimental. 	Bennett and Kalish, (2006); Kohn, (2006); Kohn, (2012); Kralovec and Buell, (2001); Reese, (1995); Soloman et al., (2002)	Damaging to pupils, pointless, ineffective, does not support learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Broadly supportive of the notion that homework can have a positive impact on learning 	Dettmers et al., (2009); Keith et al., (1993); Maeroff, (1989); Sharp et al., (2001)	Measured amounts can support learning
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is a need for new, small-scale, qualitative studies 	Hallam (2004)	Explore stakeholders' views and learn about the value and type of homework set
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Power relations in homework 	Henderson (2006)	Scottish schools PhD thesis
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Defining homework 	Hallam (2004); Ofsted (1999); Alanne and Macgregor, (2007); Vatterot, (2009), Cooper (2007); Tas et al., (2011)	All suggest broadly similar characteristics
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Research linking homework with good study skills 	Cooper, (1989); Corno, (1996); Corno, (2000); Epstein and Van Voorhis, (2001); Warton, (2001); Xu and Yuan,(2003)	Independent learning, better organisation of time
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cautiously welcomes homework but its effect in primary schools is unknown 	Hattie (2008)	Large-scale meta-analysis of 168 separate studies

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework helps pupils develop a positive outlook 	Horsely and Walker (20013)	Learning enquiry skills and self-directed learning.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework can help students develop higher order thinking skills 	Dobozy (2010)	Students as researchers and problem-solvers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students who complete their homework tend to have higher achievement 	Cooper et al., (1998)	Self-report homework completion data linked to statistics on attainment
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Found no link between the amount of time spent on homework and college students' grades. 	Maltese et al., 2012	Analysis of two large-scale statistical studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Personalised homework appeals to students 	Hong and Lee, (2003); Fishman et al., (1998); Xu (2009); Hong and Lee (2000); McGill, 2014; Creasy (2014)	Choice and the use of computers for homework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Students' role is to view homework positively 	Fleming and Mills (1992)	Older pupils have more responsibility for homework completion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents play a key role in supporting homework 	Balli (1998); Snow et al., (1991); Cooper et al., (2000)	Parents as supporters and encouragers
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parents often confuse and pressurise their children through homework 	Baumgartner et al., (1993)	Parents have unreasonable expectations
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regular engagement of parents in home learning aids academic and social development 	Harris and Goodall, (2007); Melhuish et al., (2001)	Longitudinal studies on parent/ pupil relationships

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parental involvement with reading at home 	Brooks et al., (2008); McElvany and Steensel, (2009); McElvany et al., (2010); Steensel, (2009)	There are mixed views about the effectiveness of parental home reading programmes
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • More research is needed to understand how parents support homework 	Hoover-Dempsey et al., (2001)	Analysis of longitudinal studies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationships are critical to homework's success 	Olympia et al., (1994; 13)	Teachers Involve Parents in Schoolwork (TIPS) project
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Supporting families to engage with teachers about homework 	Xu and Corno, (2003)	A review of a research with a small sample of urban families in the USA
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Creating a conducive homework environment 	Cooper et al., (2001); Armstong et al., (1991)	Removing distractions to maximise homework completion
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework as a social activity 	Dunn and Dunn, (1993); Walker et al., (2004)	Homework with friends can be beneficial under certain circumstances
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The role of homework clubs 	Sanacore, (2002); Train et al., (2000); Lamb et al., (2004)	When carefully organised, these can support families especially in areas of social need.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Homework and lower achieving children 	Kay et al., (1994); Nelson et al., 1998); Bryan and Sullivan-Burstein (1998)	Making tasks relevant and accessible and supporting parents
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flipped learning approaches 	LaFee (2013); Bergmann and Sams (2012); Bishop	Homework which introduces new learning

	and Verleger (2013)	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Homework and new technology 	Robinson and Sebba, (2010)	Case study of computers to support homework
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Gender and homework 	Deslandes and Cloutier, (2002); Harris et al., (1993); Hong and Milgram (1999); Xu and Corno (2006)	Found girls have a stronger work ethic. Boys have poorer homework management strategies
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> International comparisons 	Circa (2013); Hong et al., (2011); Chen and Stevenson (1995)	Homework studies in other cultural settings

Appendix 5

A Child's Guide To Homework At Maylandsea Primary School

A Child's Guide To Homework At Our Primary School

About this guide

This is where you can find out about homework. You can discover what homework is for and how it helps you. You can find out what parents and teachers think about homework and what your homework responsibilities are.

What is homework for?

Homework has two main jobs. It helps you to learn and it helps you to develop other skills which are important for life such as being responsible, well organised and independent.

