Parents' Reported Involvement in Students' Homework: Strategies and Practices

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Abstract

In this study we examined homework, the most common point of intersection among parent, child, and school activities related to formal learning, in interviews with 69 parents of first- through fifth-grade students. Analyses revealed rich information about parents' thinking, strategies, and actions related to homework. Their ideas generally clustered around 5 major themes: concern for children's unique characteristics as balanced with school demands, questions about appropriate levels of independent work by children, efforts to structure homework activities, direct involvement in homework tasks, and reflections on the personal meanings of perceived success and failure in helping children with homework. Findings suggested that students' homework represented a complex and multidimensional set of tasks for parents, for which they often felt ill-prepared, by both limitations in knowledge and competing demands for their time and energy. Strategies for involving parents more effectively in students' homework are suggested, based on the general finding that parents want to be involved more effectively in their children's school learning.

Popular and professional attention to homework abounds. Writers have produced a plethora of newspaper columns (e.g., Kutner, 1992) and books of advice on helping children with homework (e.g., Maeroff, 1989; Rosemond, 1990); educators have developed numerous programs intended to ensure the productive accomplishment of homework (e.g., Anesko, Schoiock, Ramirez, & Levine, 1987; Clary, 1986; Cooper, 1989a). Scholarly studies and literature reviews of homework's contribution to school achievement have produced somewhat mixed results—many have supported its usefulness (e.g., Cooper, 1989a, 1989b; Fehrman, Keith, & Reimers, 1987; Keith &

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Page, 1985; Keith, Reimers, Fehrman, Pottebaum, & Aubey, 1986; Leone & Richards, 1989; Paschal, Weinstein, & Walberg, 1984; Reynolds, 1991; Shanahan & Walberg, 1985; Staver & Walberg, 1986), but others have failed to find consistent linkages (e.g., Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Cool & Keith, 1991; Cooper, 1989a, 1989b; Lee, 1985; Smith, 1990).

The variability in scholarly findings for homework may be due to shortcomings in the studies. Homework has seldom been defined fully; investigators either have assumed that its components and demands were obvious or have employed simple descriptors (e.g., time spent on assignments); both approaches have denied the variability of tasks often implicit in the generic concept. Some investigators have suggested the potential importance of parents in the homework process (e.g., Baker & Stevenson, 1986; Chen & Stevenson, 1989; Stevenson, Chen, & Uttal, 1990), but rarely has homework been conceptualized as a complex set of requirements involving a variety of assumptions about specific activities on the part of parents *and* children. A few notable exceptions identified patterns that may characterize many families' interactions around homework (Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; Lareau, 1989; McDermott, Goldman, & Varenne, 1984), but the dimensions of such patterns have yet to be examined systematically in a broader population. Further, the majority of studies have focused on adolescents' homework. Much less attention has been given to the highly significant precursor elementary years, arguably the years when significant patterns of parental involvement—and child attitudes and activities related to homework—are developed in ways that may influence later student attention to and performance on homework tasks.

We argue that homework is a complex and multifaceted activity that begins for most students during the early elementary years, when parents have a significant role to play in forming the attitudes—as well as patterns of strategy and accomplishment—that underlie success in homework and in school. There is an abundant literature on linkages between homework performance and academic achievement, but the critical role played by parents' assumptions and activities has largely been ignored. This inattention is detrimental to educators' understanding of parental factors that influence most children's school success.

In the study reported here we focused on describing the interactions parents reported as they assisted their children with school-related work at home. Specifically, we wanted to know what elementary school parents think about their roles and activities in relation to children's school assignments and homework success, how parents conceptualize their roles in relation to homework performance, and how—by their own reports—parents help their children complete homework.

Method

To address these questions, we studied a sample of 69 parents of elementary children, grades 1–5, in two elementary schools in a large metropolitan school district in the midsouth. Parents' accounts of their thinking, strategies, and activities related to their involvement in children's homework were gathered as part of a larger study of parent involvement, parent efficacy, and children's school performance.

Schools

Participating schools were selected on the basis of their representativeness of the community at large. Halliday Elementary (pseudonym) was situated in a modest, primarily middle-income neighborhood of homes, apartment buildings, and small businesses constructed primarily in the 1950s and 1960s. The school served kindergarten through fourth-grade students from the neighborhood as well as students bused from a "partner" school approximately 3 miles toward the center of town. The partner school was located in a more

