THE DISCURSIVE MANAGEMENT OF HOMEWORK PRACTICES IN THREE PRIMARY SCHOOLS IN NELSON MANDELA BAY

by

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ABSTRACT

This treatise examines the discursive management of homework practices in three primary schools in Nelson Mandela Bay. Grade four is focused on as it is hoped that at this stage of their schooling, the learners are receiving homework and are familiar with the concept.

The three schools are from differing social, historical, political and economic backgrounds. The schools chosen are a former model C school, a ‘Coloured’ school and a ‘Township’ school. These three diverse schools have been selected to identify the dominant Discourses that inform the homework practices. The eventual effect of these Discourses on the learners is also included. The material and personal effects on the learners is discussed.

The prevalent Discourses on homework in the model C school, work to produce disciplined subjects who are able to 'self govern' and thereby succeed in society. At school’s B and C the dominant Discourses are of a deficit nature. These discursively position the learners as victims and subjects who are unable to manage their academic and private selves, as a result of their circumstance.

While the staffs at schools B and C appear to be well intentioned, this abovementioned deficit model is perpetuated by their talk. These principals and teachers need to become aware of the power that their discursive formations contain and the impact thereof.

A qualitative methodology is adopted in this study. Three different methods of data collection are employed in order to promote triangulation and thereby increase the validity of the findings.

Discourse and Critical Discourse analysis provide the tools with which to analyse and draw conclusions from the gathered data.
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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

1. Introduction

This study examines the discursive management of homework practices in three different types of schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay (NMB) area (and its effects on learners and their schooling.) The environments of the schools and the learners’ home situations are recognized as significant influencing factors. Another important consideration is the historical legacy of apartheid in terms of human and material resources. How teachers speak about and speak to their learners with regards to homework is examined. In particular the power of language to both represent and shape subject positions and subjectivities of the learners during this process is analysed, in the context of the policing of homework practices in the three schools.

The notion of policing is a Foucauldian (1977) concept which employs different types of technologies of control. These include surveillance, record keeping and individualising. Surveillance, individualisation, and normalisation can be seen to be instruments of power, which impose homogeneity in order to produce bodies that are ‘both docile and capable’ (Foucault, 1977, p.294). Data generated around the homework practices was used to examine prevailing discourses that teachers used to manage homework and make pupils compliant in completing homework. If homework was not issued the explained reasons for this are examined.
2. Researcher’s Background

I grew up and attended school during the latter part of the apartheid period in South Africa (SA). Even though I was in a rather sheltered and privileged school environment, with reference to the political and social turmoil occurring at the time, I was aware of the differing types of education available to white, coloured and black learners. I was also aware that the education that I received (in a Catholic private school) was, in my eyes, of a better quality than those of fellow coloured and black learners who could not afford to pay the private school fees. The discourses that I and others were exposed to in the private Catholic school system positioned us in such a way that we appeared to have an ‘edge’ over our peers in the public schools.

I remember being told how much more ‘confident’ I was and more ‘willing to volunteer an opinion’ than my friends who were not exposed to well resourced schooling. I received homework daily and my homework diary required my parents’ signature. It was checked every day and we received corporal punishment if the above processes were not completed.

There was a strong sense of segregation and access to ‘good quality’ education was denied to anyone who was not white, with the exception of those ‘coloured’ and ‘black’ families who could afford to pay the high school fees. In fact, the education policies for black learners were so designed as to keep these learners from acquiring any skills that could actually enable them to be productive and contributing members, of any significance, in society. Christie (1985, p.127) highlights this difference in schools and schooling. She writes ‘separate schools were part of an overall plan for the social, economic and political development of apartheid. Schools were part of creating and maintaining an awareness of separateness and difference’.
3. Context and Rationale

A survey, conducted in 1981, tracked the expenditure per capita on African (black), Coloured, Indian and White learners and indicated that the expenditure on the African learners (R17) was vastly different to the amount spent on their White counterparts (R128) (Blignaught, 1981and SAIIR survey, quoted in Sached Ravan). This resulted in gross differentiation between resources, both human and material, in SA schools.

Currently, in 2007, the geographically determined nature of Apartheid continues to separate people. While the Group Areas Act no longer exists and people may live where they want to, many black families are disallowed any real choice of where their children attend school as a result of the accompanying economic factors. The group areas act was an act enforced by the then white South African parliament in 1950, which segregated different racial groups in terms of where they lived and worked. The consequences of this act was that many non-white people commuted long distances in order to get to work and school and many were removed from their homes. Studies that have been conducted indicate that ‘schooling in South Africa is delineated largely in terms of class’ (Hoadly, 1998, cited in Sekete, Shilubane & Miola, 2001, p.14) and this leads to the better resourced schools being situated in formerly white and middle class suburbs. The distance from townships and coloured communities combined with the high school fees means that most historically disadvantaged learners do not have access to these better resourced schools. These schools are referred to as former model C and typically have smaller learner/teacher ratios. Typically, most of these schools are also equipped with computers and televisions and have strict policies in place regarding attendance, dress code and homework.

In this treatise I aim to examine the relationship between language and its contexts of use. Accordingly I will then be able to analyse the effect that these discourses have on the learners and the way in which they identify themselves and are identified and positioned by their teachers.
Substantial research has been conducted on homework and this is discussed in chapter two of this treatise. There appears however to be a gap in the current research. Most of the research appears to work with the assumption that learner’s are assigned homework on some form of regular basis. This however might not be the case in SA. Also the surveyed literature does not investigate the way homework is given in the South African context and what informs these practices. This study aims to begin to address this gap by analysing the discourses which inform the practices in the three schools and make recommendations.

4. Research Question and Objectives

4.1 Research question

How is homework discursively managed in three selected primary schools?

4.2 Objectives

The objectives of this research project are to determine:

- whether a homework policy exists
- what the origin of the policy is and whether or not homework is a naturalised practiced in these primary schools
- how the policy is being implemented
- how homework is linguistically mediated within the classroom
- what the current homework practices are in the classrooms
- how the practices are communicated
- how the homework practices are managed
- what discourses are drawn on
- how the prevailing discourses position the learners
5. Choice of Methodology

This study is qualitative in nature. Qualitative research is a:

naturalistic, interpretative approach concerned with understanding the meanings which people attach to actions, decisions, beliefs, values and so on within their social world, and understanding the mental mapping process that respondents use to make sense of and interpret the world around them (Ritchie and Lewis, 27 April 2007; cited Rainwater, 10 October 2007, online).

As can be seen from the preceding research question and general objectives of this research study, the concern with understanding the meanings of interactions and utterances is central to what I hope to explore and analyse. I want to observe the ‘quality, meaning, context, or image of reality in what people actually do, not what they say they do’ (JUS, 8 October 2007, online).

6. Outline of chapters

Chapter one is an introductory chapter which gives the background to the research question as well as sets the context for the study. The research questions and objectives are also stated above. This chapter briefly outlines the choice of methodology for the study and the reasons for choosing qualitative over quantitative.

Chapter two is the literature review. It explores the available literature on homework. South African studies have been included and fore grounded. The notions of discourse and critical discourse analysis are introduced here.

Chapter three reports on methodology and methods. This chapter discusses the selection of participating schools and provides background to the classification of these schools. The methods used to collect the data are described. How the data will be analysed is also explained. Lastly the process of gaining ethical consent for the study is reported on.
Chapter four reports on the findings of the analysis of the data. Here the transcripts of the interviews, observations and focus groups are analysed by means of critical discourse analysis and discussed.

Chapter five concludes the treatise and recommendations are supplied.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Introduction

The chapter will start with a definition of homework and then provide a general overview of homework research. The purpose of homework will also be examined. Both the positive and negative aspects of homework will be explored as these appear to be issues of contention. As homework is generally perceived to be completed at home, literature involving parental involvement and the learners' home environment will also be included. Finally practical guidelines gathered from the literature with regard to the setting of homework will be listed.

This chapter explores selected literature on homework. Given the nature of the treatise and the research questions, literature on discourse will also be included. Various viewpoints emerge in the reviewed literature on homework, but Van Voorhis (2004) mentions that most studies seem to agree that homework is a core issue at schools and affects the learners, their families and their teachers.

2.2 Definitions of homework

Cooper (1989a, p.7, as cited in Marzano and Pickering, March 2007, p.74) defines homework as ‘any tasks assigned to students by school teachers that are meant to be carried out during non school hours’. The United States (US) Department of Education (DoE) however has a more concise definition for homework. It simply defines homework as ‘an extension or elaboration of class work’ (Kid Source Online, 2000). These definitions do not appear to reflect what appears to occur in the South African primary school context. As will be shown in the later data analysis chapters of this treatise, very little work seems to be completed by the learners outside of school hours. The reasons or justifications for this practice will be fully explored in chapter four.
2.3 A general overview of homework research in primary schools, positives and negatives

Not many studies appear to have been conducted at primary school level and those that have been carried out suggest that homework can be both beneficial as well as a waste of time (Cooper, 1994; Plato, 2000; Sharp, 2001). The aforementioned American and Australian studies suggest that learners in primary schools should have brief and undemanding assignments or tasks for homework. The next section will separate the positive and negative arguments for and against the assigning of homework to primary school learners.

Cooper, Robinson and Patall conducted a large scale analysis in 2006 that identifies a few studies that show positive effects of homework in the lower grades (two, three and four). Developing good study habits and positive attitudes towards school are some of the benefits gained from homework in primary schools (Cooper 1989b, cited in Marzano & Pickering, March 2007, p.77).

Marzano and Pickering (p.77) present a similar argument that homework in the earlier grades mentioned above, should ‘foster positive attitudes, habits and character traits, permit appropriate parental involvement and reinforce the learning of simple skills introduced in class’. This presents an ideal situation, one where parents and school share common understandings and the cultural capital of the home is similar to that of the school. However, issues of class, privilege and money, and in the SA context, race and the legacy of Apartheid, make this unreachable for most school learners.

A further positive argument for the assigning of homework to younger learners is put forward by Brown. She suggests that if younger learners are given smaller tasks to complete on their own, homework is beneficial to them. Brown (Plato, 2000, online) argues that ‘self responsibility is cultivated when a student hands in an assignment, no matter how small’.
Reese (1997, cited in Plato, online), when researching the correlation between student achievement and homework, writes that there appears to be a negligible difference in test scores of those ‘homework completing students’ and ‘homework non-completers’ at the primary level. Differences in test achievement between homework completers and non completers are however indicated in similar research among high school learners.

Kohn (cited in Jehlen, January 2007, online) indicates that ‘no research has ever demonstrated any academic benefit of giving homework in elementary schools’. He goes on to state that most of the listed positive benefits of homework are a myth. Bempechat (1998, quoted in Plato, 2000, online) and Butler (2000) indicate that when homework is given in the early phases of primary school it appears to add ‘very little value’ (p.5) to the learner's education. They also write that ‘social and emotional development is ill-served by the stress that homework can bring on children and their parents’ (p.6, online).

Issues of social and emotional development and stress on families are critical points to consider in the SA context. Homework and its completion could become yet another stress factor on learners whose home situations, in terms of academic support, are often less than ideal. Learners do not all necessarily live with their parents. Some live with grandparents or other caregivers and some may have single parent families who work until late. In some cases the caregivers do not have the academic ability or time to help the learners with their homework. Statistics show that in 2001, 74.3% of people in the Eastern Cape were living in poverty (http://www.hst.org.za/sahr).