First of all when you do your homework properly, carefully and regularly, you will feel more confident. When you practise your spellings or times tables and when you do your 'Talk Homework' you will feel much better prepared for your next lessons.

If you don't do their homework properly there is more chance that you might feel a bit confused because you will not have not have taken the opportunity to think a bit more about your learning at home.

Your parents can learn with you because they will enjoy finding out what you are learning about at school. Also, when your parent talks you about your homework it gives you an even better chance to learn. Talking about homework with someone at home is a great way to help you learn.

Also when you have homework, you are being given some responsibility. This is important because it will help you to grow into responsible adults. As you get older and move from reception class to year 6 you will have responsibility for planning and completing your homework independently.

How to get help with homework.

Doing homework with someone else is fun and it helps you to learn. This could be mum or dad or someone else at home. It could be a friend. If you still get stuck it is your job to ask your teacher to explain it again.

By the time you leave primary school, your homework habits should be securely established so that you can cope at secondary school.

Your job

You are responsible for taking your homework seriously. You should let someone at home know what homework you have and you should plan when you are going to do it. Don't leave it until the last minute. Doing your

homework on time and to a good standard is a sure sign that you are maturing, developing independence and responsibility and wanting to learn.

Your teacher's job.

Your teacher will plan homework to help you learn. Your homework will be linked to something that you are learning about at school. Teachers will try to make the homework useful and fun. You might get a project or some research. You might be able to be creative and design something. You might be given something to practise or something to prepare for a lesson. You might be able to use a computer if you have one at home. You might be given some choices about what homework to do or how to do it. You might be asked to teach something to someone at home. It should not be too easy or too hard.

Your teachers will also make sure your homework is done properly so make this easy for them and hand it in on time.

Marking your homework

There are lots of ways for you to find out how you have done. You might have a spelling test and get a score. You might mark your own work or swap with a partner to mark each other's homework. If you do a project your teacher might ask you to do a presentation about it.

Your parents' job

Someone at home will help you find a suitable place to do your homework. They will take an interest in your homework and talk about it with you. Sometimes they will do the homework with you.

They will also help you to organise the right time for you to do your homework and they will help you make sure that it is done well.

Homework hints and tips

1. Get into a good routine and plan when and where you will do your homework
2. Let your family take an interest in your homework and show them what you are learning about
3. There is no one place where homework should be done. However, in front of the television is not recommended.
4. You might like to do your homework with friends. This has many advantages; it helps to make homework more fun, it allows you to discuss your work and share ideas and it encourages co-operation which is important in learning.
5. Make sure you have pens and pencils ready so you don't waste time searching for them.
6. Have a positive attitude. When you make a good effort it will be rewarded because you will know that you have succeeded.

7. If there are problem you must tell someone. Your family or your teacher will help you

Here are some things children told me about homework

It's a good thing usually because when it's fun it helps you learn at home as well as at school

I like choosing so we can do in our own way so maybe make a model or design a board game about the Romans or whatever we like

Maybe our homework could be to explain to our mums why talk homework is good for us

When you do it again at home it sticks in your head so you know you will get it right when you do it again maybe in a test

It reminds me what I learned in the lesson and I really understood it better when I tried to do it again at home

Your mum or dad can explain it clearer and it's only me not the whole class so it makes better sense then

My mum's very busy but sometimes we talk about homework when she's making the dinner

Appendix 6

Interview schedules, checklists and examples of collected data
from parents, pupils and teachers

Researcher checklist of topics to discuss during parent interviews

- Homework likes and dislikes for you and your family
- Value of homework
- Time spent on homework
- Differentiating tasks
- Your child's homework needs
- Your homework environment
- Domestic issues and homework
- Homework clubs
- Homework with friends
- Challenges and problems of homework
- Homework timings
- Homework marking and feedback
- Your role as a parent/ carer
- Homework relationships with teachers
- Homework projects
- Formal and informal homework
- Homework in preparation for future lessons
- What works well
- What should be improved
- Homework is successful when...
- Homework is not successful when...
- Any other thoughts about homework?

List of topics for children's focus group discussions

- Is homework useful?
- The best homework is when...
- Things I like about homework
- Things I do not like about homework
- Where and when homework is best for me
- My favourite piece of homework was ...because...
- What type of help I like to get with homework
- How homework could be improved

