When School Goes Home: Some Problems in the Organization of Homework

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It is a simple and well-accepted fact that in American homes children of all ages have to bear down most evenings to do work sent home from school. Within the simplicity lies a tornado of sentiment. People feel strongly about homework, about its presence in the house and about its consequences for life in school and beyond. Said the aging father of one large, successful academic family, whose members did much homework in their day: "Homework was a curse put on parents." Only the child in the room disagreed: "If you think it is difficult for parents, you should be a kid. It's horrible." Against such complaints comes the almost inevitable claim, often from the same mouths, that homework is absolutely essential to a child's development. Dissenters exist, mostly in the educational literature. Hundreds of articles, editorials mostly, have been written on the pros and cons of school work sent home. This article is designed to shed some light on why so many feel cursed, and are yet so willing to be imposed on, far beyond the submission required by any research facts about the efficacy of homework.

Essentially, the dispute around homework has centered on whether it is good or bad for children (in terms of achieving in school or at least developing good work habits) and their families (in terms of fostering close ties with their child's progress or better communication with the school). A full range of positive and negative stands, and even positive and negative research results, has appeared in print. We cannot offer definitive answers to all the questions raised. Homework is in fact a mixed bag, sometimes good, sometimes bad, for

This article would not have taken shape without the persistent prodding of Mary Cross. Helpful comments on an earlier version were offered by King Beach, Courtney Cazden, William Cross, Lawrence Lopes, Sylvia Scribner, and Catherine Snow. We have relied heavily and gratefully on the substantial fieldwork of A. Morison and V. Hamid with the two families we report. The families were most generous to cooperate with our research.

Volume 85, Number 3, Spring 1984
0161-4681/84/391$1.25/0
both children and their families. What we can offer are some issues to think about in deciding how to study homework.

As children move through life at home and school, they consistently encounter things they cannot do. Educators must be concerned about the arrangement of persons and things in terms of which necessary information can become available for the children to build new skills. It seems clear, on the surface anyway, that school and home arrange for learning in quite different ways. In our study of literacy in families, all the children involved seemed to have no ongoing difficulty with any of the tasks they encountered at home, even though many tasks required considerable literacy. Still we have been hard pressed to find specific familial learning situations. A great deal of learning does take place in families, but it is difficult to identify it.

The situation in school is quite different in that it specifically presents itself as designing many scenes where teaching and learning are supposedly happening. Nonetheless, it is in school that we can find many children who seem to have learned so little of what they need to know. Classrooms can, in fact, be organized to keep children off task, away from arrangements that would offer new information and foster growing competencies. In the classroom it will not do just to learn, as one is seemingly free to do at home. In the classroom, students may or may not have to learn, but they definitely have to display their learning. It seems that schools, far more than homes, must foster a certain amount of publicly identified success and failure because of their role as a sorting institution in a meritocratic society.

Surface discontinuities aside, home and school may be much more alike than is usually allowed in the literature. They are, after all, part of the same community of pressures put on children. When school tasks go home, school-like learning scenes become visible, and family members must display their learning or suffer the consequences. As the learning scenes become visible, family members can lose their power to construct learning environments as efficient as the ones that apparently occur around their homes as subroutines of daily life tasks. In playing school, they can arrange for failures of the kind that are otherwise invisible in their families. In other words, parents and children can arrange school-like scenes during which it is possible to display typical teacher-student behavior while never really getting any task in focus, while never really arranging for learning.

This phenomenon raises a number of issues: What kind of homework, if any, should teachers be sending home? How can teachers understand homework failure in ways that do not stigmatize the child or the family? Beyond the family, what alternative teaching/learning scenes are within a community that teachers can make use of in organizing homework assignments? What pressures are constraining families to organize such regressive homework scenes, and what would have to be reorganized to change them for the better? What can parents do to keep homework from disrupting family relations? What can parents do to protect a child they have not been able to help at home?
In this article, we offer a look at how homework is handled in two families. We offer one regressive scene and one that is more successful, and situate both as sensible adaptations to a community of pressures. The organization of this information is as follows: We prepare for our homework scenes by reviewing the debates about homework within the educational community. The review of literature on homework reveals that no one has ever looked closely at what homework does inside families or how it might function as an instrument of sorting. Then we take up our own study in sections on theory, descriptive preliminaries, and finally the description of the two homework scenes. We leave the readers with the problem of how to use homework as a tool for promoting success at school tasks, rather than for reinforcing school failure.

THE HOMEWORK LITERATURE

Homework seems to be present in school curricula for a variety of reasons, and educators and parents seem equally confused about the ways in which it benefits or detracts from learning. This confusion has sparked a great amount of debate for over two decades.