Various studies conducted on homework over a 16 year period (1987-2003), show that there is a positive relationship between the amount of homework that students do and their achievements (Cooper, Robinson & Patall, 2006, cited in Marzano & Pickering, 2007, p.74). They argue that generally, doing homework causes improved academic achievement.
In a Malaysian study, North and Pillay (2002) state that there seems to be general consensus in the literature on education and homework that homework has a positive effect on learning. This positive effect occurs as a result of homework that is actually done at home which therefore extends the time that is available to learners and teachers for learning (North & Pillay, April 2002, p.137). Helms (cited in Homework Hubbub, News Debate, October 2006) mentions that ‘as with anything, things need to be reinforced and practiced in order to be understood’. All of the above presupposes that learners have home situations which lend themselves to the completion and practice of homework and ideas. Issues of space and supervision need to be considered and addressed within the South African context.

Most research, predominantly conducted within high schools, indicates that homework is generally beneficial to learners (Plato, 2000; Sharp, 2001; Cairney & Ruge, 2005). Sharp (2001, p.1. online) argues that, when students do homework they can retain information better. She further states that homework increases a learners’ level of competence in a subject and that it can lead to self discipline, time organisation, good study habits and skills. Cooper (1994) adds to this by stating that learners develop better critical thinking and information processing skills. Furthermore, according to the literature reviewed, homework appears to increase a learner’s inquisitiveness and can lead to a greater level of independence in problem solving. Singh et al concur and write that homework and parental involvement in particular can lead to the ‘development of determined achievers and the construction of a positive learning environment’ (2004, p. 302).

According to Cooper some of the positive effects of homework include the improvement of a learner’s factual knowledge and the learners’ understanding of materials. Concept formation, attitudes, self discipline, study skills and problem solving on one’s own are also listed as positive ‘side effects’ to homework (1989, p.86). Marzano and Pickering point out that in research that has been carried out, the positive effects of homework are actually related to the amount of homework that a student completes, rather than the time spent completing it, or how much homework the student was given.
There are however studies that argue that assigning homework in the primary grades has no benefit. Some argue that the benefits are not noticeable and that no consensus has been reached about this in research.

Even though most research shows that homework is a positive activity, far more appears to be written about the negative effects of homework. Cooper (1994, p.2) lists ‘satiation, denial of access to leisure time and community activities, cheating and increased differences between high and low achievers’ as some of the main negative aspects to homework. Singh et al (2004) in their research on *black parental involvement in education* report that some critics of homework claim that homework puts some learners at a disadvantage. According to their South African investigation ‘homework contributed significantly to many learners’ dropping out of school’ (2004, p.305). This observation is linked to the Apartheid schooling system which was in place in SA in the 1900’s and is mentioned in the introductory chapter of this treatise. The issue of parental involvement and home environment and these two factors’ effects on learners and their homework will be further explored at a later stage in this chapter. North and Pillay (2004, p.137), mention that homework can be a negative experience for both the learner and the teacher. They refer to Painter (1999, cited in North & Pillay 2002, p.138) who describes how both herself and the learners just ‘glaze over’ as they approach the homework tasks and that they were ‘all just going through the motions’. While this is a report from only one teacher, it is not unreasonable to believe that many teachers and learners feel the same way.

Kralovec & Buell assert that in the US homework contributes to a culture that is too corporate and competitive in that it ‘overvalues work to the detriment of personal and familial well being’ (Kralovec & Buell, 2000; cited in Marzano & Pickering, 2007).
2.4 The purpose of homework

Feldman (February 2004), writes that the main purpose of homework is ‘most probably to improve a learner’s achievement levels’. This statement can be divided into various components and many of the following authors’ view on the purpose of homework can find a home in this broad stated purpose.

Marzano and Pickering view homework as a ‘powerful instructional tool’ (March 2007, p.76). They contend that the most important purpose of homework is to enhance learners’ achievements by enabling learning to take place for a longer period everyday and not just during school hours.

The above thought can be extended to include learners ‘practicing a skill learned in class and to help prepare for the next day’s lesson’ (Cooper, 2001; Polloway, Epstein, Bursuck, Jayanthi & Cumblad, 1994). This will offer the learners, on an individual level, the opportunity to ‘participate and demonstrate their understanding of the topic’ (Van Voorhis, p.207). The reason that this individual opportunity is so valuable to both learners and teachers is that no two learners are the same. Some learners might want to participate vocally in class and show their understanding of the topic at hand in this way. Other learners might be quiet and will show understanding of the topic through the tasks assigned for homework.

According to Plato (2000) the purpose of homework is to supplement and reinforce the work done in school. This view is echoed by the US DoE (2000) which states that homework exists as a practice for learners to reinforce the skills that they learned in class. They also mention that another purpose of homework is to prepare learners for activities that will be carried out the following day. The article states that homework should serve as an extension of knowledge in so much as learners can complete long term assignments based on what they are taught in the classroom. Given the complexities of the SA situation one might conclude that strong support systems would be
required to achieve this purpose and this would not describe the ‘typical’ SA home.

Cooper (2006) writes that homework in primary schools should fulfill three purposes. These purposes are to encourage a positive attitude and good habits with regard to school work in the learner, to allow the parents to interact with their children and to reinforce whichever skills were taught in the classroom that day. News Debate (October 2006, p.3) mentions that for many American educators, the purpose of homework is to ‘help kids retain what they learn in class’ and also to reassure the educator that learners are covering and reviewing class material on their own.

In a South African (SA) study focused on ‘black parental involvement in education’ which was conducted in historically disadvantaged black secondary schools, the authors mention a purpose of homework that appears not to have been given much mention in the overseas literature. Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004, p.301) mention that part of the expectation of parents when they send their children to school is to get a ‘quality education’. Part of this ‘quality education’ is homework and through homework parents are given the opportunity to engage with and provide input into their child’s education. Singh et al bring our attention to the spirit of Masifunde. This means ‘let us educate together’. The ‘us’ in this quotation refers to parents and teachers. In this instance therefore homework can be seen as having the potential to form a bridge between the home and school.

In a study conducted in Malaysian schools, teachers were surveyed about the purpose of homework. The main purpose for assigning homework, as emerged from the survey, was in order to provide ‘practice for students and diagnostic information for teachers’ (North & Pillay, 2002, p.139). What this means in practical terms is that these teachers assign homework in order for the learners to practice classroom activities, complete work that was started in class and prepare the learners mentally for the next day’s lesson. These preceding purposes cover the practice element of assigning homework. Under the diagnostic component of homework, the teachers listed giving feedback,
Van Voorhis (2004, p.205), in an article that reflects on homework assignments, design and ritual, talks about homework as serving three functions. These functions are 'instructional, communicative and political'. She writes that teachers are often hesitant to answer what their purpose is in designing and assigning homework as they are so rarely asked to identify their reasons. In her role as consultant at an American university she has found that teachers seem to assign homework for one of ten different purposes. The teachers surveyed listed the purposes from most important to least important. They are, as follows: practice, preparation, participation, personal development, parent-teacher communication, parent-child relations, peer interactions, policy, public relations and punishment (2004, p.207). These 10 purposes can be slotted into the three functions as mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. This is a useful guide to be used by the SA teachers in order to determine their purposes for assigning homework to their learners.

The activities that can be referred to as instructional purposes are practice, preparation for the next class, participation in the learning and personal development. The only activity not addressed earlier on in this section is that of personal development. Learners learn that homework is an activity that is their responsibility. It is up to them (as the learner) to complete the tasks assigned, ideally without their parents and teachers reminding them of the assignments.

The communicative purposes of homework include parent-teacher communication, parent-child relations and peer interactions. In some cases parents are asked to review a test or project with their child. This serves to keep parents aware of how their child is performing in that particular subject area. It keeps parents up to date and ensures that when their child’s report is sent home the parents are prepared for the results.
Finally the last few sections on policy, public relations and punishment all fall under the political purposes of homework. These functions are there to fulfill policy and satisfy the general public’s expectation with regards to homework. Van Voorhis mentions that although punishment has long been accepted as one of the purposes of homework ‘educators today denounce the use of homework for this purpose’ (2004, p.208).

2.5 Parental involvement in homework and the effect of the learners’ home environment

In an American review on studies on homework (2001) Sharp et al report that in general it appears that parents want schools to set homework for their children. Parents believe that their involvement will make a positive difference to the learner’s performance (Hoover-Dempsey & Sandler, 1005, 1997; cited in 2001). Parental involvement and home environment have, in this part of the discussion, been combined as these factors appear to be inextricably linked in the reviewed literature.

Singh et al (2004, p303) report that the *South African Schools act of 1996* decentralised school management. This effectively means that parents need to be involved with their child’s education even more than before. There are various reasons for this but for the purposes of this chapter the focus is that the more involved the parent is in their child’s education the better off that child will be (Vasallo, 2001, p.1). Hoover-Dempsey and others (Battiato, Walker, Reed Dejong & Jones, 2001, p.201) explore the parental role and the construction of these roles in their child’s homework. They write that the roles are ‘generally constructed from personal experience and expectations of pertinent others’. This reference raises interesting questions with regard to the SA context, which has been mentioned in the introductory chapter and will be taken into account in the data chapters of this treatise. The abovementioned researchers go on to state that when parents are better equipped and qualified they are more likely to offer their child help with homework assignments. Once again this has implications for the SA context where we are all products of the Apartheid schooling situation. Research by Singh et al
(2004) suggests that black parents who have been disadvantaged by the abovementioned schooling situation do not feel that they can help their children. The article reported that in some extreme cases, it was discovered that some teachers had stopped assigning homework to their learners as the teachers knew that no assistance was forthcoming in the home (Singh et al, 2004, p.304).

Economically disadvantaged learners and the fact that their home environments are often not conducive to completing homework have been the focus of much debate in recent (2000 – 2007) years in the US. Plato (2000, p.7) asks how learners who have less than ideal home situations can be asked to prioritise the completion of homework? Cooper (2000, online listserv), a teacher that was surveyed in a list-serv, talks about the effect of home life on the learner’s ability to complete homework. She hypothesizes that ‘many of them have outside obligations like sports or babysitting, and many are dealing with some heavy duty stuff outside of school. Who wants to worry about algebra when your mom is dying or you don’t know when you are going to eat next?’

Also, in most historically and economically disadvantaged schooling situations in SA the fundamental tools which are needed to complete homework successfully, are lacking. This lack is seen as well in the homes of the learners who attend these disadvantaged schools. In the schools there are often not enough text books for the learners; in most cases the teacher has the only copy. These learners go home and are expected to complete homework assignments successfully but their home conditions are not conducive to this outcome. Privacy and comfort are often not available. Jubber contends that ‘socio-economic status correlates highly with other significant education performance variables, such as parental level of education’ (1994, p.137; cited in Singh et al, 2004, p.305).

Space, light, quiet, materials are all factors that have been listed by most homework research as impacting on a learner’s ability to complete homework. On the other hand, Brown (cited in Plato, 2000) claims that the
abovementioned factors can be overcome, when they impact negatively on the homework process. She points out that research conducted by Walberg indicates that “when teachers give well-designed homework assignments and comment on the students’ work, the effect on achievement is ‘three times as large as family socioeconomic status, as indexed by family income, education and occupation’” (Plato, p.8, online).