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economically depressed neighborhood; most partner school children lived in small, older homes or a nearby public housing project. Parents from both Halliday neighborhoods (18 from Halliday, 9 from the partner school) participated in the study. Baxter Elementary (pseudonym) was a "walk-in" school serving kindergarten through sixth graders in a lower- to lower-middle-income neighborhood built up in the 1930s and 1940s. Most Baxter students lived in small, older homes or apartments clustered in a neighborhood of mixed residential, commercial, and light industrial uses. Some parents had lived in the neighborhood as children and had attended Baxter 20 and 30 years earlier. Despite the stability, the neighborhood bore an air of depression in some areas, where vacant lots and abandoned vehicles appeared among variably maintained homes. Forty-two of the parents interviewed were from Baxter. Teachers in both schools maintained expectations that children from first grade on would do some homework as a routine component of school learning. Teachers' expectations for homework time generally ranged from about 10 minutes per weeknight (first grade) to approximately 45 minutes per weeknight in the upper grades. Homework assignments usually involved review of skills or concepts being taught in class and in the upper grades sometimes included longer-term projects as well (e.g., science fair).

We began the study at each school with a request that the principal identify one classroom at varied grade levels, based on her estimate of the typicality (for the school) of the classroom's teacher as well as child and parent populations (principals were *not* asked to select classrooms that were either outstanding or weak in parent involvement). Letters describing the study were sent home to all parents in identified classrooms; approximately 50% of the parents from each classroom elected to participate.

Parents

The typical participant was a married mother of two or three children, employed out of the home in a pink-collar job (mean Hollingshead occupation score = 3.84; Myers & Bean, 1968; see Table 1). Comparison of participating with nonparticipating parents on (blind) teacher ratings of child achievement and parent effectiveness in helping children succeed in school (employing a measure similar to Stevenson & Baker's [1987]) indicated no significant differences between the two groups of parents. The average teacher rating of child achievement for participating parents was 6.95 (SD = 3.60) on a 13-point scale (13 = A+, 1 = F) and for nonparticipating parents was 7.14 (SD = 2.88) ($F = 0.09$, $p = 0.766$, N.S.). The average teacher rating of parent effectiveness for participants was 2.83 (SD = 1.17) on a 4-point scale (4 = very effective, 1 = very ineffective) and 2.54 (SD = 0.83) for nonparticipating parents ($F = 2.14$, $p = 0.146$, N.S.).

Interviews

Interviews focused on domains of parent involvement in children's schooling (e.g., homework, conferences, children's academic and social progress). Questions related to homework included, Do you usually spend any time, in an average week, helping your child with homework? If so, could you give us an estimate of how much time you spend? What kind of help do you give generally? Does anyone else help your child with homework? How effective do you feel when you help with homework? Can you give an example? Have you tried homework strategies that did not work? Can you give an example? Why do you think they did not work? Probes generally focused on requests for more examples of points parents raised (e.g., Could you give me another example? How did that work?). Individual interviews were conducted by a trained interviewer in an unoccupied room at each school (five parents, at their request, were interviewed by phone or at their place of employment). At the outset of each interview, efforts were made to put the parent at ease, and the informal, simple-inquiry

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TABLE 1. Description of Parents

Variable	Number (N = 69)	Percentage
Gender:		
Female (mother)	60	87
Male (father)	9	13
Marital status:		
Married	42	61
Not married (divorced, single, etc.)	27	39
Race:		
Black	12	17
White	57	83
Employment status:		
Employed outside home	55	80
Not employed outside home	9	13
Unknown	4	6
Occupation of employed parents, per Hollingshead categories:[a]		
1. Executive, "major professions"	1	2
2. Managers, "minor professions"	12	22
3. Administrators, small-business owners, semi-professionals	5	9
4. Clerical, sales, technicians	24	44
5. Skilled workers	3	5
6. Semiskilled workers	10	18
Number of children in family:		
One	14	20
Two	28	41
Three	17	25
Four	7	10
Five or more	3	4

[a]Percentages reported are for the 55 parents employed outside the home.

nature of the study was stressed. Interviews generally lasted about 45 minutes.

Analyses

Interviews were audiotaped, transcribed verbatim, and subsequently checked for accuracy against original recordings. We independently marked each full interview transcript for homework-relevant portions following the definitions included in Appendix A, which we derived from the literature on homework and from initial review of the full transcripts. Following agreement by consensus on all portions of each interview to be included in the homework transcript, we used procedures similar to those recommended by Constas (1992) to analyze the data.

Homework transcripts were examined first for ideas reflected in the homework definition. As ideas delineating dimensions of this definition emerged in the data, we bracketed and labeled discrete statements in the transcripts containing single instances of specific ideas. Bracketed statements were tentatively placed in an increasingly detailed scheme of categories for describing parents' thoughts, strategies, and actions related to children's homework (see App. B). After we finalized the scheme, two reviewers working independently used the full scheme to guide bracketing of all homework transcripts (clean transcripts) for a final time; disagreements on bracket placements were resolved by consensus between reviewers.