During the 1960s, numerous articles about homework appeared in parent magazines and educational journals. Most authors did not address empirical research and their articles were mostly based on opinions. As a body of literature, the articles were useful in addressing several issues concerning the advantages and disadvantages of homework and in delineating the basic types of homework assignments given to students, for example, assignments that provide practice or drill in a content area, as different from those that aim to extend in-school learning with individual projects involving reading and research.

Most of the arguments in the literature were inconclusive and not supported by adequate research. In fact, the two major reviews of homework studies drew contradictory conclusions. One concluded that homework seems to lead to higher achievement; to be more useful and important at higher grade levels than lower ones; to benefit some students, but not others; and, last, to have no negative psychological effects on students. A second reviewer disputed the idea that achievement is accelerated and concluded that there was little evidence available for making any conclusions concerning the relationship of homework to achievement. Both reviewers dutifully called for more research of better quality and scope.

The debates “pro” and “con” homework developed around a few basic arguments. They are summarized as follows:

ADVANTAGES OF HOMEWORK

It furthers learning and achievement through reinforcement, practice, application, and enrichment of what

DISADVANTAGES OF HOMEWORK

There is no evidence that homework fosters achievement. The assignments are often meaningless tasks since they
is learned in school. It also allows for the completion of unfinished work.

It relates school learning to problems in the home, community, and nation. It encourages a sense of civic responsibility and an appreciation of community.

It fosters a close relationship between the home and the school. It acquaints parents with their children's school work.

It develops independent work and study habits in the child. It fosters discipline, responsibility, and initiative.

It fosters an appreciation for school and learning.

are not geared to the individual needs of children.

It interferes with important family and community participation. It cuts into time that children should have for pursuing leisure, playing, contributing to home life, and pursuing community activities.

Parents may confuse the child or be unqualified to help with the work. This can cause tension and stress for both parent and child, which may result in disruptions of family life.

Not all homes have conditions that are conducive for study. Some parents end up doing the assignments for their children.

It makes students less enthusiastic about school and learning tasks.

THE SURVEY RESEARCH

The unsupported debates gave rise to some empirical investigations of homework practices and prompted researchers to identify many variables for study. Several surveys were conducted on the kinds of attitudes that teachers, parents, and students had toward homework and the kinds of homework assignments they worked on. The most interesting and generalizable result of opinion and attitudinal surveys was that most parents and teachers were in favor of homework. People generally thought homework was of value; their concern was with the nature of homework assignments. Most people seemed to think that homework was detrimental for students only if it was inappropriately assigned by the school or mishandled by the home.

Such fears seemed to be realized. When homework policies in seventy-seven school districts in New York State were surveyed, homework was revealed to be a mismanaged aspect of most school programs. It was found that: Homework policies did not harmonize with research related to sound teaching and learning principles; differences among individual students were generally ignored in giving assignments; one-half of the school districts gave reading assignments, generally considered a poor practice by reading specialists; and, last, in only one-third of the districts did teachers grade, correct, and return homework assignments. The researchers concluded that even though homework was a standard part of almost all school programs,
teachers needed guidelines for making it an educationally sound part of the curriculum.9

In another survey, 58 superintendents, 90 principals, 94 teachers, 1,480 parents, and 2,692 children were questioned about homework. The results indicated that parents and teachers agreed that homework was valuable, but disagreed about why it was valuable. The parents considered homework valuable because it either helped their children do better on exams and get promoted to the next grade, or it prepared them for high school. Teachers, on the other hand, viewed homework as valuable for its long-range capability to develop organizational skills and to make children more aware of their local resources.10

The discrepancy between the teacher view and the parent view of homework was evident in most of the survey research. Parents surveyed seemed to have very particular views of the kinds of assignments they thought their children should be given. These opinions of parents are particularly important to note because they provide clues about the ways in which family life can accommodate the school and the ways in which parents see themselves participating in school-related learning activities.

Overall, the survey research confirmed that homework is a valued and prevalent part of school programs in the United States. It also pointed to the need for developing homework policies, practices, and tasks that are well fitted to school learning, features of home environments and family life, and individual student differences. The survey research did not address the more specific effects that homework had on student achievement in school. That task was left in the hands of researchers who utilized quasi-experimental research designs. The survey studies contributed to the experimental research by delineating variables such as the kinds of homework assignments given; the teacher, parent, and student attitudes toward school; and their relation to achievement.

THE QUASI-EXPERIMENTAL STUDIES

The findings from experimental studies conducted during the 1960s and 1970s led to no conclusions about whether homework has positive or negative effects on student achievement. They are of interest here to the minor extent that they sometimes touched on the ways in which family life might contribute to school achievement. Some of the research sought to investigate the special features of the home environment in order to build a framework within which homework could become a more fruitful educational activity. Again, these results were generally inconclusive and contradictory.