Cooper (1994), Plato (2000) and Sharp (2001) all cite parental involvement as playing some role in whether the learners complete their homework or not. Sharp (2001, p.3) summarises that parents get more involved in homework with younger children and that socio-economic and cultural factors play a part in the type of assistance that the parents are able to give. She does however point out that a review of studies on homework in America shows that there is no clear link between the amount of parental involvement in homework and learner achievement at school.

An alternative viewpoint is put forward by Cairney and Ruge (2005, p.1) as they state that ‘parental involvement in children’s education has long been recognized as an important element in effective schooling’. They are however referring to schooling as a whole and not the specific point of homework. Hewison and Tizard (1980, as cited in Cairney and Ruge, 2005) point out that when a parent helps a learner with a task such as reading, that this can be a ‘better predictor of success than other factors such as intelligence’. The issue of home environment and potential support is obviously a complex and sensitive issue in the SA context in which poverty, Aids and illiteracy are prevalent. Also the increasing gap between the ‘have' and ‘have nots’ further exacerbates this situation.

Bennet and Kalish (2006) in their book, *the case against homework: how homework is hurting our children and what we can do about it*, focus on the quality and quantity of homework given to learners. They provide evidence to support their claim that ‘too much homework harms students’ health and family time.
American parents in the reviewed literature have owned up to feeling 'unprepared' when helping their child with homework and that their trying to help their children often causes stress. Epstein (2001, cited in Marzano & Pickering, 2007) conducted a series of studies to try to find when parental involvement can help and not hinder the homework process. From these studies they recommend an interactive approach to homework with three main considerations. These are: that parents are given clear guidelines as to their role in the homework process, that teachers don’t expect parents to act as subject experts and that parents should ask questions that would clarify what their child has learned. However this requires of the parents to be confident, assertive and have easy access to the teachers.

Good and Brophy (1978, 1980) also recommend certain strategies with regard to parental involvement in homework. They put forth that it would be useful if children can show or explain the work they did at school that day to their parents and get their reactions. Also they suggest that students ‘interview’ their parents on their parents’ experiences and social studies topics. This would, in their view, mean that ‘both parents and children are likely to experience [the tasks] as enjoyable rather than threatening’ (Marzano & Pickering, p.78).

**2.6 Guidelines for setting ‘good’ homework**

After perusing the above literature, the main guidelines for setting ‘good’ homework are to:

- assign purposeful homework,
- design homework to maximize the chances that students will complete it,
- involve parents in appropriate ways,
- carefully monitor the amount of homework assigned to different grades (Marzano & Pickering),
- assign regularly and consistently,
- communicate the policy to parents,
• be flexible in terms of when to assign homework,
• make it count, so that when learners do not do homework they realise that there are consequences,
• not assign homework as punishment (Feldman, Feb 2004).

In this study I hope to determine whether any of the above recommendations are present at the three schools. The effect, if any, of the differing socio-economic and historical backgrounds of the schools has on this situation will be investigated.

2.7 Social class production

Educational institutions are powerful generators of dominant ideologies and as such produce practices that both exclude and include. One of the ways that class and social privilege is reproduced is explained by Bourdieu’s (1984) notion of cultural capital. A widely used definition of cultural capital stems from Lareau and Lamont (1988) who indicate that cultural capital is ‘institutionalised, i.e. widely shared, high status cultural signals (attitudes, preferences, formal knowledge, behaviors, goods and credentials) used for social and cultural exclusion’ (cited in Lareau & Weininger, 2003, p.587).

Aspects such as attitudes, preference and behaviors are usually learnt from one’s home and community. Schools tend to reward learners who carry within themselves ‘appropriate cultural capital’. In doing so, they ratify that form of cultural capital and devalue the cultural capital of those learners who come from working class homes.

In this study, the notion of cultural capital is used with specific reference to ‘attitudes’ and ‘credentials’ ascribed to the parents of the learners. If parents are seen to lack the necessary credentials or have poor attitudes, they are excluded from participating in their child’s homework. Therefore, those parents who possess the ‘relevant credentials’ and ‘correct attitudes’ are rewarded and thereby further privileged.
2.8 Discourse

Discourse ‘is used in linguistics to refer to extended samples of either spoken or written language’ (Fairclough, 1999, p.3). ‘Language in use’ is how Gee (1999, p.7) describes discourse. He distinguishes between ‘d’iscourse with a small ‘d’ and ‘D’iscourse with a big ‘D’. The distinction between these two forms is important for this treatise, as the analysis will mainly focus on the big ‘D’. Discourse is when “‘little d’ discourse (language in use) is melded integrally with non language ‘stuff’ to enact specific identities and activities” (Gee, 1999, p.7). It enables people to be positioned by differing entrenched perspectives. For example in a school situation certain characteristics and categories are ascribed to the learners where teachers expect to find the ‘clever one’ the ‘bully’ the ‘class clown’ and so on. The non language ‘stuff’ that chapter four will examine are socio-economic, historic and political.

Fairclough explains that if one takes the view that discourse is an extended sample of language, then the emphasis is placed on the interaction between the person who speaks and the one who listens, or on the person who writes and the one who reads the writings. In consequence to this the ‘processes of producing and interpreting speech and writing, as well as the situation context of language use’ are emphasized as well (Fairclough, 1992, p.3). He views language not as an individual activity but as a form of social practice (p.63). Therefore language is produced and reproduced in social settings such as the school. What I aim to investigate and observe in this study is how meaning is generated by the social situations of the three schools involved.

The notion of positioning and power is critical in the understanding of discourse. How the homework practices in the differing school contexts are implemented and monitored will be explored in order to analyse how the Discourse has shaped and continues to shape these practices.

Discourse models appear to aid in the construction of positioning. These models are a concept that is not only interesting but particularly relevant to this study. These models will form part of the theory that will help with the
analysis chapters of this study. Gee (2005. p.71) defines Discourse models as ‘the largely unconscious theories we hold that help us make sense of texts and the world’. As humans we tend to live with and act on these assumptions unless challenged. Therefore it can be said that these models are the frame through which we ‘see’ the world. Furthermore while one learns from one’s experiences, these experiences are shaped by the ‘social and cultural groups to which we belong’ (Gee, 1999, p.71). But these frames are culturally bound, leaving us to have limited perceptions of situations. Also these frames can make us act in certain ways believing we are doing what is right, when in fact the opposite might be true. This can be applied to the SA context. We all ‘know’ that Apartheid separated the ‘whites’ from the ‘blacks’ and privileged the ‘whites’. We also all ‘know’ that the ‘blacks’ were put in badly resourced schools and therefore not educated properly. It will be interesting to note how this ‘knowledge’ has influenced the Discourses that inform the homework practices that exist in the schools that I will visit, even though it has been 13 years since the demise of Apartheid.

Foucault describes discourse as ‘constitutive’. In this way objects and subjects of social life are produced, transformed and reproduced by discourse (Fairclough, 1992, p.41). Fairclough believes that one’s ‘social identity;’ and ‘subject positioning’ are constructed by discourse. Discourse constructs social relationships among people and it is these relationships and related interactions that this study explores.

It is important at this stage to distinguish between linguistic analysis and discourse analysis. Foucault has the following to say on the distinction between the two:

Discourse analysis is concerned not with specifying what sentences are possible or ‘grammatical’ but with specifying sociohistorically variable ‘discursive formations’ (sometimes referred to as discourses), systems of rules which make it possible for certain statements but not others to occur at particular times, places and institutional locations (1969, cited in Fairclough, 1992, p.40).
The three schools, selected for this study are situated in differing backgrounds in terms of history, politics and finances. Therefore the analysis chapter reports on observations and findings at the three schools.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the method that I will use in order to analyse the data collected in this study. In particular the concepts of power and positioning will be explored through the critical part of discourse analysis. CDA is a method of analysis that both describes and interprets discourse in context and also explains why and how these Discourses work (Rogers, 2004, p.2). I will explore how the Discourses that I encounter in my research are historically informed. Furthermore how this historical nature is factored into the homework practices within the three schools (whether consciously or unconsciously) and the effect that these Discourses have on the learners, parents and situations involved will be explored.

2.9 Conclusion

The literature reviewed in this chapter will serve as a lens through which I will analyse the data from the study in chapter 4. The following chapter explains the methodology used in the collection and analysis of the study.
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY AND METHODS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter discusses the methodology selected for the study. Furthermore the selected methods used for data gathering will be described. Firstly this chapter will explain my reasons for selecting a qualitative methodology. Then I will discuss the reasons for the choice of research sites and the processes followed to obtain ethical clearance. Next the methods used to gather my data will be introduced and discussed. My selected methods of data analysis are included.

3.2 Methodology

Qualitative methodology looks at the social world that includes social aspects of life and takes into account experiences, relationships and social interactions (Mason, 2002, p.1). Qualitative research, since it includes methods such as interviews and observation, tends to provide more in depth data than quantitative research. Furthermore, qualitative research ‘has an unrivalled capacity to constitute compelling arguments about how things work in particular contexts’ (Mason, 2003, p.1). The capacity for qualitative methodology to provide rich data motivated me to choose this methodology. The selected schools were different in terms of background; historically, contextually and financially. I aimed to observe the impact that the environmental factors have on the homework practices within the various situations as well as how the discourses in the different schools on homework work to produce and reproduce specific subjects in terms of class and privilege.
3.3 Research sites: Selection of schools

Since language is socio-culturally determined (Heath, 1983) the sample of the schools was selected from three different socio-cultural settings. This kind of sample is what Mason (2002) refers to as strategic sampling. She explains that ‘if we sample strategically across a range of contexts, we increase our chances of being able to use that very detail not only to understand how things work in specific contexts, but also how things work differently or similarly in other relevant contexts’ (Mason, 2002, p.125).

Convenience sampling was applied with reference to access and the school principals’ willingness to partake. The willingness of the teachers and parents of the learners and eventually the learners influenced my choice of participants. Therefore the sampling method was applied for ‘practical reasons’ (Mc Burney, 1994, p.203). As the sample for this study is small, I will not attempt to make generalisations based on the findings.

3.3.1 Definitions and backgrounds of the types of schools

Drawing on the historically determined nature of schooling in South Africa, which was discussed in chapter one, three major categories of schools were identified. These are, former,¹ ‘model-C, former 'Coloured' and 'Township' schools.

Former model C schools are generally situated in affluent middle-class areas. These schools are well resourced, have well trained teachers and small class/teacher ratios. Also the learner population tends to be a racial and cultural mix (Carrim & Soudien, 1999). While language issues do arise in these schools, there tends to be a prevalence of English and Afrikaans as the language of learning and teaching. While these are not the mother tongue of

¹ these terms have been used in their historical apartheid context and do not imply that the researcher agrees with or is attempting to legitimise them.
many black learners the high exposure often enables them to acquire the
language rapidly.

The former model C school selected is situated in an affluent suburb in NMB. The area is home to many students and academic institutions. It is close to the sea and the neighborhood is relatively quiet. There is a shopping complex in close proximity. The grounds and buildings of the school are immaculately kept and you have to be buzzed in to gain access to the main school building. There are computer labs, music rooms and an onsite library which are all resources for the learners to use. The school has formal grassed playing fields and its own pool. The classrooms are comfortable and set up with moveable tables and individual chairs. There were on average 26 learners per grade four class.