Summary of findings from one semi-structured group interview with teachers

1. Consolidating class work. Mainly maths and English at Y6. Set as part of a routine. Preparation for secondary. Get more of it as children get older. Teachers should stress its importance. Should use ICT to engage and get away from worksheets.
2. Linked to phonics in early years and children get smiley faces and stickers and certificates as a reward for doing it. Thus, we give HW even in EYFS and put a list on classroom door so parents can see who has got their smiley face for doing their HW. Fine motor skills, spelling, blending, reading also get practical activities like 'when you go to the park look for things that begin with s etc.' 'Find a cube shape when you go to the supermarket'. THIS ASKS A LOT OF PARENTS.
3. Teachers can see via HW that children can apply their learning and do it independently not with parents...unlike KS1 where SLT agree it should be with their parents. DO WE ACTUALLY EXPLAIN THIS TO PARENTS?
4. HW encourages a tripartite relationship (child/ pupil/ teacher).
5. Builds independence at KS2 and we expect them to do it on their own.
6. Needs to feedback into what is happening in the classroom or it is meaningless.
7. Linked to future work so if you don't do your HW you won't be able to do your writing this week as you've not done the background work (V. INTERESTING CONCEPT HERE OF HW FEEDING INTO FUTURE LESSONS).
8. HW think up questions to interview someone from WW" then actually ask these when the visitors come into school. HW is a life skill as they need the rigour of having to do something
9. HW gets older children to think for themselves (in maths can they apply it with more practice at home without me there). USES HW AS AN ASSESSMENT TOOL.
10. Link between HW and academic success: sees that able children do their HW more readily. Says those who do the most preparation for their writing HW then produce better results in that writing lesson. KS1 topic HW over a longer timescale lets children personalise and be creative about how they present their findings...model, poster etc and parents are then invited in to look at all the range of work produced. Parental support varies and some years it's well supported as parents support their children well at home and other cohorts parents don't so much. Home parenting support is vital.
11. Teachers say that parents don't always understand the importance of HW and thus they don't all support it. Some parents think that learning is for school not home and others are really proactive.
12. Upper KS2 we met with parents to explain HW importance and send out letters and speak to parents where HW is not being done. INDIVIDUAL APPROACH. Other regular offenders seldom do it.
13. HW really helps children make better progress as it's meaningful and linked to school work. We differentiate it and it works well for Y6 children and it's VITAL for covering ground in preparation for Y6 SATS. Reinforces formal work, spelling, grammar and punctuation. And less creative HW is set except after SATS. Needs to address formal learning 1st. Also, creative HW still needs to expect good basic skills to be included. THUS CREATIVE DOESN'T MEAN SLOPPY. Link it to literacy targets to get high expectations in creative HW
14. ICT HW is self-marking too and children do lots of this as they enjoy it.
15. Teachers understand parental pressures so getting a sheet of formal stuff can be better for them. At KS1 creative HW gives flexibility to do as much as they want. No time for projects at KS2 due to time constraints.
16. SEN pupils HW: KS1 cheeky monkey goes home and less able can draw and other can write about where he's been out. (self-differentiating). This leads onto SEN children talking about what they've done at the weekend and thus it supports SEN pupils to develop their communication skills. At Y6 HW is fully differentiated so even SEN pupils should be able to

do it independently. I child is a poor reader and teacher has liaised with mum so she understands the need to support his reading then leaves him to do it independently after that.

17. Biggest problem for teachers is chasing it up if it's not done. Upper KS2 teachers feel they NEED to insist it's done by all and will phone parents if it's not been. Fairness and prep for secondary and pressures of SATS. They feel if this was done more rigorously at lower KS2 it would be less of a shock in Y6. It's more relaxed lower down the school so Y6 parents sometimes argue against it as they've not been made to support it earlier in the school (CONSISTENCY ACROSS THE SCHOOL). In KS1 they don't get the certificate if it's not done.
18. Parents do tell teachers it's a problem fitting it in at home but teachers feel it's easier at upper KS2 when children are more independent. I say 'you don't need your mum and dad to help you' Teachers ensure it's easy to fit in and not too lengthy. Teachers give advice to parents about when and how to do it but this is ad hoc.
19. Teachers feel that there is some correlation between perceptions of good parenting and homework support. Parents know what to do as it's in a booklet but still feel that too many don't and some additional support/ coaching would be beneficial to some families. (Phonics workshops for parents can be popular and they need to know how to do it.) It's about educating the parents not about being a good or a bad parent. Teachers need to personalise it by talking to parents where it's not done...it's a pocket of parents here not hundreds. A few families struggle due to their lifestyles so maybe a homework club would really help some of them...eg invite those we think need it due to trauma/ family problems. ALLEVIATE FAMILY CONCERNS.
20. HW with the most able: often they do more than they are asked. EG some EYFS started using their cvc words in sentences. HAPs need HW which challenges them (Hannah). Teachers shouldn't be asked to differentiate it by more than 3 ability levels and we often mark it together in class by children so feedback is instant and it's motivating as they know it'll be marked immediately and they'll know how well they did.
21. Real value of HW is: learning takes place everywhere/ gets parents involved in their learning (MASSIVE REASON ACROSS LOTS OF INTERVIEWS)/ children realising that they have a big part to play in taking responsibility for their learning/ ownership so they are not passive learners.
22. 'Those who don't do their HW are the ones who aren't where they should be and that little group is the one to get into'
23. Teachers realise not all parents will be happy all the time about HW but teachers feel it is so important.