We then coded bracketed homework transcripts according to the scheme summarized in Appendix B. A random sample of transcripts was coded independently by a third trained reviewer, yielding reliabilities (calculated as the number of statements

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on whose coding two reviewers agreed as a proportion of total statements coded) ranging from 69% to 96% ($\bar{x}$ = 78%). We subsequently reviewed coding on all transcripts and resolved all disagreements by consensus. We came to full consensus, based on the detailed definitions included in the coding scheme, on the coding of all statements prior to our identification of major themes characterizing the data set as a whole.

As we analyzed the coded transcripts, we looked for patterns, themes, and regularities, for common points of theoretical and pragmatic importance to understanding parents' experiences and perceptions of their roles in relation to children's accomplishment of homework. We particularly wanted to understand parents' views of their children, their parental roles, and the school's role in relation to their involvement in this "home-support" function for their elementary school children.

Results and Discussion

Two parental assumptions seemed to underlie the major themes emerging in these data. Despite the difficulties many parents experienced in helping their children with homework, all expressed a belief that homework was a given, a normal part of their children's—and their own—lives. Bound closely to this idea was the often explicit belief that success in homework was necessary to succeeding in school. Most parents also assumed that they *should* be involved in their children's homework efforts. Although they varied in reported intentions, strategies, actions, and assessments of their homework roles, all conveyed a belief that some interaction with children in relation to homework was a given of parenthood, a responsibility that simply "came with the territory" of having a child in elementary school.

Although both of these findings might have emerged from the implicit demand characteristics of the interviews, two points of evidence argue against such an interpretation. First, those who agreed to participate in the interviews represented a wide range of parents within each classroom; participants included parents aligned along the full array of the two general "success" markers reported by teachers: student achievement and parent effectiveness. Second, participants did not refrain from expressing sometimes strong criticism of school practices. Most appeared comfortable—in the privacy of an interview with a stranger—in expressing their ideas and feelings, directly and often forcefully. They constituted a generally diverse and sometimes outspoken group that did not appear to bow to potential situational demands for particular responses.

Theme 1: Children's Unique Qualities

Parents consistently conveyed strong awareness of their children's unique characteristics as well as the implications of these qualities for involving themselves in homework (86% offered comments in this category; see Table 2 and App. B, Category 1). These comments were notably matter-of-fact in tone, focusing on characteristics of which parents might well be proud (e.g., "She's pretty smart") as well as those that might be problematic (e.g., "He needs a little more help than the average child"). Parents identified numerous personality characteristics potentially implicated in their children's learning habits and abilities (e.g., "If he gets stumped, he really don't like to ask questions at all," "She's real competitive and demands a lot of herself"); many described the implications of these qualities, for example, "I'll ask her questions to help her to think, so that she can answer herself—that works. But if I start pushing her and trying to force her into saying something and hurry her up, it does not work. . . . She doesn't want to waste a bunch of time, but you can't push her." Parents also noted their children's attitudes and characteristic performance in specific subjects (e.g., "Social studies is just over his

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TABLE 2. Parents Recording Comments in Various Categories, by Theme

Theme	Category[a]	Number of Parents Recording Statements in This Category (N = 69)	Percentage of Total Sample[b]
1. Children's unique qualities	1.0. Child status, learning characteristics	[59]	[86]
2. Expectations for independent work	4.0. Expectations for independent work	[57]	[83]
3. Providing structure	2.0. Rules and structures for homework:	[67]	[97]
	2.1. Notes school practices	42	61
	2.2.3. Checks to see if child has homework	22	32
	2.2.4. Notes child's lying about homework	23	33
	2.3. Structures time and rules	40	58
	2.4. Coordinates homework help for child	36	52
	2.5. Communicates with teacher	49	71
4. Active involvement	3.0. Parent engages in homework process:	[67]	[97]
	3.1. Availability, general monitoring	50	72
	3.2. Motivates	38	55
	3.3. Homework task activities	38	55
	3.4. Teaches, explains	34	49
	5.0. Homework review activities	40	58
5. Reflections on personal success, limitations	6.0. Parent reflects on successes, limitations helping with homework:	[58]	[84]
	6.1. Responses to child	36	52
	6.2. Personal abilities in helping with homework	50	72

[a]See App. B for fuller descriptions of categories of parents' thinking, strategies, and actions related to involvement in children's homework.

[b]Percentages for major categories and subcategories (in brackets) represent percentages of the full sample ($N = 69$).

head again," "My little girl hates math"), sometimes elaborating on their responses (e.g., "I make her sit down; if she's missed 13, we've got to know why, and we're going to correct them, and we're going to make sure that we really knew what was going on in class").

Even as they identified their children as unique, parents also described them in school-generated terminology (e.g., "He's learning delayed," "She has an attention deficit disorder"), and their comments frequently suggested that they had incorporated information from teachers into their understanding of children's abilities and performance (e.g., "She said he takes a little more time to understand than other children").