In the former ‘Coloured’ schools there has been migration in large numbers of black learners from the ‘Township’ schools. These schools are situated in previously Coloured communities and are therefore more accessible geographically (both physically and economically) to the poorer black students than the Model C school. It is possible that language issues in these schools

\[2\]

\[3\]

\[2\] I have inserted photos of each school to give the reader an idea of the condition of the building and surrounds.

\[3\] These photos have been taken in a way that ensures that the schools cannot be identified.
could be more prevalent as teachers are dealing with learners with less access to dominant forms of ‘linguistic capital’ (Bourdieu, 1991).

The Coloured School is set in a poorer area of the NMB. The suburb is rather ‘worn’. The houses are set close together and papers and unsupervised children are a common sight on the streets. Minibus taxis regularly drive through this suburb with their music turned up very loud. Visitors have to park their cars on the street as the gate only gets unlocked at the start and end of the school day. A janitor unlocks the entrance to the street when someone needs access. The school building itself is maintained well. The classrooms are of average size but sparsely decorated. There are desks that are set up in rows. This is a Catholic school. There are pictures of the Pope and statues of the Virgin Mary and other religious symbols about. There were 31 grade four learners in the observed class.

There has been very little migration into the ‘Township’ schools (Sekete et al, 2001). The learners living in these areas are usually the financially least mobile. These schools tend to be the most poorly resourced and have a high class/teacher ratio. Often teachers in these schools are teaching in a
language which is not their mother tongue (Carrim & Soudien 1999), therefore learners are disadvantaged even further.

The selected township school is located in a poor, rundown area. There is no formal playing field for the children, but a large dusty open patch within the school’s gate serves this function. The buildings are not well maintained. There is one photocopy machine and computer, both of which reside in the secretary’s office. The classrooms are approximately the same size as in schools A and C but the learners are closely packed into this space. There are desks set up which should accommodate two learners per desk but sometimes have three or four learners in them. There was an average of 51 learners per grade four class.

Hereafter the former model C school will be referred to as School A, the ‘Township school will be referred to as School B and the so-called ‘Coloured’ school as School C.
3.4 Methods

One of the most important criteria, to ensure the eventual validity of conclusions from a research study, is that of the reliability of the gathered data. In order to increase the reliability, I used three different methods of data collection. This inclusion of the collection of multiple sources of data is referred to as triangulation. Triangulation works on the assumption that, ‘because various methods complement each other, their respective shortcomings can be balanced out’ (Mouton, 1996, p.156). The three methods used are semi-structured interviews, observations and focus groups.

3.4.1 Interviews (semi-structured)

I decided to use a semi structured interview to collect data from the participating principals and teachers. Semi structured interviews were utilized as opposed to unstructured as I wanted the participants to feel free to talk about the issues that were important to them but I also wanted a sense of continuity across the various interviews. In semi structured interviews the researcher has a list of questions that is put forward to the participant but the interview does not necessarily have to follow the schedule exactly (Seidman, 1998; cited on 8 October 2007, online, p.4 (314). I asked the initial questions and then allowed the participant to talk freely. I only prompted the participant to talk more about a certain section when they appeared to feel strongly about or were particularly interested in whatever they were discussing at the time.

3.4.1.1 Principal Interviews

The school principal of each of the selected three schools was interviewed. This was done in order to allow them to share the school’s official response to homework, or their policy if there was one and their perception of its practice at their school. A copy of the interview schedule is attached as Addendum A.
3.4.1.2 Grade teacher Interviews

The grade four English medium teachers were also interviewed. In the case where there was more than one English medium grade four teacher, all were invited to partake in the study. These grade teachers deal with the day to day practice and therefore it was useful to gain their perspectives on the homework practices. Five teachers participated in the study – school C had only one grade four teacher participating. Grade four was selected as it is hoped that at this stage in their schooling, learners would be significantly familiar with homework.

The interviews were audio-taped and transcribed. Permission was sought from the principal and teachers for the taping. The recordings were then transcribed by myself and shown to the interview participants for verification. None of the participants had any queries about the transcriptions. A copy of the teacher interview questions is attached as Addendum B.

3.4.2 Observation

I observed 15 classes in total. In order to ensure that I did not spend the entire observation period writing field notes instead of actually observing, I drew up an observation schedule. The schedule listed specific items or behaviors that were identified from the literature as forms of good homework practice. It was drawn up with the research questions for the study held in mind. A copy of the schedule is attached as Addendum C.

The observations of the classrooms were intended as a verification of the espoused views on homework as opposed to what was actually practiced. The plan was for the complete sample of selected teachers each to be observed in their classrooms for the entire day for one week. This was not possible due to logistical reasons. In addition the National teachers strike in May and June of 2007 complicated school observations. Schools A and C followed the subject teaching structure, which meant that the teachers were not always with the learners who were selected to partake in the focus
groups. The observation time periods were further reduced for various reasons in the different schools. Mostly time constraints, both on the schools’ part, and mine affected the eventual length of the observations.

At school A I observed both teachers (MsT and MsZ) for three double classroom sessions, which lasted one hour each. At School B I observed MsC for three one hour sessions and MsD for two half hour sessions. At School C I observed MsH for four 90 minute sessions.

The observation of the classes allowed me to observe whether the teachers’ interview responses translated into practice on any regular basis. The observation was direct and systematic (Mouton, 2002) as an observation framework (see Addendum C) guided the observation in each classroom. The interactions in the classroom were also tape recorded when homework was discussed and only the teachers’ instructions were transcribed and documented.

3.4.3 Focus Groups

A focus group can be described as ‘guided or unguided discussions addressing a particular topic of interest or relevance to the group or researcher’ (Edmunds, 1999; cited in Berg, 2001, p.111). As I was dealing with young children (ages 9 – 11) I needed them to feel comfortable talking to me and sharing their opinion of homework in their school. The group structure and informal atmosphere of this method makes it ‘an excellent means for collecting information from young children and teens’ (Berg, 2001, p.112).

The most important reason that I chose this method though, was that I felt that the learners would feel more inclined to participate in a group setting and Finch and Lewis (2003, p.171) write that an advantage of a focus group “is the spontaneity that arises from their [the groups] stronger social context”. I had hoped that the group setting would allow the learners to feel relaxed. This appeared to be the case as most of the selected learners spoke freely within the group. The focus group setting allowed for the exploration of the learners’
attitudes to and perspectives on homework and the way it is distributed and managed.

The focus group was conducted on school property within the school hours at a time that suited school management, the teachers and the learners. Informed consent forms, which gave permission for the learners to participate in the study, were distributed to the learners to take home. The learners’ parents/guardians were asked to sign the forms and return them to the school. Only the learners who returned the signed consent forms formed part of the focus groups. The focus group discussions were audio taped and transcribed. A copy of the focus group points is attached as Addendum D.

At school A only eight informed consent forms were returned from MsZ’s class and this determined the size of the group.

At school B I received 23 positive responses. The eventual eight learners were chosen with the help of MsC. I had a general discussion with the balance of the learners. MsD felt that my presence was too disruptive therefore no consent forms were distributed to the learners in her class and no focus group held.

At school C I received 14 positive responses. Nine learners participated in the focus group.

Within all the groups there was a mix of gender and race. I led the focus groups around the issues identified in Addendum D. Previous contact with the learners assured me that they were sufficiently proficient and able to express themselves in English. Therefore it was not necessary for me to have the assistance of a translator.

The data that will be analysed in chapter four will be taken from the Interviews with the three Principals and five teachers that participated in the study. The schools, as previously mentioned are labeled A, B and C. Therefore when I refer to data from the various participants I will label it as follows:
• IPA – Interview with Principal of school A
• IPB – Interview with Principal of school B
• IPC – interview with Principal of school C
• ITA(1) – Interview with teacher one at school A
• ITA(2) – Interview with teacher two at school A
• ITB(1) – Interview with teacher one at school B
• ITB(2) – Interview with teacher two at school B
• ITC – interview with teacher at school C.

The teachers who participated in the study will be shown the full thesis and I will discuss implications with them. What follows below is a table the shows the experience and qualifications of the teachers that participated in the study. This will be useful when analyzing the interview and observation transcripts in order to see whether teaching experience or qualification has any impact on the management of homework practices.

**Teacher qualifications and experience**

**Table 1**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>TA(1)</strong></td>
<td><strong>TB(1)</strong></td>
<td><strong>TC</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification: B Ed</td>
<td>Qualification: SP 3</td>
<td>Qualification: D3 Junior Primary Foundation Phase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience: 2 years</td>
<td>Experience: 33 years</td>
<td>Experience: 18 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TA(2)</strong></td>
<td><strong>TB(2)</strong></td>
<td><strong>TC</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualification: 4-year Diploma Educational Computing</td>
<td>Qualification: D3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience: 26 years</td>
<td>Experience: 18 years</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| TC | Experience: 18 years |

---

32
3.5 Field notes

Field notes were kept on each visit with details on such aspects as: school setting, the state of the building and resources. Field notes were also taken during the interviews and focus groups.

3.6 Method of analysis

The data generated through the interviews, observations and focus groups will be analysed by means of CDA. Rogers (2004, p.3) explains that:

researchers who use Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) are concerned with a critical theory of the social world, the relation of language and discourse in the construction and representation of this social world and a methodology that allows them to describe, interpret and explain such relationships.

The above quotation can be taken as a framework for my research questions and the resultant data generated by the various methods that I employed to gather such data. This can be seen by my interest in the relationship between the differing contexts of the schools and the different types of talk around homework and management. Furthermore, I am interested in the result of the combination of context and talk and the impact that it has on the grade four learners and their resultant status in the classroom.

CDA can be described as viewing ‘the power in society as not so much imposed on individual subjects [but] as an inevitable effect of a way of particular discursive configurations or arrangements privilege the status and positions of some people over others’ (Locke, 2004, p.1). With this view, the transcripts of the interviews, observations and focus groups will be analysed by means of CDA in chapter four.

This form of analysis recognizes that language is a social practice and is tied to specific social, cultural and historical contexts. As such ‘the constant unity of language and other social matters ensures that language is entwined in social power in a number of ways: language indexes power, expresses power,
is involved where there is contention over and a challenge to power’ (Wodak in Seale, Gubrium & Silverman, 2004, p.199). Therefore the analysis of the interview data as well as the transcripts of the talk in the classrooms and the focus groups around the issue of homework will allow me to ‘focus on the signifiers that make up the text, the specific linguistic selections, their juxtapositioning, their sequencing’ in order to recognise ‘that these choices are tied to conditions of possibility’ (Janks, 1997, p.329).

The use of active or passive voice in order to position or ascribe agency will be explored in chapter four when analyzing the data. Also patterns of transitivity which assign processes to the subjects to which they refer will be included. Janks (1997, p.336) explains that ‘transitivity specifies the different types of processes that are recognized in the language and the structures by which they are expressed’. Material, verbal, mental, relational, behavioural and existential processes are the six different kinds of transitivity proposed by Halliday (1985, cited in Janks, 1997, p.336). Evidence of these patterns will be sought in order to determine the position of the subject to which they refer.

3.7 Ethical Considerations

As my study dealt with minor children in a primary school setting I had to obtain clearance from the Human Ethics Committee (HEC) of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University (NMMU). I drafted an introductory and informal information letter to the principals, teachers and parents of the learners. These are attached as Addenda E, F and G. The intended interview questions for the principals and teachers and observation schedules as well as focus group points for the learners were submitted to the HEC for clearance.