Maylandsea Community Primary School

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Mr N.P.C. Rudman BA (Hons) PGCE MA

'Enjoy and Achieve'

Parents' Homework Questionnaire

Dear Parents

23rd October 2013

If you have some time available to answer a small number of questions with some of your thoughts then I would be really grateful. The more information you give me about your opinions the better placed I will be to make homework as meaningful as possible. **Please could you return this questionnaire to Mr Rudman. I am very grateful to you for taking the time to complete this. All responses are treated in the strictest confidence.**

1. How, if at all, does homework benefit children of primary school age? What, if anything, does it teach them?

- o reinforce learning through practise / repetition
- o discipline - start to learn the routine of work so that when it gets more serious, it is part of the child's daily structure.

2. Are there any benefits for you as a parent when your child gets homework?

- o can see progress being made.
- o regular homework time creates a good space in the day for communicating / listening / engaging with child - a lovely time!

3. What do you consider your role as a parent to be in your child's homework?

- o support what he has already learnt at school
- o enhance education
- o add things I would like him to learn about

4. As a parent, what (if anything) do you like about homework and why?

- o as 2 above - helps me communicate & engage
- o The feeling that I can do something to help my son develop and grow

5. As a parent, what (if anything) do you dislike about homework and why?

- o I would like feedback from teachers to help / guide me to support my son more effectively - at the moment this is not very forthcoming.



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1. How, if at all, does homework benefit children of primary school age? What, if anything, does it teach them?

I think it is important to prepare a child for Senior School regards h/w, as won't be such a shock. It forms a good habit.

2. Are there any benefits for you as a parent when your child gets homework?

I feel I am contributing to their schooling and it keeps me informed of how they are getting on all the way through the school year instead of just twice at parent evenings.

3. What do you consider your role as a parent to be in your child's homework?

** that h/w is a priority*

to ensure they know the ^{}priority of doing h/w and to encourage them to know the importance of what they are set out to do.*

4. As a parent, what (if anything) do you like about homework and why?

I like the simple h/w set out that does not take too long to complete, it benefits the children to not feel its going to take on age to complete. Maths, Literacy + Spelling are most important and good communication between teacher and parent via the h/w diary is key.

5. As a parent, what (if anything) do you dislike about homework and why?

I dislike the school projects when they are set out before a school holiday that is only 1 week in duration. It does not give enough time to complete the work and I feel slightly resentful that the holiday is my time to enjoy with them rather than worry about how we are going to achieve the work in a ~~so~~ short space of time, especially if we are going on a holiday.



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Parents' Homework Questionnaire

Dear Parents

23rd October 2013

If you have some time available to answer a small number of questions with some of your thoughts then I would be really grateful. The more information you give me about your opinions the better placed I will be to make homework as meaningful as possible. **Please could you return this questionnaire to Mr Rudman. I am very grateful to you for taking the time to complete this. All responses are treated in the strictest confidence.**

1. How, if at all, does homework benefit children of primary school age? What, if anything, does it teach them?

So long as homework is fun, interesting and activity based, young children are happy to give up their time to show their parents what they

2. Are there any benefits for you as a parent when your child gets homework? can do,

I feel the way my child approaches their homework is probably a fair reflection of how they approach class work. I have learnt a lot about my child, watching what they enjoy versus what stresses them.

3. What do you consider your role as a parent to be in your child's homework?

Whilst I understand I shouldn't help my child too much, if they are lazy or reluctant to do the work I feel I must micro-manage them through it. It let them give in a poor piece of work feels like a poor reflection

4. As a parent, what (if anything) do you like about homework and why? of me.

I enjoy getting involved in my child's learning and trying to link it to family activities to help reinforce what they have learnt.

5. As a parent, what (if anything) do you dislike about homework and why?

If a teacher sets homework at the end of the day by merely writing it on the board for the children to copy down without discussion, it massively leads to the children not ~~understanding~~ understanding the task. PTO

Children's Thoughts About Homework

I am a ~~boy~~ ^{girl}

I am in Year..6...

What is your favourite sort of homework and can you say why?

Writing in ~~ing~~ on ^{the} computer because I can put photos on and edit it.

What homework don't you like and can you say why?

Sumdog because it takes ages to load.

Is homework a good thing or a bad thing for children to do and can you say why?

Yes because it helps us learn ready for the subject in class.

Do you think homework helps you to learn and why do you think this?