Taken as a whole, these observations suggested that parents placed their homework-helping ideas squarely into the context of their children's unique characteristics. The importance of parents' observations in this area lies not so much in assertions about the accuracy of their observations but in the evidence they offer for parents' attention to their children's characteristics as they framed their expectations

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and plans for working with them (see Lightfoot, 1978).

Theme 2: Expectations for Independent Work

Consistent with general understandings that children become increasingly capable of independent thinking and action across childhood (e.g., Dix & Grusec, 1985), parents described their efforts to have children accomplish some homework tasks independently (83% offered comments in this category; see Table 2 and App. B, Category 4.0). Some simply reported that they expected independent work, whereas others explained that they offered help on a contingent basis (e.g., "*If she has a question about something that she is doing,* we will sit down and read the instructions together and talk about it or maybe have to look in her books and see the explanations or something" [emphasis added]).

For many parents, however, children's independence during homework activity was a complex issue. Several reported tension as they tried to balance children's needs for help with their own ideas about what children should be able to accomplish by themselves. Some parents described eventually successful resolutions:

> He would depend on me, I found out at the beginning, to read all the directions for him and ask him leading questions—which would give him the answers. I cut that out rather quickly, because I decided that he needed to read the directions; he needed to comprehend and understand. . . . He would sit down and would say, "What does that mean?" I would say, "I don't know. Read it again." So we would read it three and four times, until he realized that I was not going to give in. . . . So right after Christmas, all I had to do was just sit there. And when it came to a hard spot, then he would ask me and we would talk about it.

Other parents responded to these tensions by "giving in" and offering more help than they believed their child should really need—for example, "He won't have it any other way. It's like, 'If you don't sit down with me, I'm not going to do it.' I don't know—he feels more secure, I guess, when I'm there with him, seeing what he's doing."

As a whole, parents seemed to work actively to understand their children's needs for help and to balance these understandings with their own expectations for increasing independence. Some found this a fairly easy process; others seemed constantly challenged by efforts to create an acceptable compromise.

Theme 3: Providing Structure for Homework Activities

Virtually all parents described themselves as responsible for structuring aspects of children's homework activities (97%; see Table 2 and App. B, Category 2.0), and many reported basing their structuring and help choices on their understanding of teachers' homework expectations (61%; Category 2.1). Several made routine inquiries to children about homework assignments (32%; Category 2.2.3), and, perhaps surprisingly, an equal number reported concerns about their children's trustworthiness in this regard (33%; Category 2.2.4). One mother, for example, recounted, "[He] would come home and tell me, 'I'm doing okay, I don't really have any homework.' And we believed him—until I got his midterm report that said it's not true!" Few parents mentioned the reasons for such conflicts, although several seem possible (e.g., children may have been embarrassed about poor performance, failed to understand the linkage between homework and school performance, or simply preferred to play after school; parents may have felt relief and easy acceptance of "no homework" reports given the press of other family demands).

Over half of the group described rules they developed to govern homework activity (58%; Category 2.3); rules often had to do with timing (e.g., "I'd make her sit down and do it as soon as she got home") or dis-

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tractions during homework (e.g., "On weeknights, they aren't allowed to watch TV until their homework is finished"). Among parents who reported tension about rules, many responded by "buckling down"—for example, "I put an end to those [phone calls during homework time]. I said, 'You can have one call a night. It doesn't matter who it's from and you can talk for 10 minutes. That's it.' " Another described: "I was on him every day to come in, making him read, making him study, making him do his addition and subtraction, and really being on him to make him sit down. He would get mad and discouraged sometimes. But [I'd say], 'You got to do it, you've got to learn. You can't get up until you can show me that you can do this and do it right, because I know that you know how to do it!' " A few parents reported giving up, as did one mother who shrugged helplessly, "I mean, if they refuse to bring their books home, there's nothing I can do."

Given the importance often ascribed to family structuring of homework time (e.g., Cavazos, 1989; Stevenson & Stigler, 1992), it was somewhat surprising that more parents did not describe rules for homework. Consistent with suggestions in the literature that homework accomplished without explicit, school-like structuring may be more conducive to successful performance (e.g., Delgado-Gaitan, 1992; McDermott et al., 1984; Scott-Jones, 1987), however, it seems likely that homework in several families was accomplished within the flow of "normal" family life. It is also possible that children differed in needs for external structuring, as parents themselves may have differed in preferences and ability to impose structure.