I was granted permission by the NMMU to conduct this study in June 2007. On institutional approval, I approached the office of Mr. Sam Snyer, the Education Department’s local district manager, to obtain written permission for the study to proceed. The letter sent to Mr. Snyer is attached as Addendum H
and the written approval is attached as Addendum I. I also obtained written consent from the principals.

Written informed consent forms were filled in with both the principals and grade four teachers at the start of their individual interviews. The interviews took place in the month of July and the beginning of August 2007. The informed consent forms were also sent home with the learners for their parents/guardians to sign. In addition verbal assent was sought from the grade four learners. As stated above, all of the participants received a written invitation to participate in the study. This invitation explained that participation was voluntary and that participants could withdraw from the study at any time, without any negative consequences for them. The focus group discussion points and questions were attached for the parents/guardians to peruse. The schools will be referred to as A, B and C and the teachers will be referred to by their gender with single letters (MsC, MsZ and so on).
CHAPTER FOUR: ANALYSIS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter presents the analysis of themes in the data gathered throughout this research project. As the notion of discursive constructions is pivotal in the research question, the data will be analysed by means of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA). For a discussion on CDA and Discourse models refer to chapter 2, section 2.7. Selected models will be used to reveal the perceptions that the teachers and principals have of parental and community ability for homework involvement. In this chapter, the linguistic features of voice, modality, lexicalization and patterns of transitivity will be explored within the data. Furthermore this chapter aims to identify the socially determined assumptions that can be seen from the analysis of the linguistic features and how these affect the homework practices in the selected schools.

‘Parents send their children to schools with the expectation that they will get quality education in order to secure their future with a decent vocation’ (Singh & Mbokodi, 2004, p.301). This quotation captures the main theme of this chapter, namely parental involvement with regard to homework, as it is an issue that occurs across the data of all three schools. The first section of this chapter will examine what homework policies are in place in the schools, how the teachers reported that they incorporate the policies into their day to day practice and how the espoused policies are enacted in the classroom. The chapter will then examine the teachers’ and principals’ expectations of parental involvement in their child’s homework. It will also explore which dominant Discourses are drawn on and what impact these have on expectations on parental involvement in the homework practices in the school. This theme will be discussed within the framework of socio cultural practice. Literature on parental involvement will also be used as a lens to further examine the data. All the phrases found in the tables throughout the treatise are direct quotations from the various sources and therefore suitable for discourse analysis.
4.2 Policy

The following table shows the homework policies in the three schools, as shared by the principals during the semi-structured interview.

4.2.1 Analysis

**Principals reporting on policy**

**Table 2**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>IPA</th>
<th>IPB</th>
<th>IPC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• policy is in the <strong>homework diary</strong></td>
<td>• it’s not really a policy that is <strong>written down</strong> in a document</td>
<td>• the policy is that the children will be <strong>given homework on a regular basis</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• from gr4 up children <strong>should get</strong> a certain amount of homework <strong>everyday</strong></td>
<td>• its an <strong>oral policy</strong></td>
<td>• regular doesn’t mean everyday. It’s normally when the children cannot complete the work in class</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• grade 4 and 5 child gets <strong>½ hour a day</strong></td>
<td>• we have a <strong>policy that teachers give homework,</strong> some teachers have books and others just tell the children to do the homework</td>
<td>• some children are a bit <strong>slow in completing tasks</strong> and then they have to do them for homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• we give homework but that homework is then basically a <strong>revision of what they have done in class</strong></td>
<td>• <strong>teachers who have books,</strong> there is a special book that they write the homework down in and parents have to sign</td>
<td>• some children don’t want to make it work</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• the children <strong>ought</strong> to get homework.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• <strong>homework book</strong> has a two fold pattern a revision of and a grounding of what they taught also it is the teachers way of communicating with parents</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

School A has a policy which is printed and can be referred to in the formal medium of the school diary. Both parents and learners at this school have access to the policy at any time. The phrases that IPA uses such as ‘**should**’ and ‘**ought**’ when talking about the policy are examples of modal auxiliary
verbs. These auxiliary verbs ‘modify or change the verb to express degrees of possibility, probability, intention or necessity’ (Deakin University, 1995, p.47). The apparent tentative nature of these verbs, however only refers to the amount of homework that is assigned and not to the policy itself. The fact that homework needs to be completed by the learners is never questioned. These modals afford the teachers some flexibility within the homework policy. Part of the policy is that officially the school day ends at 14:10 but there is a first bell which is rung at 14:05. This bell indicates that the next five minutes are for the writing down of homework in the school issued homework diary. It also provides the learners with a time to ask clarification questions of the teacher if needed. This assigned time period which occurs daily also serves to impress upon the learners at school A the formality and importance of homework. There are clear consequences for these learners if they do not complete homework. These consequences appear in the form of receiving demerits and an eventual detention session.

School B on the other hand, has no written policy. IPB refers to the policy that they do have as ‘oral’. The policy in this school is that ‘teachers give homework’. There is no mention of how often the teachers are required to give homework or the purpose of homework. Also resources play a part in the apparent informality of the homework practice at school B, not every teacher and learner has access to a ‘homework book’.

The policy at school C is similar to that of school B. There is no written policy that can be referred to and while IPC was relating the policy information to me he was rather tentative both in his manner of delivery (field notes, 17/08/07) and in his phrasing. IPC mentions that school C’s policy is that learners will be ‘given homework on a regular basis’, but he goes on to say that ‘regular doesn’t mean everyday’. At no point in this interview did IPC offer a definition or time frame for ‘regular’.


4.3 Parental involvement

4.3.1. Analysis

Table three below contains data from the interviews with the principals regarding parental involvement. This is followed by the teachers’ perceptions in table four. The data gathered will be analysed in the sections following the tables.

**Perceptions of parental involvement (Principals)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School A principal</th>
<th>School B principal</th>
<th>School C principal</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| • parents **expect** their child to get homework  
  • if there is no homework you will find parents **query**  
  • the parents **will soon tell** me if I overload that they feel its too heavy for age group  
  • if a child doesn’t understand the parents **will write** a letter | • parents **are called** in (after a lengthy intervention involving the teacher, learner and principal)  
   • mothers and parents **work**  
   • in severe cases of ‘neglect’ letter **goes to** parents, severe = 2 times no homework done  
   • ‘**good & caring’** parent **will come and complain** to me that their child doesn’t get homework  
   • ‘**better**’ parents **get involved** in homework and school life. | |

An analysis of the table above indicates the following transitivity structure:

Material processes are fore grounded in all three schools. These are processes that are ‘types of doing’ (Janks, 1997, p.336). The material processes ascribed to parents are, *query*, *write* and *tell* (verbal) for School A suggesting that the parents have the necessary resources and know-how in order to act in the best interests of their children. The material processes
imply that these parents hold the school accountable and are secure in their right to do so.

Principal B makes only one reference to the parents and this reference is in the passive voice suggesting that the school has the agency to decide when parents may be involved. It appears that parents are summoned to the school as a last resort only when the principal decides that he has exhausted all other channels.

Similar to school B, school C principal positions the parents as being unavailable (parents work) and therefore the school asserts its authority to intervene and only in extreme cases, are the parents called in. Agency is ascribed to parents only in exceptional cases of good and caring parents and those who are better, which is not the norm. The material processes of involving and complaining position these ‘atypical’ parents as having the necessary social resources to engage meaningfully with the school. Unlike the parents from school B who have to be called or the parents from School C who receive written notices, these ‘rare’ parents have the power and choice to decide their level of involvement.

Observations, such as can be found in tables three and four, on the lack of activity of lower income parents in the schooling process are ‘routinely provided as evidence that low-income parents “just don’t care about their kids” or “don’t think education” is important’ (Smrekar, April 1992, p.5).

The following table refers to the teachers’ comments about the parental involvement.

**Perceptions of parental involvement (Teachers)**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of parental involvement (Teachers)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Table 4</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>School Teachers A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• if it is picked up that a child isn’t writing homework</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>down the parents will contact the</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>teacher</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>the parents tend to phone each other.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lots of parents come and complain that my child hasn’t written down his homework so we don’t know what he is supposed to do.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’ll have a parent phoning in and saying ‘but I never knew about this’</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I’m so sick of parents coming to me and complaining, so I decided no I had to come up with some sort of plan here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>parents sign homework books.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I say to the parents ‘if the child hasn’t done it, put a cross next to it and don’t sign. Don’t sign and say the child has done it and then I assume its done.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The highlighted phrases in the table above from the teachers at School A reinforce what principal A has said about the parents. Once again, the processes ascribed to the parents are material and these position them as assertive and powerful. They are portrayed as active agents in their child’s education and homework. When a mental process is used in association with the parents at School A, it is delivered with a positive emphasis. This positivity is shown by the fact that parents phone each other or ask the teachers questions, meaning that if the parents are unsure about anything they will be
proactive in gaining clarification. They also have a network of parents where homework issues are discussed. The social class of the parents (refer to chapter three, section 3.3.1) at school A ‘provides parents with more resources to intervene in schooling’ (Smrekar, 1997, p.7). These parents are assumed to have higher: schooling levels, social status and incomes all of which will contribute to their sense of entitlement. This is an example of what Sharp refers to as the socio-economic and cultural factors that enable the parents to give their child assistance (refer to chapter two, section 2.5).

The teachers in School B attribute negative mental processes (‘can do absolutely nothing’, ‘can’t help’, ‘won’t understand’) to the parents. These negatives are absolute, without modality, and construct a deficit discourse. The parents are perceived as having limited mental capacity. Therefore the perceived lack of financial capital available to the parents in School B translates into a lack of mental capital.

In School C the processes attributed to the parents are material but negative. These utterances from the teachers at this school are very similar to the ones from the teachers in School B. Passive voice is used, when referring to parents constructing them as inactive in their child’s education. The school appears to have the agency to choose what action to take and when if they identify a problem with homework

4.3.2 Discussion

Parental involvement in their child’s schooling is often determined by cultural and socio economic factors (Sharp, Keys & Benefield, 2001). The parents at School A tend to be middle to upper class and therefore the teachers expect them to be involved. The motivation for involvement stems from the parents themselves, as can be seen from the table 4 above. Clearly the parents in this school both want to be and are involved in an academic sense.

It can be deduced from the above that these parents feel powerful and do not expect to be challenged, rather they expect explanations. It is apparent from
the following phrases (‘parents will contact’, ‘phone in’, ‘come and ask’) that these parents have a sense of entitlement. Fairclough (1995, cited in Clarke, 2007, p.113) states that ‘by looking at language we are really looking at local examples of commonly held beliefs’. If one refers to table 4 it can be reasonably assumed that these parents believe they have the right to enquire, question and make suggestions about their child’s homework situation.

In the following quotation IPA describes a typical parent evening at School A, a situation that is not mentioned by the interview participants in the other schools. He says:

then we have our meetings with the parents. If you come into the hall you will see that we have a desk and in front of it two chairs for mom and dad. Then behind them you will have a row of people and people move forward. They want to come in and chat to us why their kid isn’t performing. You have that reference to be able to explain to them if you see ‘0’s’ you can say to them that they can see that their children haven’t done their homework. Teachers have to be able to cover themselves (IPA).