Yes because it gets it all in their heads and accidents are the path to the next time the question is seen.

How could this school make homework more interesting and fun?

The school could make it more interesting by letting them choose a subject to write, so one of their own ~~own~~ subjects.

Tell me about where you do your homework and how could this be better?

I do my homework with my mum or dad in front of the TV. I also get more ideas by stroking my dog and I don't think ~~it~~ could get better.

Children's Thoughts About Homework

I am a ~~boy~~ girl.

I am in Year.....6

What is your favourite sort and homework and can you say why?

I like wordsearches because then you know how to spell and find it on your sheet so it sticks in your mind what ~~spelt~~ sort of spelling it

What homework don't you like and can you say why? is!

I don't like Sumdog because sometimes the mouse gets stuck or you are not quick enough.

Is homework a good thing or a bad thing for children to do and can you say why?

Yes because you can do it at home and not in ~~shoe~~ school. be the teacher gets interrupted and starts again.

Do you think homework helps you to learn and why do you think this?

yes because your mum/dad explains it ~~clear~~ clear.

How could this school make homework more interesting and fun?

To do more games on the computers, or to do wordsearches for your spellings.

Tell me about where you do your homework and how could this be better?

At home with my mum & dad to help me in the dining room.

Children's Thoughts About Homework

I am a ~~boy~~ girl.

I am in Year...5

What is your favourite sort of homework and can you say why?

I like doing projects because
I can be creative.

What homework don't you like and can you say why?

I don't like Sunday homework
because sometimes it's hard to
go on a computer.

Is homework a good thing or a bad thing for children to do and can you say why?

I think it's a good thing for
children because it helps them
learn more.

Do you think homework helps you to learn and why do you think this?

Yes because ~~they~~ it helps them
understand what they're learning.

How could this school make homework more interesting and fun?

Doing more projects.

Tell me about where you do your homework and how could this be better?

I do my homework at the dining
room table with my mum or dad
helping me. I think it would be
better if we have a homework
club.

Appendix 7

Child participants' information sheet

Maylandsea Community Primary School

Dear

I would like to invite you to take part in some meetings with me and some other children to talk about homework.



I would like to find out more about what you think of homework and especially if you like doing homework or not.

I am also interested in what sort of homework activities you enjoy, whether you like to get help with homework and whether you think homework helps you to learn.

We will have our meetings in school time and you won't miss any playtimes or lunchtimes. I will use your ideas to help make homework better for everyone at school. I would also like children in Years 5 and 6 to do a short piece of writing about homework after our discussions have taken place. This will give them the chance to tell me in more detail about homework.

If you would like to be involved in this project please fill in the form below and bring it back to me. If you agree to take part and then change your mind later then that is alright too.

Mr Rudman

I would like to help Mr Rudman with his homework project.

My name.....

My class.....

Date.....

Appendix 8

Adult participants' information pack

Maylandsea Community Primary School

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – PARENTS

Section A: The Research Project

1. **Title of project:**
Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school
2. **What is the purpose and value of the study?**
This study is being carried out as part of a doctoral studies research project in your child's primary school, to explore the views of parents, pupils and teachers about homework. The overall aim is to discover how homework practices can be developed in the best interests of pupils and families and to create a framework for the delivery of homework at this school. Findings from this research will also encourage other primary schools to reconsider their own homework practices.
3. **Why you are being asked to participate**
You are invited to be part of this work in order to give a parent's point of view about homework. You may have views about its benefits and drawbacks, the type and frequency of homework and the extent to which it aids or hinders children's education and helps or obstructs families in learning about their child's education.
4. **Who is organising the research?**
The study is being organised by the headteacher, Mr Rudman, with the support of staff in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (FHSCE) at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. The research project will form the basis of Mr Rudman's doctoral studies thesis.
5. **What will happen to the results of the study?**
The results will be used to create 'A Framework for the Delivery of Homework' at this primary school. The thesis will be submitted for doctoral studies accreditation to Anglia Ruskin University. I also hope to publish the findings in articles and books for practitioners and in academic journals.
6. **Who is funding the research?**
This project is not being externally funded
7. **Contact for further information**
If you have any questions or would like any further information about this project, please contact the project leader, Mr N. Rudman by email: nicholasrudman@maylandsea.essex.sch.uk or telephone: 0162 742251.