Other family members' help with children's homework (from spouses, grandparents, boyfriends, and siblings) was reported by about half of the parents (52%; Category 2.4). Some of these coordination efforts emerged as a function of convenience; others were developed to give more competent ("I can do English, he can do math; he's a math whiz") or more patient help, for example, "We take turns. He'll do it one or two nights, then I'll do it—so neither of us will get too aggravated. Sometimes when you explain something to him, it aggravates you to know he knows how to do it, but he just can't seem to get it. . . . So we found that if we switch and take turns that *we* don't get near as irritated." Consistent with other reports (e.g., Biernat & Wortman, 1991; Lightfoot, 1978; Stevenson, Lee, et al., 1990), active homework help was primarily a "mother's responsibility" in these families, as exemplified by one mother's comment that "my husband lets me do it" and a father's observation: "Day to day operations, I pretty much leave to my wife."

Many parents also reported communications with teachers about children's homework assignments (71%; Category 2.5); in fact, homework seemed to provide the context for a large portion of informal conversation between parents and teachers. Some parents reported asking for more information or confirmation of homework due dates; others complained ("I told her that fourth and fifth graders staying up until 11:00 and 12:00 wasn't right"), and some worked to negotiate compromises in requirements, for example,

> I talked to her teacher and said, "We will do our best to get this done, but if it's a day late, would you please allow that?" Well, the teacher didn't like that too much. I think she said, "What comes first? She shouldn't play ball if it's going to affect school." But on the other hand, she is committed to playing ball; she has a responsibility to that, too. I agreed that school should come first, and I explained to her . . . that she [my daughter] also had a commitment. And then I said, "As an adult, I know you understand that there are several things that are involved with what you are committed to, that you have to follow through." And she said, "Well, if you want her to turn it in late, then she can turn it in late."

Many parents also discussed ongoing interactions with teachers about their work

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with children at home, reflecting considerable teacher responsiveness to parents' expressed concerns, for example, "He was having some trouble doing math. She told me that the whole second grade was having the same problem . . . and they were working on reinforcing it. She told me not to worry about it, that if he didn't catch on, she would let me know. [Then] she told me . . . every night just do maybe five or six or seven math problems with him, but don't make him do them a long time, because he did it enough at school during the day." Other parents sought suggestions for work at home and expressed clear appreciation for teachers' help: "She's fantastic; we need more like her. . . . She'd say, 'Take him back there and let him read for 15 minutes, and have him read out loud so you can hear him. And when he makes mistakes, don't say, "No, you know better than that"; go in there and say, "I think you've misread this," and "Let's go over this together." ' And stuff like this. And it really helps." That so many parents described teacher contacts underscored the importance of teachers' availability and attention to parents' needs as part of successful homework practice. Specific, supportive communications from teachers seemed very important to parents' efforts to help their children succeed with school assignments.

Theme 4: Parents' Active Involvement in Children's Homework

Almost all parents described some form of helping with homework activities (97%; see Table 2 and App. B, Category 3.0). Most described general monitoring (72%; Category 3.1) or efforts to motivate children's performance (55%; Category 3.2). These motivational efforts usually involved praise, rewards, or exhortations to better performance, for example, "I'll try to point out to her how she feels, when she's not doing her best, how she feels when she comes home. We'll look at the grades that she did, and, 'When you get a grade like that,' I'll say, 'How do you feel when you get a 52?' And she'll say, 'I don't feel so good doing this compared to that 100.' " Some parents elaborated on their values, reporting short lectures to their children, for example, "Your grades are your own responsibility; having a boring teacher has nothing to do with studying," or "You could do better! The Lord has give you a beautiful mind—use it and don't be lazy, because I know you have the potential!" In general, parents suggested that their motivational strategies had some of the desired effects. Parents rarely reflected on the motivational techniques they *should* use; for the most part, they seemed to report on a repertoire created within their own experience and used according to their children's perceived needs and homework demands.

About half of the parents discussed strategies for helping with homework (55%; Category 3.3). Spelling homework was described most frequently (e.g., "I have him write them and then I'll give him a spelling test and then go back over them, switch them around, things like that"). That spelling was mentioned more often than other subjects may have reflected parents' greater comfort with the area (it may have been more like their own school experiences than were other subjects); the "drill and practice" nature of much spelling work—as well as the attraction of easily identifiable correct answers—may also have drawn more teacher suggestions or child requests for help. Several parents also described reading homework, for example, "I'm cooking while he's reading, and if it didn't sound right, I make him go back and read it over again. And if he skips over it again, or it sounded the same way, I go back and I read it, and tell him, 'C., this is not right, that word is something else. . . . Don't skip over words; you've got to break it down and read what it is.' " Math homework, when mentioned, tended to evoke description of review or simple teaching activities (e.g., "I have a blackboard at home and we just set down and worked them—big, so she could see everything").