From this extract the physical involvement of the parents is visible. The fact that Principal A relates that there are rows of chairs of people just waiting, also that both parents attend and want to engage with the teacher is informative. The accountability on behalf of the teachers further shows that the parents are quite dominant in this schooling situation. When relating this during the interview, as captured in the field notes (18/07/07), IPA was visibly agitated during the interview at the thought and reality of being accountable to the parents. The parents at School A are portrayed as being proactive participants. They are powerful. They are active agents in their children’s education and are therefore empowered. They hold the teachers accountable. These parents can negotiate with the school from a point of strength that their jobs, income and lifestyles (their cultural capital) afford them.

However, if it is true that the parents at School A have expectations of the teachers and education system then it is also true that the teachers at this school also have expectations of the middle class parents. When referring to
the issue of parents signing homework diaries and checking up on homework, ITA(2) had the following to say:

then there is an issue of whether the parents have signed because it’s (homework) been done because you’ll find that the signature is there but the work hasn’t been done. I see it as the parents are lying to me (ITA(2)).

ITA(2) appeared insulted by this notion. She holds the parents to a high standard. ITA(2) does not however at any point in the interview speak of challenging these parents about the ‘lies’.

It appears that while she does not agree with this practice she does not feel that she has the authority to challenge the parent about this issue. At this school the power balance is most definitely in favour of the parent. This could stem from the fact that in the original concept of a Model C school (and still today) there is a governing body that manages the school. This body deals with finances, disciplinary issues and practices and it is made up of mainly parents, with some teacher representatives. Also the parents pay high school fees which appear to entitle their involvement in the school.

School A makes allowances for the time consumption of after school activities, such as sport, but still expects learners to complete homework when it is necessary. The staff at this school is clearly aware of their responsibility to produce learners who are capable in more than one area (academia and sport).

The outlook and perceptions of what part parents play in their child’s education is noticeably different in schools B and C. The way that these parents are positioned feeds part of a deficit model that appears to be reflected in staffs’ reasons for not assigning homework. From the analysis of the data in table 3 it can be seen that the expectations and perceptions of teachers and principals in school’s B and C are similar. While there are differences between the two schools, they are minor. The interview participants themselves term the parents who are active in their child’s education and homework as exceptions. From the above it can be deduced
that parents are cast in certain roles by the schools. These roles will be explored and discussed in the following section.

‘Roles are generally constructed from personal experience and expectations as well as the perceptions and expectations of pertinent others’ (Biddle, 1986, paraphrased in Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2001, p.201). These roles or the construction thereof is apparent from the negative statements made by the teaching staff with regard to parents in these schools. Here the parents are predominantly working class with IPB reporting that ‘many of my learners live in an informal settlement situation’.

While the school policy states that homework should be given on a ‘regular’ basis, I found that very little homework was being given. In fact ITB(1) mentioned, during classroom observation, that *her learners were tired because they had to do homework every day as I was there* (field notes 02/08/07). She explained that because of the size of her grade four class (54 learners) and issues of lack of parental involvement and home environment, she only assigns oral homework such as learning times tables everyday.

At the initial meeting with the teachers at school B, MsC warned me that the Gr4 teachers did not give much homework because when they did the learners did not complete it. She described the reason for this as ‘black students do not do homework as it is not part of their culture of learning’ (field notes, 16/07/07). The assumptions that the staff at this school has formed of its parents start with the socio economic and continue through to the issue of literacy. While having a discussion with IPB about homework books or diaries his response was that ‘our parents can’t afford anything extra’.

Kralovec & Buell (2000, p.79) write that ‘parents from low socio economic families are looked down upon and therefore their voices are not heard’. This issue can be seen in the way that the teachers refer to the parents at these schools. Negative phrases such as ‘parents who can do absolutely nothing’, ‘parents don’t have the information’, ‘parents can’t help the children’, ‘parents don’t understand the homework’, ‘parents don’t come’
show the reader that parental involvement in these schools is not expected, valued or in some cases even welcomed. There is a sense that the parent will not be of much help in the process. Not one positive comment was made about parental involvement (except for the ‘good and caring parent’) at schools B and C. The parents/guardians at school B are constructed as passive; they are perceived as having nothing to give the school.

The perception in this community and school is that most learners do not have a two parent family. ITB(2) reported ‘most children live with their grannies’. While this is true for some of the learners it is not true for all of them, as will be shown by the section on home environment and the data collected from the focus groups with the learners themselves. In fact in the focus group held in school B all of the learners reported living with their parents.

It appears that at this school the teachers are constructed as the ones with the power. Phrases, from the teacher interviews, such as ‘I can’t give them new learning areas for homework’, ‘I send a letter home’, ‘I get the information for them’, ‘I give the work’ all transfer the power to the teachers. The constant use of ‘I’ foregrounds the teacher and constructs the parents as ‘outsiders’ who have no useful input into their child’s homework. With these above comments the teachers position themselves as the responsible active agents in the learners’ education, from which the parents are excluded.

Furthermore the parents are constructed as being without material resources, which is understandable when one thinks of the South African situations of poverty, aids and apartheid. What is worrying though is that because these parents are perceived as having no material resources, the staffs of Schools B and C also perceive the parents as having no mental resources. The Discourse which informs the assigning of homework or in this case the lack thereof, in these schools appears to be exacerbating and reproducing the existing social inequalities.
4.4 Home environment

Kralovec and Buell, (2000, p.80) state that it is important to bear in mind learners’ differing home environment and resulting parameters that influence the completion of homework. In the SA context these different environments are of particular interest and impact. For a discussion on the influence and importance of home environment on homework see chapter two, section 2.5.

4.4.1 Analysis

Table 5 below has extracts from the interview data from the Principals and teachers from the three schools. The focus in this table is the effect of home environment on the learners with regard to homework.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Home Environment</th>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• I look at some of these children and see how busy their schedules are. I see whose sports on starts at 15:00.</td>
<td>• we have to look at homework from a holistic point of view, in context of where the children are</td>
<td>• we provide them with the opportunity those children that really don’t have the opportunity to do homework</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• there isn’t really a venue that they can do homework in before that</td>
<td>• many of my learners live in an informal settlement situation</td>
<td>• socio-economics play a big part in whether the parents will see if the child’s homework is done or not</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• they often sit outside, that isn’t an environment that you can do homework in</td>
<td>• there is no electricity and I think it would be unfair on those kids to be consistently doing their homework</td>
<td>• there is nobody usually at home that they can rely on so they just don’t bother</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• they have enough on their plate with other things</td>
<td>• the learners have to use candles, have hardly any attention</td>
<td>• there is no ongoing thing with the children</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
• If they can't do their homework we have to understand because of the environment they are in
• I advocate a policy that is very understanding towards the kids and where they come from
• they commute an hour each way everyday
• some stay in shacks and when it rains books get wet
• this is the type of stuff I have to deal with
• the children get home late
• its dark
• and some of them stay in shacks and there is no electricity and so on
to go home from school and do work
• in this community there isn’t anyone really who is going to sit and monitor
• the poorer community where I’m teaching now, those parents aren’t interested in this they just send their children to school because they have to

At School A the learners are constructed as active and sporty. While there is sympathy for the learners with regard to time and the need for an immediate venue for homework before sport, the learners are none the less positioned in a positive way. ITA(1)’s comment that ‘they have enough on their plate’ implies that these learners have the cultural capital necessary to ‘deal’ with school life and all it encompasses. The learners are active, involved and busy. In this situation the fact that homework competes with other activities is accepted and seen in a positive light.

The comments at school B position the learners as subjects who need to be guided and taken care of. The school, and by association the staff, is the one
with the power, it is the caregiver. ‘We have to look at’, ‘I advocate’, ‘my learners’, ‘I think’, ‘we have to understand’, ‘I have to deal with’. The comments are all paternalistic and can even be viewed as condescending. They construct the school as the ‘one’ that provides and understands.

The home situation of the learners in School B is attributed almost no importance in these utterances. The staff acknowledges this situation in passing, but the focus is clearly on how the school provides for its learners. When the home situation is referred to the utterances only highlight the negative aspects as perceived by the staff at school B. The staff believes that the learners live without many physical resources. This is shown by the following extracts: ‘live in an informal settlement’, ‘no electricity’, ‘use candles’, ‘have hardly any attention’ ‘shacks’, ‘when it rains books get wet’. With these comments the staff also constructs themselves as sensitive and understanding, in an almost familial way.

If one refers to the comments in table 5 it can be seen that the parents at school C are viewed as having no money, no interest, no aspirations and no opportunity, according to the staff. The staff believes that this leads to a ‘difficult’ home environment. ITC reported: ‘There is usually nobody at home’, ‘there is no ongoing this with the children to come home from school and do homework’, ‘there isn’t anyone who will sit and monitor’, ‘parents aren’t interested’ ‘just send children to school because they have to’. Once again this is a definite and negative perception of the learner’s life. The parents are not afforded agency and portrayed as not being able to have any positive effect on their child’s education. The absence of modality in the first three utterances helps to enforce the impression of helplessness in the home situation.

The following section will present the learners’, at the three schools, thoughts on home environment. Their perceptions and how these differ from the schools’ perceptions of their home lives will be discussed. The implications of these differences will also be reported on. This data was provided by the learners themselves during focus groups at the three schools.
The data that follows in this table is data from the abovementioned source.

**Parental involvement & home environment (Learner Focus Groups)**

**Table 6**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School A</th>
<th>School B</th>
<th>School C</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• sometimes my mother gives me tests for exams</td>
<td>• my sister helps me with homework</td>
<td>• we all have electricity</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do my homework at aftercare</td>
<td>• I do homework alone because everyone is working</td>
<td>• homework keeps me busy in the afternoon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• if its easy I do it myself otherwise I ask my mom</td>
<td>• I do my homework in the living room</td>
<td>• sometimes if its easy I do it alone</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do homework in my room because I have a desk in my room</td>
<td></td>
<td>• other times my mother helps me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do my homework in my study room</td>
<td></td>
<td>• if I don’t understand I ask my uncle to explain or help me</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do my homework in my dad’s study or sometimes I sit next to the pool</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>there’s a chair and table there for me</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• I do my homework in the kitchen or in my room, depending on where my</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>mom is.</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The parents in school A are shown to be involved, as discussed before. They are aware of the expectations and conventions of the processes involved to succeed in the schooling system. It can be deduced that the parents are familiar with school conventions, as they set tests for revision. Also, according to the focus group data, these learners prefer to complete their homework
wherever their mom is. These parents are active agents in that they are available for consultation and they prepare their children for success.

The homework space portrayed by these comments is an ideal one. The mere fact that the learners of school A have a separate space to complete their homework sets them apart from their counterparts in the other two schools. Some of the learners complete their homework in a study, which implies somewhere with a desk, space, electricity, comfortable chairs and atmosphere. The mother features heavily in the learners’ frame of reference and the help appears to come from immediate family members. ‘Mom’ was mentioned 15 times by the learners in school A, which means that each learner mentioned their mother at least once during the focus group (8 learners in group). Also the teacher Ms Z mentioned ‘mom’ every day when she tried to ensure that the learners write their homework down correctly. Ms Z tells her learners to write the homework down in full so ‘that mom will know what you need to do and when for’ (field notes 13/08/07 – 17/08/07). This gendered notion of the mother as being responsible for homework is problematic but beyond the scope of this research.