Academic Supervisor: Dr Gerry Davis, Anglia Ruskin University:
Geraldine.davis@anglia.ac.uk

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

- 1. Why you have been invited to take part:**
You have been invited to take part in this study because you are the parent of child who attends this primary school
- 2. Whether you can refuse to take part:**
Participation in the study is entirely optional – you can choose not to participate
- 3. Whether you can withdraw at any time, and how:**
If you agree to take part in the study, but later change your mind, then you can withdraw simply by informing the researcher, Mr N. Rudman. Please note, however, that after I have gathered all the information for this study, it will be put together so that I will not be able to identify which information came from which person. At that stage I will not be able to withdraw any information I have been given as I will not be able to identify it.
- 4. What will happen if you agree to take part?**
I will invite you to take part in a small number of group discussions (possibly only one or two) along with other parents to talk about various aspects of homework. I may then invite a few parents to attend follow-up discussions to discuss some of your ideas in greater detail. With your permission, these discussions will be recorded using a small digital voice recorder. The discussions will be transcribed to help me analyse the content.
- 5. Are there any risks involved - and what will be done to ensure your wellbeing?**
I hope that taking part in the study will be an enjoyable experience. I will aim to be considerate and not to take up your time unnecessarily. I will liaise with you about the timing of these discussions to try to fit in with your family and working life.
- 6. In the unlikely event that something should go wrong, agreement to participate in this research should not compromise your legal rights.**
- 7. What will happen to any information/data that are collected from you?**
Any information that you give to me will be kept carefully and securely in a locked filing cabinet. Audio files will be downloaded onto a secure area of my school computer, accessible only by me.
- 8. Are there any benefits from taking part?**
The main benefits of this study are in understanding more about how homework practices can be revised in the best interests of children and their families. Parents' views are vital because the completion of homework is a joint responsibility between pupils, parents and the school. The research is designed to improve the homework experience for everyone.
- 9. How your participation in the project will be kept confidential**
All personal information (including names and contact details) will be stored safely and destroyed at the end of the research study. In reports of the study no full names will be used. First names or pseudonyms will be used throughout and the real name of the school will also not be released in the thesis or in any associated reports.

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this research.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION TO KEEP,
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – TEACHERS

Section A: The Research Project

8. **Title of project:**
Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school
9. **What is the purpose and value of the study?**
This study is being carried out as part of a doctoral studies research project in your child's primary school, to explore the views of parents, pupils and teachers about homework. The overall aim is to discover how homework practices can be developed in the best interests of pupils and families and to create a framework for the delivery of homework at this school. Findings from this research will also encourage other primary schools to reconsider their own homework practices.
10. **Why you are being asked to participate**
You are invited to be part of this work in order to give a teacher's professional perspective about homework.
11. **Who is organising the research?**
The study is being organised by the headteacher, Mr Rudman, with the support of staff in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (FHSCE) at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. The research project will form the basis of Mr Rudman's doctoral studies thesis.
12. **What will happen to the results of the study?**
The results will be used to create 'A Framework for the Delivery of Homework' at this primary school. The thesis will be submitted for doctoral studies accreditation to Anglia Ruskin University. I also hope to publish the findings in articles and books for practitioners and in academic journals.
13. **Who is funding the research?**
This project is not being externally funded
14. **Contact for further information**
If you have any questions or would like any further information about this project, please contact the project leader, Mr N. Rudman by email: nicholasrudman@maylandsea.essex.sch.uk or telephone: 0162 742251.
- Academic Supervisor: Dr Gerry Davis, Anglia Ruskin University:
Geraldine.davis@anglia.ac.uk

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

10. **Why you have been invited to take part:**
You have been invited to take part in this study because you are employed as a teacher at this primary school
11. **Whether you can refuse to take part:**
Participation in the study is entirely optional – you can choose not to participate

- 12. Whether you can withdraw at any time, and how:**
If you agree to take part in the study, but later change your mind, then you can withdraw simply by informing the researcher, Mr N. Rudman. Please note, however, that after I have gathered all the information for this study, it will be put together so that I will not be able to identify which information came from which person. At that stage I will not be able to withdraw any information I have been given as I will not be able to identify it.
- 13. What will happen if you agree to take part?**
I will invite you to take part in a small number of group discussions along with other teachers from this school to talk about various aspects of homework. I may then invite you to attend follow-up discussions to discuss some of your ideas in greater detail. With your permission, these discussions will be recorded using a small digital voice recorder. The discussions will be transcribed to help me analyse the content.
- 14. Are there any risks involved - and what will be done to ensure your wellbeing?**
I hope that taking part in the study will be an enjoyable and professionally relevant experience. I will aim to be considerate and not to take up your time unnecessarily. I will liaise with you about the timing of these discussions.
- 15. In the unlikely event that something should go wrong, agreement to participate in this research should not compromise your legal rights.**
- 16. What will happen to any information/data that are collected from you?**
Any information that you give to me will be kept carefully and securely in a locked filing cabinet. Audio files will be downloaded onto a secure area of my school computer, accessible only by me.
- 17. Are there any benefits from taking part?**
The main benefits of this study are in understanding more about how homework practices can be revised in the best interests of children and their families. Teachers' views are vital because the completion of homework is a joint responsibility between pupils, parents and the school. The research is designed to improve the homework experience for everyone.
- 18. How your participation in the project will be kept confidential**
All personal information (including names and contact details) will be stored safely and destroyed at the end of the research study. In reports of the study no full names will be used. First names or pseudonyms will be used throughout and the real name of the school will also not be released in the thesis or in any associated reports.