In only one study was homework found to be a motivating factor in the reading achievement of elementary students.11 Growth in reading achievement was studied for approximately 400 intermediate-level students of varying socioeconomic backgrounds. The assignments were individually developed by the teacher with respect to the student's academic ability,
academic needs, home environment, availability of resources, extracurricular activities, and special interests. The researcher interviewed children in order to determine special-interest and home-environment features. The assignments were related to the subject matter of the school curriculum, but were completed totally outside the school environment. It was concluded that the individual enrichment assignments had a positive effect on reading behavior and reading achievement. The contention was that when students are motivated to complete work in which they are interested, they apply reading skills. It should not go unnoticed that these positive results were developed in a program in which the teacher designed the assignments to fit into the flow of each child's home and community life.

Even though attention was focused on homework, few studies recognized the importance of examining the places in which homework is done, or what goes on between people as they work on it. With few exceptions educators have not thought to look into the home and the interactions between family members for learning about how homework is handled. We have learned a great deal about teaching and learning processes from looking at what goes on inside of classrooms; by the same token, we should learn a great deal about homework processes by looking inside homes. Understanding the ways that homework is accomplished or thwarted inside families would tell us a great deal about how it is related to school achievement.

THE PARENT-INvolVEMENT LITERATURE

The literature gleaned from evaluation work on compensatory education programs addressed aspects of parent involvement in school learning. It informs homework issues. Compensatory programs grew from the results of sociological research that supported a strong relationship between a student's home environment and school achievement. The school programs developed around the suggestion that poor home environments would be compensated for if students experienced enriched school settings.12

Parents were sometimes required to participate in the compensatory education of their children. In some programs, parents were taught how to complete learning tasks with their children. A teacher would assign a task and teach it to the parent, who would then teach it to the child. In other programs parents were asked to set the scene for learning. They were asked to set aside quiet places for working, to look at and to sign work, or to spend a certain amount of time reading with their child each day. Involvement could be indirect, as in a few programs in which parents were merely asked to participate in school events such as Parent-Teacher Association meetings and extracurricular activities.

As the programs sprouted in schools, so did research efforts to test their effectiveness. Although the studies did not show a strong or consistent relationship between parent involvement and achievement, they did pinpoint
a strong relationship between parent participation and the development of positive attitudes toward reading and reading instruction.\textsuperscript{13}

In a few studies, homework became one of the central variables for describing the relationship between home environments and school achievement. As part of one large study of the sustaining effects of compensatory programs, home environment and household data were gathered from 14,157 families with children in elementary school.\textsuperscript{14} Homework was one of the household activities for which data were collected. Homework activities (as reported by the parents) were measured in terms of bringing homework home frequently, obtaining frequent help with homework, spending more time on homework than the average, and having others besides the parents assist with the homework—all of which turned out to be negatively related to achievement in both reading and math.

Although the parent-involvement literature reaches closer to the home than previous efforts did, it still leaves us with little idea of how homework is supposed to work, how it does work, and how it does not. To get a closer look at what we need to know, we have to spend some time in a home, getting to know its participants and getting a feel for homework through their eyes.

THEORETICAL PRELIMINARIES

How can we talk about homework scenes in ways that keep their social complexity in view? It is not easy. Essentially, all the conversation on the issue of homework uses a language of motivation, skill, and achievement, all supposed properties of individual children. The focus of the American school language is on the differences in skill levels between children (whether inherited or acquired through experience).\textsuperscript{15} By this focus, homework is considered successful when it leads to more skills and more achievement for more youngsters. Our argument is that before a language of individual traits is adopted—before homework is understood on the basis of skills and achievements on school tests—one must know what homework is, how it works at home and school, and what it does to persons relating to each other around it.

In order to rid ourselves of the biases inherent in most approaches to homework, we watched some homework scenes to see how people did them. In all of them, matters of motivation, skill, and achievement were constant issues among the participants, but their constant presence as issues did not turn them into research tools. In fact, their presence is the topic of our investigation, and we cannot use them to describe what was going on. If everyone displays sleepiness after wine, it is meaningless to say that they do so because of wine's dormative powers. Similarly, if everyone displays differential skills and achievements during homework, it is meaningless to say that they do so because of each child's different achievement potentials. When we searched for the mechanisms organizing the displays (as the scientist of wine would
look for the chemical reactions that organize the sleepiness), what stood out were the resources people had available at any given time for handling particular tasks and how the resources available articulated with differential opportunities within their community. In going directly to homework scenes for guidance on how to understand homework, the relevance of the categories with which homework is normally understood seemed to disappear. It was not that successful children did not appear motivated, skilled, or full of achievement, or that unsuccessful children did not appear the opposite. It was rather that these categories did not tell us much about what was going on in homework. Motivation, skill, and achievement are neither independent nor dependent variables in the traditional sense. Rather, it seemed to us that people's preoccupation with them, and the very behavioral content of what was visible once they were focused on, varied with the structure of the distribution of opportunities and resources within the communities organizing the homework.