4.4.2 Discussion

Homework, as the name suggests, is usually work that is completed at home. This implies that the teachers are unavailable during this time and process (Corno, 2000, p.529). However, most of the participants informed me that very little homework, if any, was conducted at home. The learners are assigned tasks based on the day’s work and then they are given time, during school hours, to complete the tasks. Only when projects are given to the learners do they have to take work home, but even then these projects are started in class. If for whatever reason the learners do not complete these projects during the scheduled class time, only then does it became work to be completed at home. This holds true for the ‘policies’ of all three schools, but the reasons for not assigning formal homework differs between the three schools. At school A the learners are considered too busy with other cultural development to have much homework to complete at home.
The learners in school B however are handled with compassion which borders on pity. It is implied by the teachers’ comments that the learners do not have enough mental capital or support to be able to complete homework outside the school situation. The reasons for not assigning homework to be completed at home in school C is similar to that of school B. ITC feels that she is unable to assign homework as the parents will not help their children. Interestingly enough, whereas in school B the parents are constructed as not having the ability to help their children, in school C they are constructed as having no interest in helping their children. This negativity can impact on the learners’ desire to do homework as can be seen in a study conducted with *Township Youth and their homework* (Moller, 1994, p.27), when the learners were asked about the frustrating aspects of their schooling they replied that the negative attitudes of their teachers contributed to their frustration.

The data from the focus groups, specifically data from schools B and C, directly contradicts the perceptions that the teachers hold of the suitability or impact of the home environment and parental involvement on the homework process. Phrases gathered from the teachers at schools B and C when referring to parental involvement include: ‘can do absolutely nothing’, ‘don’t have the information’, ‘won’t understand’, ‘don’t have time’, ‘no help from their parents’, ‘aren’t doing their part’ (see Table 4). When commenting on the home environment and why the learners were not given consistent homework the teachers commented: ‘no electricity’, ‘nobody usually at home’, ‘isn’t anyone who is going to sit and monitor’, ‘parents aren’t interested’ (see Table 5). The learners on the other hand shared different experiences with me. What follows are some of the responses: ‘my sister helps me with homework’, ‘we have electricity’, ‘if its easy I do it alone other times my mother helps me’, ‘if I don’t understand I ask my uncle to explain or help me’ (see Table 6). While parents, per se, are not always providing guidance for these learners, it seems clear that the learners do get guidance even if it is from a sibling. Also apparent, is that the learners are resourceful: they seek out help from family members.
The selection of the focus group participants was random (see section 3.4.3 p.31 for explanation of the selection process) and therefore could be said to be an indication of many of the environments of the learners. The teachers at these two schools, as I’ve stated before, are dedicated but seem overwhelmed by the ‘circumstances’ surrounding education in their schools/community. It is significant that the teachers draw on ‘common-sense’ understandings of the learners’ rather than ask them directly. These assumptions lead to the perpetuation of behaviors that discriminate against learners. A more productive approach might be for the teachers to regularly speak to the learners about their environments and even visit the homes of their learners, if possible.

4.5 Observations

The final part of the study was to observe the grade four classes of the teachers that were interviewed (see chapter three, section 3.4.2). It would be easy to assume from the above interview extracts and resulting analysis that the teachers in school A are the ‘model’ teachers and that the teachers in schools B and C have a defeatist attitude and have therefore ceased trying to help their learners. However, the interviews did not yield the complete scenario, as the observations revealed. This section refers to the field notes taken during the research, as only part of these sessions were tape recorded (refer to chapter three, section 3.4.2).

At school A homework, as stated earlier in this chapter, is part of a formal process. On the black board at the side of the classroom there is a section that has all the learning areas written down. Written next to the learning area is the homework for that specific area and also written down is when the homework is due (refer to chapter four, section 4.2.1 for a description of how this board aids the learners). The teacher sits at her desk and each learner is asked individually whether or not he or she has completed homework and if the answer is negative the teacher writes a note to the parent in the school issued homework diary. The parent then has to sign this note in
MsZ’s desk is situated at the front and center of the classroom. When she is seated at her desk she is able to view the entire classroom and all the learners. In a glance she is able to determine from their body language whether or not the learners are behaving or conforming. From this vantage point MsZ is able to perform:

policing functions of surveillance, the economic functions of control and checking and the religious functions of encouraging obedience and work (Foucault, 1997, p.173).

The learners at school A are systematically being homogenised into being subjects who are capable of contributing to society in a positive way. They are also being trained to accept authority and to function in a disciplined way in society.

These processes all form part of the technologies of control (Foucault, 1977). Students are individualised, and non-observance is punished.

By the word punishment, one must understand everything that is capable of making children feel the offence they have committed, everything that is capable of humiliating them, of confusing them: … a certain coldness, a certain indifference, a question, a humiliation, a removal from office (Laselle; cited in Foucault, 1977, p.178).

It was easy to observe the implementation of the punishment in this classroom. The formal school ‘punishment’ process starts with a demerit and moves onto eventual detention. However, whether MsZ is aware of it or not, she dispenses punishment from the moment the learner reveals that he or she has not completed the homework or has forgotten their homework diary at home. The tone of her voice becomes biting and the level of her voice becomes raised. She makes comments such as ‘I’m so tired of you not doing your homework’, ‘now I have to write to your mother again’, ‘it’s no wonder you aren’t doing well, you can’t even remember to bring your homework diary to school’ and ‘what am I supposed to do with you?’ (Field notes, 14/08/07). With these comments, homework sets up a space for humiliation. I recorded that I
felt distinctly uncomfortable in the classroom at that stage, both for myself and on the learners’ behalf. The comments did not appear to visibly affect the learner, which suggests that these comments are a normal part of their school day. While the disciplining is meant to be positive, it is not without negative the aspects of lowering self esteem and self worth.

Strict records are kept by the teachers at school A and the parents are included in the surveillance process. Ms Z is however able to do this as the class size is relatively small (refer to chapter three, section 3.3.1). There were 4 learners whom MsZ called up to her desk at the end of the day in order to check their homework diaries. This is done as these four boys periodically write their homework down incorrectly or neglect to copy it down at all (they are subjected to the disciplinary gaze). These four learners are put under further ‘pressure to conform to the same model, so that they might all be subjected to subordination, docility, attention in studies and exercises, and to the correct practice of duties and all the parts of discipline. So that they might all be like one another’ (Foucault, 1977, p.182).

The homework diaries are collected at the start of the learning area period and the teacher checks that each learner’s diary is signed by the parent. MsT showed me an entry where a mother had written a query to the teacher in the homework diary (field notes 27/08/07). This reinforced what IPA had shared during his interview. The preceding description, cements the reality of the formality of the homework process in school A. This practice was consistent over the observation period of both MsZ and MsT’s grade four classes. These formal and controlled homework practices are enabled by the circumstances of the school involved. The spacious classroom size with the relatively low student teacher ratio (refer to chapter three, section 3.3.1) which leads to less incidental noise, the quiet surrounding suburb, the fact that the classroom door is not constantly being opened and the material aspect of the homework diary all allow the teacher to apply technologies of control. If one draws on the literature reviewed on the positive and negative aspects of homework (refer to chapter two, section 2.5) then it can be inferred that the model C school
teachers are trying to instill self responsibility and independence in their learners.

The homework situation in school B was the one that was most noticeably affected by the six week National teacher strike. The homework assignment that was distributed on the first observation day (01/08/07) was dated for a lesson that was supposed to have been conducted on 23 May 2007. This meant that the homework assignment was based on work that had not been covered recently, which is in direct contradiction of one of the main guidelines of setting good homework, which is to assign purposeful homework (refer to chapter two, section 2.6). MsC shared that she had ‘prepared homework because I knew you were coming and I didn’t want you to come for nothing’ and also that ‘we don’t really do written homework because there are too many kids in this class’.

For the time period that I observed MsC she was consistent in assigning and checking up on homework. She did however reveal that ‘my learners are tired because they are not used to getting so much homework’ (field notes 04/08/07). There are no formal diaries, as previously mentioned, but the learners in this class do have an exercise book which serves as a homework book. I remarked on the fact that these books are not signed and MsC replied ‘parents don’t have to sign homework books. Only if there is a problem must they sign’. Once again the parents are almost marginalised in the homework process and only included when problems arise. Connell raises relevant observations about the above. She writes that ‘working class families are bearers of educational histories which are often difficult or truncated, leaving parents with little familiarity with upper-secondary or post-school pathways’ (Connell, 2004, p.227). But on the other hand the stress and pressure placed on learners in school A is prevented by schools B and C, as this is another opportunity to individualise or demean learners (refer to chapter two, section 2.5, Bennet & Kalish).
MsC does try to instill the notion of consequence with regards to practicing of writing and tables. She has spot checks and if the learners perform well then they have no formal writing or multiplication tables for homework. If the learners however cannot perform then MsC assigns writing practice for homework. MsC was welcoming when I observed her class and enthusiastic about the research study. Unlike in school A, there is no individualising or strict record keeping in school B, not because the teachers are unwilling but because of circumstance. The material aspects such as having 54 pupils, which produces incidental noise, the teacher being interrupted by students delivering tuck shop money or asking for the school’s one stamp are all inhibitive.

The observation of MsD’s class at school B followed much the same pattern. She did however ask me to not observe a full week (I was allowed two ½ hour observation sessions) as she felt that my presence was ‘disruptive’. MsD furthermore shared that she could not set and mark homework for the whole week as ‘I have many other duties at the school’ (field notes 06/08/07). MsD had however assigned homework on the first observation day. When I returned the next day only a third of the class had completed the homework. MsD reported that this was normal as the learners had to ‘deal with no electricity, no money and no lights’. There are no repercussions for not completing the assigned tasks as the learners cannot be detained after school hours due to a lack of transport (ITB(2)).

As previously mentioned (chapter four, section 4.2.1) there is no formal written homework policy at school C. During the observation time period at this school, no formal homework was assigned to the students. The justifications or reasons for this have been discussed throughout chapter four. Learners were given tasks during class time and were explained to that if they did not finish the tasks during class time that it would be for homework. MsH does have a system for learners who under perform. A special sheet is sent home and the parents are meant to make an appointment with the teacher to discuss the situation. These learners and parents are then given a ‘special homework book’ with remedial exercises in it, that they are expected to work
through together. MsH shared that ‘I can only give the special homework book once the parents have come to see me as the activities in it involve the parent sitting with their child’. The learners who have to complete these remedial exercises are individualised but for different reasons to the learners at school A.

What is encouraging in this practice is that MsH has allowed for differences in her classroom. She has made special provision for learners who need remedial attention. Likewise it is significant that she has included the parents in this process. At the time of the observation of her classroom, MsH had 4 learners who had these special homework books. These learners were given homework every day. The homework exercises in these books however were not at grade four level, as these learners are ones that have not acquired the ‘necessary’ skills in the preceding grades. MsH informed me that she felt that regular and monitored homework, which meant parental involvement, would benefit the learners (field notes).
CHAPTER FIVE: CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This chapter will draw conclusions from the data presented and analysed in chapter four as viewed through the lens of the literature reviewed in chapter two. A summary of the subsections of policy, the principals’ and teachers’ perceptions of parental involvement and home environment with regard to homework will be presented. This will be followed by a general discussion of the analysis, thereafter conclusions will be drawn. The limitations of this study will be listed and suggestions for future research will be made.

5.2 Policy

As reported in chapter four, section 4.2.1, the policies in schools A, B and C differ. School A has a policy which is written and formalised through the medium of the school issued homework diary. There are unambiguous guidelines to the issuing of homework and the consequences for non compliance are visibly set out for both parents and learners to refer to. The principal of school A was able to unequivocally state the position and guidelines of this policy. This certainty and belief in the policy appears to have filtered to the teachers at this school.