Thank you very much for considering taking part in this research.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION TO KEEP,
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET – PARENTS of PARTICIPATING CHILDREN

Section A: The Research Project

- 15. Title of project:**
Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school
- 16. What is the purpose and value of the study?**
This study is being carried out as part of a doctoral studies research project in your child's primary school, to explore the views of parents, pupils and teachers about homework. The overall aim is to discover how homework practices can be developed in the best interests of pupils and families and to create a framework for the delivery of homework at this school. Findings from this research will also encourage other primary schools to reconsider their own homework practices.
- 17. Why your child is being asked to participate**
I would like to learn more about how the children at this school view homework. I would like to know what they think homework should be for, what activities they like to do at home, what type of support they like to receive from adults and how homework can be improved to suit the way they like to learn.
- 18. Who is organising the research?**
The study is being organised by the headteacher, Mr Rudman, with the support of staff in the Faculty of Health, Social Care and Education (FHSCE) at Anglia Ruskin University, Chelmsford. The research project will form the basis of Mr Rudman's doctoral studies thesis.
- 19. What will happen to the results of the study?**
The results will be used to create 'A Framework for the Delivery of Homework' at this primary school. The thesis will be submitted for doctoral studies accreditation to Anglia Ruskin University. I also hope to publish the findings in articles and books for practitioners and in academic journals.
- 20. Who is funding the research?**
This project is not being externally funded
- 21. Contact for further information**
If you have any questions or would like any further information about this project, please contact the project leader, Mr N. Rudman by email: nicholasrudman@maylandsea.essex.sch.uk or telephone: 0162 742251.
- Academic Supervisor: Dr Gerry Davis, Anglia Ruskin University:
Geraldine.davis@anglia.ac.uk

Section B: Your Participation in the Research Project

- 19. Why your child has been invited to take part:**

Your child has been invited to take part in this study because he or she attends this primary school and I would like to learn more about the children's views about homework

- 20. Whether you can refuse to take part:**
Participation in the study is entirely optional – you can choose for your child not to participate
- 21. Whether you can withdraw at any time, and how:**
If you agree for your child to take part in the study, but later change your mind, then you can withdraw permission for your child's participation simply by informing the researcher, Mr N. Rudman. Please note, however, that after I have gathered all the information for this study, it will be put together so that I will not be able to identify which information came from which person. At that stage I will not be able to withdraw any information I have been given as I will not be able to identify it.
- 22. What will happen if you agree that my child can take part?**
I will invite your child to take part in a small number of group discussions (possibly only one or two) along with other children at this school to talk about various aspects of homework. I may then invite a few children to complete a short piece of writing about their views on homework. With your permission, these discussions will be recorded using a small digital voice recorder. The discussions will be transcribed to help me analyse the content. These activities will take place at school during the normal school day and they will last no more than half an hour each.
- 23. Are there any risks involved - and what will be done to ensure your wellbeing?**
I hope that taking part in the study will be an enjoyable experience for your child. If he or she tires of taking part or becomes upset in any way, the researcher will make sure that he / she returns to usual lessons instead.
- 24. In the unlikely event that something should go wrong, agreement to participate in this research should not compromise your legal rights.**
- 25. What will happen to any information/data that are collected from your child?**
Any information that your child give to me will be kept carefully and securely in a locked filing cabinet. Audio files will be downloaded onto a secure area of my school computer, accessible only by me.
- 26. Are there any benefits from taking part?**
The main benefits of this study are in understanding more about how children view homework. Children's views are vital because the completion of homework is a joint responsibility between pupils, parents and the school. The research is designed to improve the homework experience for everyone.
- 27. How your child's participation in the project will be kept confidential**
All personal information (including names and contact details) will be stored safely and destroyed at the end of the research study. In reports of the study no full names will be used. First names or pseudonyms will be used throughout and the real name of the school will also not be released in the thesis or in any associated reports.

Thank you very much for considering allowing your child to take part in this research.