Research that engages people's experiences in the search for categories useful in the description of behavior is called ethnography. We were pushed on by the ideals of how a complete ethnography should be done. We therefore offer no variables, only narratives that have as yet no end in sight. We offer them here as orienting devices, vignettes really. As is the case for any thick description, it is difficult to isolate different parts of the narratives.16 We strongly urge the reader to remember that data take on life only as they are actualized by specific data-gathering procedures and methods of analysis. In our case, data gathering meant that field-workers went to families and sought as many connections as possible between various kinds of behavior. With this type of data gathering and analysis, any attempt to pull the information from context does great violence to the people.

DESCRIPTIVE PRELIMINARIES

Our desire to raise issues about homework developed within the context of a larger study on the acquisition of literacy for learning in working-class families. We looked at twelve working-class families from the point of view of their use of literacy in the conduct of everyday life. We focused particularly on twelve children, one from each family, some of whom were doing well in school and some poorly. These children ranged in age from ten to twelve (grades four to seven). Seven were of black and five of Irish heritage. Six were boys and six girls. Using limited participant-observation, informal interviewing, and the videotaping of a homework scene, we got to know these children and their families well.

Our background framework for this study assumed that families continue to play a fundamental role in the education of children, but that we cannot yet specify what this role is and how it is integrated with the work others do in the education of children.17 The framework also stresses that success at school tasks is a social competence, a property of societies, communities, and
families. This means that we understood our task as the analysis of social environments. We realized that there are few clear guidelines about how to proceed along these lines inside families, but contended that this is where the most knowledge could be gained.

As the project progressed, we tried constantly to tune our focus on learning and literacy to all the other details we were picking up on life inside the families. Three aspects of the ways that families seem to manage literacy and school-related activities have profound implications for the ways we could describe and situate the homework scenes. Our description takes into account that (1) families and their individual members seem able to function at whatever level of literacy is required for their family living; (2) what families do educationally is, on the surface, different from what schools do; and, finally, (3) families are structurally well integrated with the school as a legitimate educational institution.

1. There is a tremendous amount of literacy in the families we studied, more than enough to build a program of successful school learning. If we take up the lives of people in our study as a sequence of events requiring literacy (which is rarely the way they conceive of it, of course), then our daily records of their life would be surprisingly full. Even more surprising is that almost no one has a hard time meeting the literacy demands of home life. The structure of events seems to organize the imperative to read and the skills seem to fall into place. Increasingly our questions concern not how much literacy people possess as much as what occasions there are for "doing literacy" at home. Our interests are focused less on how parents teach literacy and more on how much literacy adults leave around for their children as a side product of other things they are doing as they link into their communities.

Homework can have a well-situated place in the flow of everyday life in some homes; it is just one more literate thing families do daily. But homework can also be painfully different and difficult to sequence into the remainder of life. The point is that to understand where homework falls into the picture, surrounding scenes must be described, as well as the various links between them.

2. Learning as we ordinarily recognize it in our lives with children seems to be a subordinate activity in most homes. Formally organized teaching-learning scenes are rarely seen and, in terms of a smoothly functioning house, rarely necessary. This is not to say that learning does not occur in families. Of course learning occurs, more than we had ever expected, but family members do not put too much effort into making scenes for the display and public notice of learning. Families rarely test children and thus children almost never "fail" family education. Rather, learning seems to occur during the performance of other and more important tasks essential to the daily table of organization. Greeting cards, shopping lists, and the intricacies of calendar schedules are not managed because they are literacy events, but because they are important in regulating the connections between people.
Schools of course are quite differently organized, in that scenes for the display of knowledge assume primary importance in people's dealings with each other. In the classroom, every one searches for evidence of learning with the energy of demons possessed, this quite independent of whether learning is taking place or not. This leaves obscure, of course, just how much learning does occur in school, and some recent studies suggest that the many informal channels for structuring access to school tasks are crucial. In the long run, homes and classrooms might not be quite so different in how they organize learning, but they are no doubt quite different in the stories they offer about how learning is organized. We cannot use theories of learning developed for the quick description of classroom tasks to unpack the subtleties of learning at home. We have little theory about how learning might happen beyond the confines of experimentally constrained, carefully designed environments, and we have even less in the way of strong programs for doing pedagogy within the home. It is against such a background that we have to understand homework and consider its consequences.

3. When homework enters a home, it does not reach a network of relations simply different from those at school. If only our problems were that simple. Rather, it enters a home that is so well integrated with the school system that the same problems a child has in school, the problem of being behind and the problem of the status degradation and/or hiding that go with being behind, can be re-created in the home. Parents know how to play teacher and make the home school-like. They can teach, but they can hold a child back as well. Both kinds of consequences can be seen in the next section.