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Nearly half of the parents reported teaching their children as part of homework involvement (49%; Category 3.4). Teaching activities were most often focused on helping children learn facts or get correct answers—for example, "When she don't know what to do, first I try to show her. If she still don't understand, then I work it. Then I show her how I worked it and help her figure out how to do it." Only infrequently did parents describe building children's understanding of homework concepts; one parent who did so reported: "Sometimes I will try to explain things to her or let her explain it to me. I'll ask her questions instead of telling her the answer. I'll ask her questions to help her think, so that she can answer herself. . . . And then I'll work two or three of them for her. And then let her work two or three, until I see that she understands it." Review of completed homework was reported by about half of the group (58%; Category 5.0), usually focused on checking for neatness and correctness or offering help with mistakes.

Theme 5: Parents' Personal Reflections on Their Children and Themselves

A strong element of personal reflection emerged in these accounts of homework involvement (84%; see Table 2 and App. B, Category 6.0). Among the several parents who described responses to their children (52%; Category 6.1), many focused on concerns about standards for children's performance. Some parents described their standards (e.g., "We don't pressurize him into being a straight-A student"), but others noted significant uncertainty (e.g., one parent began, "I wouldn't really want them to drop down to C's," faltered, and concluded, "but I'm happy with C's"). Parents often seemed to be searching for "right" expectations, standards that would encourage their children to perform well within the limits of their individual characteristics and parents' aspirations for their success. For some, balancing perceptions of children's abilities with their own and others' standards for performance produced satisfactory resolutions; for others, frustrations were clearly evident ("I was really disappointed in him;" "I *tried* not to come across [as] upset"), as was outright dismay when children had repeated difficulties meeting parents' standards: "I cried a lot. I would get discouraged. I would just drop my head and say, 'Oh, Lord, why are you doing this to me? Why are you doing this to me? This boy knows this. Why is he standing here looking at me?' You know. I was like, 'Oh, God, please help us to get through this!' "

For many parents (72%; Category 6.2), such frustrations turned to reflections on personal abilities to offer effective help. Some parents described their success (e.g., "I was able to break through . . . after we'd went over it a few times, a light lit up"), but such feelings were mixed for most parents, as they cited uncertainties about their effectiveness (e.g., "Sometimes you don't know if what you're doing is the right thing, and you can't keep up with it") or their beliefs that some subjects or grade levels were beyond their own abilities—for example, "You would think I could do fourth-grade work, but sometimes I can't"; another parent elaborated: "My [math] language was different, because that was 30 years' ago language. I say, 'Tell me the words the teacher is using.' And when she does, I say, 'Okay, that's exactly what I am saying, but my words are different, because that's the way I learned it.' So sometimes she doesn't grasp what I'm talking about, because it's totally different language. So I have to learn a totally different math vocabulary. I don't know what I'm going to do with her." Parents also described normal family problems that were exacerbated by children's homework needs; one parent exclaimed, "I told her that if parents could divorce children, I would have divorced her in the third grade because it [her homework] just about killed me!" Many parents' efforts to maintain home and family, to work, and to be good parents were sometimes frustrated by homework demands, for both married and

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single parents, for example, "I work full time, and things are really hectic. . . . When I take control, either on the phone with [the teacher] or making sure that those spelling words come [home] the day that they are given out, and I am studying with her, it's fine. It's just that there are just so many other responsibilities for me and I can't do that every time. [And] we don't have 2 or 3 hours a night to do homework!" Feelings of guilt emerged for some as they discussed their beliefs about what they *should* do as compared to actual activities, for example, "I know I should work with mine [children] a lot more than I do. I'm kind of letting it slide. They could have made straight A's with a little effort—not only on their part, but on my part."

The personal and multifaceted effects of children's homework demands seemed to come full circle in this theme. As many parents began describing their homework interactions by recounting their children's characteristics, many ended by reflecting on themselves and their abilities. These findings suggested that children's homework demands held personal implications for parents' well-being and that most parents retained—even after perceived failures—strong interests in succeeding with this dimension of parenting responsibilities.

Summary and Conclusion

Overall, the results suggested that parents' consideration of children's homework—and their involvement in that work—was based on their understanding of children's characteristics and their own abilities. Consistent with Lightfoot's (1978) observations, many parents reflected a primary interest in understanding their children and working to help them, given their characteristics, to do well with schoolwork (see also Clark, 1983; Delgado-Gaitan, 1992). As a group, they saw themselves as having an active role to play in their children's homework and described this role in multifaceted terms that often included structuring homework activities, motivating children, working with them in relation to varied homework tasks, and interacting with the teacher about homework assignments and suggestions for help. Many parents also reported having skills and information inadequate for offering effective help, and several experienced difficulties in helping given the constraints on their knowledge, time, and energy. Most derived strong personal meaning from their efforts to help their children; their successes and failures in helping with homework were important to them, and they seemed to consider successful efforts a significant part of being a "good" parent for their elementary children.