Schools B and C have no formal homework policies which can easily be referred to in print form. These schools advocate an oral policy. Even the school managements (the principals) were not able to plainly articulate what these policies espouse. The ‘oral’ policies appear to foster ambiguity within the schooling situation and much flexibility in the classroom. This flexibility, while aimed to be for the learners’ benefit, seems to reproduce a deficit discourse.
5.3 Principals’ and teachers’ perceptions

The themes of parental involvement and home environment were noticeably foregrounded in the staffs of the three schools’ interview data. The teachers all reported to extend invitations to their learners’ parents to become more involved with their child’s homework. Connell (September 2004, p.228) writes that ‘parents in different social class positions have different resources for responding to the invitation – resources including time, money, confidence and educational know how’. As a result of the differing responses received from parents to this invitation the staffs have formed certain views of these parents.

The staff at school A has constructed the parents as powerful and proactive. The home environment of the learners at school A is credited with an almost idyllic quality, in terms of space, resources and support. The academic involvement of the parents or guardians at this school is welcomed. The parents here are viewed as positive and necessary active agents in their child’s education.

‘While working class parents are committed to supporting their children’s education, they tend to operate within a division of labour in which teachers are constructed as powerful and knowledgeable, encouraging a fatalistic view among the parents’ (Connell, 2004, p.229). Parents in working class homes appear to be constructed as unable to contribute. This encourages what Connell refers to as a ‘fatalistic view’.

5.4 Observations

As reflected on throughout chapters two and four the central notion of Foucault’s writings and CDA is that of power. The observations and field notes showed the production of the learners in the differing school contexts. It can be argued that through the different positioning that informed the
dominant Discourses that surround the schools, the learners’ social class inequalities are being reproduced.

The staff at school A, through their surveillance and policing, produces ‘docile bodies’ who will have internalised the ‘norms’ of society. These learners have been disciplined in the skills needed to successfully navigate secondary and eventually tertiary education. The accepted practices or ‘norms’ in society are made explicit for these learners and they will thereby be ‘successful’. Eventually, ‘policing [will] no longer [be] necessary, once discourses of normalisation are constructed’ (McNamee, 2000, p.483).

If one refers to the comments made by the teachers at schools B and C, it can be deduced that homework is not a regular feature at these schools and that there is limited emphasis placed on the completion of homework. The importance of homework is recognised by these teachers, yet they feel that the learners at these schools are unable for various reasons, to be apprenticed into the practice. The Discourses which inform these perceptions are deficit by nature and by implication will lock the learners at schools B and C into particular subjectivities. These subjects, through the deficit discourses ascribed to them are positioned as incapable.

5.5 Limitations

In order to make meaningful and accurate generalisations about a certain field, a relatively large sample needs to be consulted in order to cross reference data. The sample size for this study was small, which could be problematic for the conclusions drawn. It may appear that three schools are not enough to draw reliable conclusions about the entire Nelson Mandela Bay area’s discursive practices regarding the management of homework in its primary schools. Case studies, due to their focus on obtaining ‘rich’ data in specific contexts, cannot be used to make generalisations. This is also true of my case study.
Another limitation of my research design is that much of the reviewed literature stressed the importance of parental involvement in homework. The inclusion of data from the perspective of the parents at the various schools could have enriched the analysis and allowed for the parents to supplement the official views on homework.

5.6 Conclusion

Discourses can be powerful in positioning people (in this case the learners and their parents) in certain ways which serve to produce and reproduce inequalities in society. In my research deficit discourses ascribed to working class learners and their parents construct them as having limited (if any) resources to draw on. This then legitimises the lack of homework. The middle class pupils, on the other hand, are positioned as resourceful, powerful and able. These subject positions, if taken up by the subjects themselves, can perpetuate unequal practices and discrimination.

If one is to believe the argument that Cairney and Ruge (2005, p.1)(See 2.5) put forward that parental involvement is an important element in effective schooling, then the learners in schools B and C’s parents are not being afforded an opportunity to be involved in their child’s schooling. This may then impact on the effectiveness of the schooling given to their children.

The teachers and principals appear to draw on Discourses that are reminiscent of Apartheid. In contemporary SA, there is however a category apart from race that excludes sections of communities. Chisholm writes ‘that class is a critical component of the reconfigured education system is clear’ (2004, introduction). Rather than only race, class divisions emerge to construct and reproduce the subjectivities of the learners and their parents. From the ways in which the principals and teachers refer to the middle class parents it appears that they locate these parents as possessing the appropriate cultural capital needed for engagement with the school. The working class parents however are perceived as lacking this capital. This kind
of talk discursively reproduces the divisions that have been constructed in society. Teachers need to become aware of the power of their classroom and everyday talk to position their learners in ways that reproduce inequality.
REFERENCE LIST


Dornbrack, JJ. (December 2000). *The discursive practices of DOTS as the solution to the TB crisis in South Africa.* Australia: Deakin University. (unpublished MA treatise)


ADDENDUM A

Interview schedule for Principals

- What is the official school policy on homework?
- Are there any checks in place to assess implementation of the policy?
- What is the school’s position on homework diaries?
- What support is given to both the learners and teachers with regard to the completion and administration of homework?
- How does the school ensure standardization of homework within the same grade levels?
- What types of problems, if any, are you aware of surrounding the issue of homework in your school?
- Anything else that you would like to share about the homework situation/practice/management in your school?
ADDENDUM B

Interview schedule for Teachers

- What is your usual procedure for the preparation, administration and management of homework in your classroom?
- What were you taught about administering homework?
- Was the preparation, administration and management of homework part of your in-service training?
- What do you see as the purpose of homework?
- How often do you give homework?
- What are your thoughts on homework?
- Which language do you encourage your learners to write homework down in?
- How do you ensure that your learners understand the homework instructions?
- What is the usual timeframe that you give your students to complete homework?
ADDENDUM C

Observation schedule

I will be observing:

• if homework is written on the board (and what is written)
• what is said about homework (this will be tape recorded)
• learners’ recording of the homework
• the type of book, diary or sheet used to record the homework
• follow up procedures of checking homework
• what is said and done about homework ‘completers’ and ‘deviants’
• consistency of practice (over the period of one week)
ADDENDUM D

Focus group points

- How do you feel about getting homework?
- How do you feel about the amount of homework that you get?
- What happens at home when you have homework?
- What are the consequences of you not doing your homework?
- What helps you to understand the homework?
- Do you know why you get homework?
- Where do you do homework?
- Who helps you with homework?
03 August 2007

Dear Principal

Homework research: Ms N Felix MA Applied Language Studies

Thank you for the interest shown in my research project. The purpose of the research is to identify the discursive management of homework practices in three primary schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay area with the intention of identifying models of good practice. I am interested specifically in grade four. This letter provides you with a general overview of intended activities within the research project as well as approximate dates for school visits.

I would like to interview you and your grade four English medium class teacher. I would also like to observe the grade four class or classes for a time period of one week. This observation will be conducted during the 3rd term. I hope to run two focus groups with the grade four learners. Ideally the groups will consist of six to eight learners each.

This letter is for information purposes only. More specific and official documentation will follow from the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University Ethics Committee.

My contact details are:
Ms Nadine Felix
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I have two research supervisors and their contact details are:
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Yours sincerely

Ms N Felix
03 August 2007

Dear Teacher

**Homework research: Ms N Felix MA Applied Language Studies**

Thank you for the interest shown and your willingness to participate in my Masters degree research project. The purpose of the research is to identify the discursive management of homework practices in three primary schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay area with the intention of identifying models of good practice. I am interested specifically in grade four. This letter provides you with a general overview of intended activities within your classroom and an idea of the kinds of questions you will be asked.

I would like to interview you and observe your grade four class for one week. The types of questions I will ask you will centre on training that you received and your experiences of drafting and administering homework. When I observe your class I will be looking at how the homework is administered and managed. Your assistance would be appreciated in the gathering of learner consent forms which I will ask you to distribute to your learners and their parents/guardians.

I cannot foresee any risks resulting from your participation in this project. I will use pseudonyms when referring to your school, class and yourself. Also I will share my results with you once all my data has been collected. Thirdly, once we have completed our interview, I will transcribe it and ask you to confirm that the transcription is an accurate reflection of the actual event. Information that you share with me will only be seen by myself and my two supervisors. Apart from this it will not be shown to anyone else unless prior permission is obtained from you. However, I am hoping to publish an article from this research. It will be shown to you before submission.

If you have any further questions relating to your participation in this project please feel free to contact me. My contact details are:

Ms Nadine Felix
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Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University
041 504 3767
nadine.felix@nmmu.ac.za

Yours sincerely

Ms N Felix
31 July 2007

Dear Parent

Homework research: Ms N Felix MA Applied Language Studies

This letter provides you with a general overview of my research and the intended activities that include your child. I am currently gathering data for my Masters Degree research project. The purpose of the research is to identify the discursive management of homework practices in three primary schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay area with the intention of identifying models of good practice. I am interested specifically in grade four.

I would like to hold a focus group with the grade four learners. In this group I will ask them to talk freely about their experiences around homework. Their responses will be audio taped. Accompanying this information letter is an official ethics approval form and an informed consent form that I would like you to complete on behalf of your child. I would appreciate it if you could return the informed consent form to the school as soon as possible.

I cannot foresee any risks resulting from your child’s participation in this project. I will use pseudonyms when referring to the school, class and your child. Information that your child shares with me will only be seen by myself and my two supervisors. Their email addresses and phone numbers can be found at the top of this letter. Apart from this, the information will not be shown to anyone else unless prior permission is obtained from you. However, I am hoping to publish an article from this research.

If you have any further questions relating to your participation in this project please feel free to contact me. My contact details are:
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Yours sincerely

Ms N Felix
ADDENDUM H

16 July 2007

Dear District Director

Homework research: Ms N Felix MA Applied Language Studies

I would like to obtain permission to conduct the abovementioned research study. The purpose of the research is to identify the discursive management current homework practices in three primary schools in the Nelson Mandela Bay area with the intention of identifying models of good practice. The three schools that I have identified are Swartkop Primary, Summerwood Primary and G J Louw Primary. I have made contact with each of the three principals involved and they have indicated their willingness to allow me into their schools. I am interested specifically in grade four. This letter provides you with a general overview of intended activities within the research project as well as approximate dates for school visits.

I would like to interview each school Principal and grade four English medium class teacher. I would also like to observe the grade four classes for a time period of one week, for at least the period in which homework is given. This observation will be conducted within the 3rd school term 2007. I hope to run two focus groups with the grade four learners.

This research proposal has passed through the official ethics committee of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University. If you would like to see the official ethics forms, they will be forwarded to you.

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Yours sincerely
Ms N Felix
ADDENDUM I

PROVINCE OF THE
EASTERN CAPE
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

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Ms N. Felix
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Dear Madam

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

I refer to your letter dated 16 July 2007.

Permission is hereby granted for you to conduct your research on the following conditions:

1. your research must be conducted on a voluntary basis;
2. all ethical issues relating to research must be honoured;
3. your research is subject to the internal rules of the school, including its curricular programme and its code of conduct and must not interfere in the day-to-day routine of the school.

Kindly present a copy of this letter to the principal as proof of permission.

I wish you good luck in your research.

Yours faithfully

S. Snywer
DISTRICT DIRECTOR: PORT ELIZABETH

17 July 2007