TWO HOMEWORK SCENES

We have looked closely at two videotapes of families doing homework together. The behavior on the tapes is patterned consistently enough to raise some important issues. Our two families represent two quite different ways of doing homework, the first apparently succeeding in linking assignments into the flow of family life, the second setting aside special time for homework in a way that is quite disruptive of this flow. The first family accordingly manages more time on task, and the second family more time in getting organized, almost to the point of not getting to homework tasks. In this section, we can outline only briefly the behavior patterns of the two families. The lesson to be learned is that homework has a rich role in the relational life of a family, a role that people making homework decisions must take into account.

THE FAMILIES

The two families share a similar demographic profile. They live only blocks from each other. They are working class. They are both two and three generations derived from an Irish heritage. And for at least two generations,
all the children have attended the same Catholic school. As we shall see, they are also quite different.

Mrs. Kinney has two children, Joe and an older girl, who is doing quite well in school. The parents are divorced, but the father lives nearby. Economically, they survive on the mother's salary as a file clerk. Joe is said to be like the mother, a school failure, and the daughter like the father, who is currently finishing college. Joe Kinney is a third grader thought by his mother to be doing badly at school and homework. Joe is behind his peers in most subjects, but is said to try hard and is in no danger of being left behind. The Reading Clinic at Teachers College thought he was developing well, although he had little grasp of how to use literacy for organizing learning.

Mr. and Mrs. Farrell have two children, Sheila and a new baby. Mr. Farrell is a truck driver and self-conscious about having left school early. Mrs. Farrell is a recent college graduate. She is active in local-level dissident politics, and much of the literacy in their lives is connected with her political convictions. Sheila is a fourth grader doing well enough at both school and homework. This was both her mother's and teacher's impression. Sheila's life is little disrupted by homework, and she finishes it every day immediately upon coming from school. Although both families educate their children well, we have picked a scene from the Kinney family to show how hard homework can be. The greater frequency of such scenes in the Kinney home also suggests a set of conditions that keep Joe Kinney from catching up in school.

THE COMMUNITY

Kingsland is an American sociologist's delight. Rich in history and hovering presently between self-destruction by prosperity and self-destruction by poverty and abandonment, it is made up of a variety of white persons from different parts of the world who live harmoniously with surrounding Spanish-speaking and black populations. The demographic history of Kingsland indicates that it is best understood in terms of the linkages it offers to the outside world. The Irish who formerly dominated the area moved out and up. They were replaced in Kingsland by the Poles, who continue to replenish their stock with newcomers from Poland almost as fast as the previous generation moves along.

Kingsland is a classic defensive community that has its identity carved out as much by its neighbors and their imagined threats as by forces within the community. Kingsland is under siege, in space by people of different colors, in time by old age and declining economic conditions for working-class people, in possibilities by the road out seeming much harder. While most current inhabitants generally have a stand-and-fight attitude about the community, many leave as fast as opportunity calls. The most important road in Kingsland is out, and its main vehicle is education.
HOMEWORK INSIDE THE FAMILIES

The Kinneys and Farrells organize parts of their homework scene in quite different ways. They can be contrasted in terms of the physical arrangement of homework, the temporal patterns into which homework is sequenced, and the kinds of attention paid to procedural matters.

Joe Kinney works in the kitchen at a right angle to his mother at their round table. He periodically pulls his chair away, and she periodically pulls his chair to her. There is little touch. Others, particularly the sister, are kept at bay. A silent photo of the scene or a quick look at the interactional details reveal both a shared mother-son focus and their isolation from surrounding events; the pair is there to do homework and no one should interfere.

The spatial harmony of the Kinney family hides the fact that homework is a most difficult event for them to arrange. A careful look at the tape indicates that homework is only the nominal task of the setting and that procedural matters are the primary task for the pair. Not only is the scene formally arranged, but most of the arranging is about the form of their interaction, with homework a constant conversational topic but with the actual homework task managing only an occasional focus.

In the Farrell home, the physical scene is quite different. The child works at the kitchen table until her work is finished, often interacting with the various people who walk through the kitchen. When the homework is done to the child's measure, she reports to her mother for a check (a parent has to sign homework). The child sits on the couch next to her mother, and they begin to go over the questions and answers. The scene is crowded and busy. The father is also sitting on the couch at the opposite end, but close enough to engage in the homework correction when he is not busy doing other things. There is a young baby on the mother's leg. She also gets into the homework process, banging on Sheila's book occasionally and going off to get her own book for a while. In addition, the TV, only a meter from the mother's leg, is both on and being watched. As crowded as the scene is with moving bodies, that is how often the people are literally in touch with each other. In addition, that is how noisy they are. Neither the snapshot nor the quick look at the video would reveal a consistent focus on the homework.