The findings are limited by the facts that parents volunteered for the study and that data on their thoughts and actions were derived from a single interview with each. These limitations were balanced by some of the study's strengths—most notably, participants came from relatively "average" schools and classrooms in a large public school system, represented a range of demographic characteristics as well as child achievement and parent effectiveness as rated by teachers, and offered observations about their homework involvement in some detail. The data they generated permit broader perspectives on parents' thinking and actions than have been available in many ethnographic studies of smaller populations; at the same time, the data enable more comprehensive examination of parents' thinking and activities in this area than have been afforded by many survey-based examinations of larger populations. The findings here complement these varied studies cited earlier as significant to current understanding of parents' involvement in children's homework.

The themes identified hold important implications for schools as they work to relate effectively with parents. Parents' focus on their own children's characteristics, for example, supports the importance of schools taking a child-specific approach that acknowledges that different children's needs vary (e.g., some fourth graders can

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work independently on most homework projects, but others need considerable parental guidance and structuring). Such a school perspective may help parents understand teachers' respect for individual children, even as teachers work to help students achieve general standards of learning.

Many parents' valuing of explicit information about teachers' homework expectations and schedules suggests that communicating such information routinely to all parents is warranted and reinforces Epstein's (1986) descriptions of schools' "basic responsibilities" (see also Epstein & Dauber, 1991). Parents in this study who received specific suggestions from teachers for working with children at home reported valuing them highly; these simple suggestions (e.g., "Read for 15 minutes most nights"; "Say 'Let's go over this together' "; "Do about five math problems each night") appeared to produce an increased sense of parental knowledge and efficacy in promoting children's school learning (see Hoover-Dempsey, Bassler, & Brissie, 1992). Such suggestions could well be incorporated into brief written or telephone communications to parents, framed in terms applicable to students at a given grade level or tailored to the needs of individual students.

The drill and practice focus of many parents' reported homework involvement suggested that homework could be designed to focus on practice activities, with built-in instructions for a helper (parent, sibling, etc.). Related ideas that build on the strategies and activities these parents reported using already (e.g., explicitly encouraging their children, loosely monitoring homework activities, working two or three problems with children) could make parent-child interaction during homework more productive and satisfying for both participants. Similarly, giving parents information about the benefits of particular homework practices—for example, Leone and Richards's (1989) or Smith's (1990) findings that time with children and expressed encouragement are associated with better school outcomes for middle and secondary school students—may also enable more focused and productive parent involvement with children's homework.

These suggestions focus on teachers' roles, but they do not simply require more teacher effort. They cannot be accomplished effectively without substantial school support. Teachers should be enabled to strengthen parents' knowledge and helping skills as an integral and recognized part of their teaching roles—in part because students tend to learn most effectively when their parents are productively and authoritatively involved with them, at both elementary and secondary levels (e.g., Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts, & Fraleigh, 1987; Steinberg, Elman, & Mounts, 1989; Stevenson & Baker, 1987). Thus, the importance of allocating school and teaching time (even if it has to be taken from direct instructional time for students) to parent contact and interaction seems fundamental. Similarly, ready access to communication with parents—for example, through telephones in classrooms, recognized times (during the day or evening) for regular parent-teacher contact—also seems essential.

Our findings also suggest that parents' and children's approaches to homework seem to be in place by the middle elementary grades. Although parents sometimes noted significant changes in school demands related to homework, and sometimes referred to their perceptions that parent-child interactions became more difficult or easier with changes in such variables as child grade or parent behaviors, most parents reported generally consistent patterns of interaction over time. Particularly for children reported by parents to be experiencing difficulty completing homework, the prospects of becoming much more adept at homework assignments—in the absence of interventions, changes in teachers' homework demands, parent strategies, or child interest—seem somewhat remote. Because

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children become developmentally more independent of their parents as they move into adolescence, and because schools tend to assume a more distant relationship with parents as students move from elementary to middle to high school (e.g., Epstein, 1986), many parents' abilities and opportunities to influence children's homework performance seem likely to diminish over time. Although school-initiated changes are certainly possible—for example, homework tasks with increased focus on intrinsic student interests may become more intriguing to students—it seems more likely that patterns of parental difficulty with homework help and child withdrawal from serious homework efforts, if begun in elementary school, may continue into high school. Given the apparent importance of careful student attention to homework in the secondary years (e.g., Cooper, 1989a, 1989b), school interventions to increase parents' *and* students' success with homework during the elementary years take on even more significance.