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS INFORMATION TO KEEP,
TOGETHER WITH A COPY OF YOUR CONSENT FORM

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

NAME OF PARTICIPANT:

Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school

Researcher contact details: Mr N. Rudman Telephone: 01621 742251

Email: nicholasrudman@maylandsea.essex.sch.uk

1. I agree to take part in the above research. I have read the Participant Information Sheet which is attached to this form. I understand what my role will be in this research, and all my questions have been answered to my satisfaction.
2. I understand that I am free to withdraw from the research at any time, for any reason and without prejudice.
3. I have been informed that the confidentiality of any information I provide will be safeguarded.
4. I am free to ask any questions at any time before and during the study.
5. I have been provided with a copy of this form and the Participant Information Sheet.
6. I agree to research interviews, research conversations and focus groups being recorded for analysis by the researcher.

Please print name of teacher agreeing to participant.....

Signed.....date.....

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

Print name of parent / carersigned.....date.....

Print name of your child who is participating in this project.....

YOU WILL BE GIVEN A COPY OF THIS FORM TO KEEP

Data Protection: I agree to the University processing personal data which I have supplied. I agree to the processing of such data for any purposes connected with the Research Project as outlined to me* Name of parent / guardian

(print).....Signed.....Date.....

If you wish to withdraw from the research, please complete the form below and return to Mr Rudman.

Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers
in a primary school

I WISH TO WITHDRAW FROM THIS STUDY

Signed: _____ Date: _____

Participant Information about this research

Title of the project

Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school

Researcher details

Mr N. Rudman, headteacher, Maylandsea Community Primary School

How and why this research will be undertaken

This research aims to discover how homework practices can be developed in the best interests of pupils and families. It will lead to the creation of an agreed framework for the delivery of homework at this school. The researcher intends to explore pupils', parents' and teachers' views on homework, taking account of their thoughts about theoretical and practical issues. The research is designed to illuminate views about homework and lead to an agreed framework for the delivery of homework in this school which will guide teachers, support families and encourage pupils. The findings will not be generalizable to other primary schools but I do expect that other primary schools in similar contexts may find some of my work useful in guiding their own thinking in this complex area of school life.

Existing research on homework in primary schools has done little to address many of the questions surrounding stakeholders' attitudes, parental involvement, preferences for different types of homework, personalisation of homework activities or views about links to either pupils' achievement or progress.

The need to involve all stakeholders in the creation of this framework for homework is crucial. This is because current homework practices in primary schools involve teachers setting homework without any agreed theoretical structure behind it. Teachers are unsure about what homework to set, why they set it or who they are setting it for. Parents are often confused about these same issues. Data collection activities will be focused around discussions and conversations with participants in focus groups and also in group and individual interviews.

A critical, in-depth exploration of stakeholders' views will allow me to address uncertainties, unpick practical problems and propose an agreed framework underpinned by theoretical approaches to home learning. I will be keen to ensure that all stakeholders feel a sense of psychological ownership of the framework for homework.

Appendix 9

Supporting letter from Chair of Governors

Maylandsea Community Primary School

Ethics Application for Doctorate Research

28th January 2013

Dear Mr Rudman

This letter is to advise you that, on behalf of the governing body, I am delighted to support your application to Anglia Ruskin University's Ethics Panel for your doctoral studies research based upon homework at this school.

We have discussed your proposed research which governors feel will be of great benefit to the school.

Best Wishes

Joan Robson

Joan Robson
Chair of Governors

Appendix 10

Ethics letter of approval

26 April 2013



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Nicholas Rudman
32 Chancellor Avenue
Springfield
Chelmsford
Essex
CM2 6WS

Dear Nicholas,

Re: Application for Ethical Approval

Project Number: 12/062
Project Title: Exploring homework perceptions amongst pupils, parents and teachers in a primary school

Principal Investigator: Nicholas Rudman

Thank you for resubmitting your documentation in respect of your application for ethical approval. This has been reviewed by the Chair of the Faculty (of Health, Social Care & Education) Research Ethics Panel (FREP) in advance of the next scheduled meeting in May.

I am pleased to inform you that your research proposal has been approved by the Faculty Research Ethics Panel under the terms of Anglia Ruskin University's *Policy and Code of Practice for the Conduct of Research with Human Participants*. Approval is for a period of three years from 26 April 2013.

It is your responsibility to ensure that you comply with Anglia Ruskin University's Policy and Code of Practice for Research with Human Participants and specifically:

- The procedure for submitting substantial amendments to the Panel, should there be any changes to your research. You cannot implement these changes until you have received approval from FREP for them.
- The procedure for reporting adverse events and incidents.
- The Data Protection Act (1998) and any other legislation relevant to your research. You must also ensure that you are aware of any emerging legislation relating to your research and make any changes to your study (which you will need to obtain ethical approval for) to comply with this.
- Obtaining any further ethical approval required from the organisation or country (if not carrying out research in the UK) where you will be carrying the research out. Please ensure that you send the FREP Secretary copies of this documentation.