The homework scene slides in and out of the Farrell daily life much more fluidly. This is clear in the way various kinds of everyday life concerns are sequenced with the steps through the homework assignment. It is also evident in the ease with which the homework is sequenced with the remainder of the day. Sheila, remember, rushes to finish her homework as soon as she gets home (much like the older sister in the Kinney family), and it causes little disruption in the lives of family members. Even the two-year-old seems to know how to handle it; astoundingly, she seems to sequence her disruptions of the group, a climb onto the wrong chair, for example, with how the rest of the
family is handling the homework. The signals for focusing on task seem to be that ubiquitous and noncontradictory in the Farrell homework scene.

There is a pattern or rhythm to the organization of behavior in both homework groups. In the Kinney family, the homework event is much like a mountain to be climbed, the mother in the role of Sisyphus and Joe in the role of the rock that bows to gravity just at the point when the mother seems to have pushed him to the pinnacle of attending to the homework task for a while. Thus they have a rhythm of start the homework/do something else before anything is accomplished. There is a clear pattern of start/divert, start/divert, start/divert. The timing and organizational consequences of the breaks or interruptions are crucial. In the Kinney household, almost every interruption, by virtue of its timing, turns out to be crucial, leading as it does to a resumption of activities at some later point in a way that does not recover the place the conversation, or the homework, had reached before the interruption.

The pattern of interaction in the Farrell homework is quite different. It shows homework to be one of many things people can do simultaneously with each other near by. For the Farrells, homework is not a scene apart from the rest of life, and it is not very specially organized. It is one thing to be done among a few things to be done, and, if properly broken into parts, it can be fitted neatly into the flow of the day. The structure of the homework event runs on a rhythm of start/time-off, continue/time-off, continue/time-off. The secret to maintaining such a flow of behavior is that the rest periods, many of them infinitesimally small, must appear at the correct times, preferably after a piece of homework is completed. Between pieces of the homework task, just about anything else can happen. The baby can climb to the wrong place, the father can attempt a joke, the mother can catch up on the soap opera on the television. Then it is back to the homework in a way that is cumulative with past efforts. There are occasional disruptions, times when the father or baby enter the work focus while it is in progress. Such scenes are dealt with sternly, and father or baby are sent back to their respective corners until a time-off occasion allows them access to mother and daughter.

In the Kinney house, the procedures Joe uses going about his homework take on a great importance. This is true not only because they are talked about a great deal, but because they are talked about at such crucial times. Attention to the eraser on his pencil, the size of his penmanship, whether a pencil or pen is used or whether the table is clean—all these matters are often addressed at times relevant to mother and son taking on some piece of homework. Again and again they deal with the procedural matter, and they become lost on their way back to the homework task.

Attention to procedures can aid interaction between people by forcing an order on the sequencing of their interaction. It can also be used to disrupt a sequence in the name of some other kind of order; in this case, it disrupts the doing of homework, but maintains perfectly well the family story that Joe is hard to keep on task. “You have to stay one step ahead of him,” says the
mother. "He has no attention span." "I just turn my head and he is gone." Not only is this story told often in the Kinney household; it seems that much work is put into making sure that enough confirming behavior occurs for it to be told as if it were good description.

One feature of the scene we have been watching, in which the "Joe can't sit still" story is referred to, is that the mother spends far more time away from her seat than the child, and she does so at times that are not well timed to the orderly accomplishment of homework tasks. But when Joe does turn from the table it is a source of another telling of the story. As Joe leaves the table to get a chair for the field-worker who is crouching on the floor, the following happens:

[Mother is looking into Joe's schoolbag as he is leaving the table.]

**Mother:** Let's see what you have, Joe. A pipe? What do you say, Joe . . . [looks to the empty chair] Want to . . . [looks to field-worker] All I have to do is bend my head and he's gone.

[laughter] Ohh, Joe. Hey Joel

**Field-worker A:** That's what I thought he was doing.

**Joe:** Where did you put everybody's coat?

**Field-worker B:** Good guy, yeh.

**Field-worker A:** He doesn't like me sitting on the floor.

**Mother:** Oh.

**Field-worker A:** Thank you, Joe.

**Mother:** [Fieldworker A] went down on the floor and I didn't even notice. Thank you, Joe.

**Field-worker A:** Thank you very much.

**Mother:** You're a good host. I'm a rotten hostess. [Pause] Which books? Where did you get these?

The mother attends to his leaving and takes it to be an instance of what she warned the field-worker a video session of Joe doing homework would be, namely, a long record of an empty chair. As the mother and the field-worker laugh at her apparent predictive power, the child returns with a chair, and the mother then notices that it was an appropriate move on Joe's part. From this point on, Joe is stable and the mother far less so. But the story continues to be told, and Joe remains systematically off task for much of the homework time.

In the Farrell house, procedural structures seem to be more task related. Sheila has written in some wrong answers.

**Mother:** *This* is a consonant?

**Sheila:** Om.

**Mother:** *This* is a consonant?

**Sheila:** No.
Mother: This is a consonant?
Sheila: No.
Mother: You got an eraser?
Sheila: No.
Mother: Get one.
Sheila: I don't have one.
Mother: Well, you better find something.
Sheila: But I don't have one.
Mother: So what, so what are you going to leave it like this?
Sheila: Yeah.
Father: No, you're not.
Mother: You'll leave it wrong.
Sheila: Umm.
Mother: This is not a consonant blend. This is a vowel. A consonant blend is two consonants at the beginning of uh thing.
Sheila: [Goes to get an eraser] [About baby Maura] Ma, get her away.
Mother: [Garbled] that make one sound [clearer] that make one sound.
Sheila: Ma, this is the best I could do. Move, Maura.
Father: (to baby) Come here. Hey, come here.
Mother: (erases mistake)
Sheila: OK.
Mother: Well, you better find three more consonant blends.

Sheila must erase them to make room for the correct ones. So she is directed to get an eraser. She resists, and her father joins the direction team. But this is not done until after she sees what is wrong and what has to go in its place. Nor is it done at a time that disrupts a task in the middle of its development. As she goes off to get a pencil, the adults relax and attend to other matters, such as the baby. After she has the pencil, the mother erases the incorrect words and Sheila puts in the correct ones. Then everyone returns to the homework task for center focus. Numerous examples could be cited. The point is that procedural concerns are subordinate to task demands, not the other way around.

In sum, where the homework event is made to stand out in the Kinney home, it is diminished in the flow of events in the Farrell home. Where the Kinneys seem to have a hard time getting to the task through the social form of their interaction and all the interruptions that attention to form seems to invite, the Farrells simply alternate tasks between homework and other social life forms. Both families have constraints on their behavior together. But the Kinneys are much more explicit about the procedural constraints, enough so for them to get less homework done in more time than the Farrells.

The two families offer quite different environments for work sent home from school. The parents have different problems to solve in their daily round
with school tasks and different resources with which to solve them. The teachers, on the other hand, without knowing it, of course, have a rather different fabric onto which they would like to weave their design. Whereas drill or project work makes great sense for Sheila Farrell, Joe Kinney needs primarily to be freed from the burdens of homework. He needs instead some enjoyable reading that would help him to locate the language and meaning potential in printed words.

Although the different environments offered in the two families might suggest a family-specific homework pattern, and that would be an improvement over current practices, there is some reason to believe that we are dealing with a bigger problem than a new homework policy might resolve. There is reason to believe that the academic resources available to the two families are part of a larger picture. The community organization of differential success seems strong in these scenes, and a new homework policy, at the level of child, family, community, or school system, must address this larger picture.

HOMEWORK CONNECTIONS BEYOND THE FAMILY

In the Kinney family, there was a limited set of identities offered and few resources, financial or academic, for reorganizing their state in life. They had a narrow range of occasions for sequencing with the rest of the neighborhood: trips to the store, baseball on the streets, swimming at the public pool, church, and school; only school would engage them in social mobility and a fully literate life. That is a tremendous burden for the school to carry, but it has been doing it for a few generations in Kingsland and can still manage the job (although worsening conditions and the virtual collapse of an inexpensive Catholic school system may make it much harder today than in the past). But the school is a double-edged sword. To the extent that it links its children to the outside world, it must also adopt the standards of the outside world for its children. This puts the members of the community into the position of acting on tasks and models of behavior that do not grow out of daily living. It puts the community, in its most disconnected state, into the position of "lagging emulation," that is, of following the dictates of an envisaged but hardly existent and certainly not relevant community of scholars who set the standards (usually in an archaic language—Latin and ancient Greek for the sons of Greek peasants being the pristine case). It puts the community into the position of having to be concerned with procedures and form and, most of all, with getting it right (usually by getting it well memorized), concerns that can decenter a pedagogical focus as well as organize it.

Structurally, until recently, the Farrells had as few connections to the outside world as the Kinneys, and certainly in their own accounts of their life have portrayed themselves as out of the mobility pathways out of the neighborhood. However, once Mrs. Farrell was engaged in a neighborhood college, complete with women's consciousness-raising, political activism,
and a part-time salary, the nature of her ties with the outside world and with new kinds of literacy events changed drastically. Where the community offered most of its members limited resources for advancement (and the literacy that goes with it), that same community offered Mrs. Farrell the resources for her advancing literacy skills. Instead of just feeling powerless, she wrote about it. The city tried to close down the firehouse in this wooden community, and the residents organized a long-term and successful sit-in. The firehouse was Mrs. Farrell's most productive source of writing, and young Sheila was introduced to print with her mother's active role in poster campaigns in the community. It is in the shape of these developments that Mrs. Farrell centers her child's homework on issues such as "How do you know?" rather than Mrs. Kenney's implicit "Can you satisfy the demands of the outside community and get these questions right, even if you are not too bright?"

The contrast between the Kinney and Farrell households is essentially a contrast between what the community had to offer an average citizen and what it had to offer its most enraged citizen, who managed college credits for writing down her grievances. Literacy for learning took on an ecological validity for Mrs. Farrell that was missing in the interactions of many Kingslanders with their school. Mrs. Farrell was lucky to have found links between her school learning and her daily life, a fact that greatly enhanced the redundancy in the system along with her own and her daughter's learning rates. The kinds of links that make school ecologically (institutionally or historically) valid are limited in Kingsland. The Kinney family is the more obvious example. Politics helped to bridge the gap for the Farrels. This is not to say that only politics can bridge this gap. Another Kingsland family we interviewed but unfortunately could not study managed it with sheer love of reading and learning on the parts of the mother and father, who passed it on to the children. In the black community, some families organized similar kinds of outreach by way of religion, particularly a Black Muslim family. At times of rapid change in the wider society, it can also happen that new opportunities will suddenly appear: When it became necessary for industrialized society to have somewhat literate populations, illiterate parents were often successful in producing literate children even before the development in universal schooling. So many roads are possible. The only problem in our time for such families as we studied is that most roads are heavily blocked or too crowded.

Our homework examples should raise some important questions. Homework assignments do not exist in a vacuum, and there are clear reasons, at the level of both community and family organization, for their mixed reception. Homework takes time and academic skill, two resources that are systematically organized differentially across our communities. The indiscriminant assignment of homework against such a background can exacerbate the sorting dilemmas of our school systems. Teachers, administrators, and policymakers must be aware that their assignments can wreak havoc in a
home and add to the number of failing children. Additional, community-based routes to the organization of literacy training may have to be sought.\textsuperscript{22} Parents, on the other hand, may have to learn to defend themselves against some kinds of intrusion by schools into their homes. The specifics of a homework reform cannot be simple. Once again schooling personnel are being asked to solve the problems of the wider social structure, in this case the differential distribution of literacy demands and opportunities in various communities. We urge on all the realization that any policy that does not confront these differentials at the level of employment and political-involvement opportunities will not change the role of homework or any other educational scene in the organization of inequality in educational opportunity.

Notes

1 In 2,000 hours of observation by a research team working in a spirit kindred to our own, preschoolers were found to be involved in or around literacy for about eight minutes per waking hour, little of it looking like school but much of it requiring considerable skill. A fine report is available in A. B. Anderson and S. J. Stokes, "Social and Institutional Influences on the Development and Practice of Literacy" (Paper presented to the University of Victoria Symposium on Children's Response to a Literate Environment: Literacy before Schooling, October 1982).

2 This analysis of homework is part of a larger study on the family's role in the acquisition of literacy for learning. It was conducted at the Elbenwood Center for the Study of the Family as Educator at Teachers College under a contract with the National Institute of Education. For reports on the study, refer to H. Varenne et al., \textit{I Teach Him Everything He Learns in School} (Final Report to the National Institute of Education, 1982); and Virginia Ann Morison, "Getting Reading and Writing" (Ed.D. diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1982).


4 S. V. Goldman, "Sorting Out Sorting: An Ethnographic Account of How Stratification is Managed in a Middle School" (Ed.D. diss., Teachers College, Columbia University, 1982).


9 Bond and Smith, "Homework."


12 Interest in the home environment started with the Coleman report, which claimed student achievement could not be attributed to school factors, but were more strongly related to factors attributable to the home environment. See J. S. Coleman, Equality of Educational Opportunity (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1966). Additional studies also contended that the home environment was an important factor in student achievement. See C. Jencks et al., Inequality: A Reassessment of the Effect of Family and Schooling in America (New York: Basic Books, 1972). The movement toward compensatory-education programs developed around the suggestion that poor home environments must be compensated for if students were to experience enriched school settings.

13 See, for example, R. Kreud, "An Analysis of the Effects of a Preschool Program for Parental Involvement on Reading Readiness" (Ph.D. diss., University of North Dakota, 1975); E. Lotito, "The Effects of Parental Reinforcement on Homework Reading Programs of Children Diagnosed as Learning Deficient in Reading" (Ph.D. diss., University of Oregon, 1974); and M. Paul, "The Effects of Formal Preschool Experiences and Supportive Reading Behavior in the Home on First Grade Reading Readiness" (Ph.D. diss., University of South Carolina, 1976).


18 For example, see McDermott and Aron, "Pirandello"; P. Griffin, "How and When Does Reading Occur in the Classroom?" Theory into Practice 16 (1977): 876-83; and H. Mehan, Learning Lessons (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).


22 For a good start in the direction of community-based literacy training, see L. Moll and E. Diaz, "The Teaching of Writing as Communication" (San Diego: University of California, Laboratory of Comparative Human Cognition, in progress).
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