Our findings also suggest the importance of encouraging parents to help their children. These parents *wanted* to help their children succeed; most thought, worried, and reflected on the roles they should take and how to handle those roles successfully. Several investigators, drawing on theoretical formulations of family-school relationships (e.g., Bronfenbrenner, 1986; Hobbs et al., 1984) and a rich history of early intervention programs, have developed programs for preschool and elementary children that consider parents an indispensable and integral part of the educational process (e.g., Cochran & Dean, 1991; Comer & Haynes, 1991). Their findings and our results suggest the appropriateness of such enablement approaches, based as they are on the dual assumptions that parents want to be effectively involved in their children's education and that teachers have the potential to encourage and further enable that involvement. Homework in particular is *not* a domain beyond the influence of schools; far from wanting less involvement in children's learning at home, many parents simply want to know better how to be involved.

Overall, our findings imply that parents are involved in their children's schoolwork at home in multifaceted ways reflecting the particularities of individual children and the unique configurations of their parents' personalities and lives. Employment of these and related findings may enable substantial contributions to parents' sense of knowledge and authority in children's school lives across the elementary years. In so doing, such efforts may contribute significantly to students' long-term success in school.

Appendix A
Definition of Homework and Homework-Related Activity

Homework was defined as including the following activities parents described in relation to children's school-related work carried out at home or outside the normal school day:

1. Activities that parents engage in at home with or for the child in relation to assignments given, in response to other teacher or child requests or suggestions, or as a function of the parents' wish to enhance the school performance and school-related learning of the child;
2. Parents' plans and activities related to the child's accomplishment of assignments brought from school;
3. Parents' interactions with the child about the school day's activities and work; parents' listening to children's comments about the day's work; parents' checking over school-related work or papers;
4. Parents' interactions with others at school, in the family, or in other settings related to the child's assignments or performance of work intended to be completed, reviewed, or reinforced at home;
5. Parents' observations related to children's accomplishment of school-related assignments at home; parents' observations about themselves and their activities related to supervising, helping, or in other ways interacting with their children about school assignments performed or reviewed at home;
6. Parents' observations concerning the importance of their own or their child's involvement in school assignments or related activities carried out at home.

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Appendix B
Parents' Thinking, Strategies, and Actions Related to Involvement in Children's Homework

1.0. Parent notes awareness of child's status or other child characteristics potentially influential in homework processes or activities
- 1.1. Parent comments on child's age, abilities, disabilities, similar status characteristics
- 1.2. Parent comments on child's learning characteristics, study style

2.0. Parent establishes rules and structures related to child's homework activity, determines need for homework activities
- 2.1. Parent notes teacher or school practices related to homework
- 2.2. Parent checks on school day and homework
  - 2.2.1. Parent talks with child about school activities
  - 2.2.2. Parent looks over papers returned from school
  - 2.2.3. Parent checks to see if there is homework, what it is
  - 2.2.4. Parent notes/tries to deal with child's lying about homework
- 2.3. Parent structures time, setting, rules related to homework
  - 2.3.1. Parent establishes rules, routines related to homework
  - 2.3.2. Parent notes physical environment for homework
  - 2.3.3. Parent notes need to balance homework, other activities
- 2.4. Parent mentions strategy for coordinating homework help
  - 2.4.1. Parent coordinates help with others in the family
  - 2.4.2. Parent relies on day care for homework help
  - 2.4.3. Parent interacts with other parents about homework
- 2.5. Parent interacts with teacher about homework
  - 2.5.1. Parent seeks/gets more information from teacher about homework
  - 2.5.2. Parent takes concerns about homework to teacher
  - 2.5.3. Parent tells child to get homework help from teacher
- 2.6. Parent arranges special help for (helping child with) homework

3.0. Parent engages in the homework process
- 3.1. Parent notes availability, general monitoring, willingness to help
- 3.2. Parent (tries to) motivate(s) child to do homework
  - 3.2.1. Parent uses rewards, encouragement, praise
  - 3.2.2. Parent uses punishments, withdrawal, guilt
  - 3.2.3. Parent exhorts, talks with child
- 3.3. Parent engages in specific homework task activities
- 3.4. Parent focuses on teaching, explaining, helping child understand
- 3.5. Parent discusses child's responses to homework
  - 3.5.1. Parent discusses child's positive homework responses
  - 3.5.2. Parent notes child says "teacher does it differently"
  - 3.5.3. Parent discusses child's negative responses to homework
- 3.6. Parent notes what he/she learns from homework involvement

4.0. Parent discusses his/her expectations for independent work by the child
- 4.1. Parent notes giving help contingent on child request or need
- 4.2. Parent notes that child does homework independently
- 4.3. Parent notes child has difficulty working independently

5.0. Parent engages in homework review activities
- 5.1. Parent reviews homework
- 5.2. Parent notes standards for acceptable homework performance
- 5.3. Parent interacts with child in review of completed homework

6.0. Parent reflects on his/her successes, limitations helping with homework
- 6.1. Parent describes own responses to child or his/her style of evaluating child or child's work
- 6.2. Parent discusses own abilities in helping (or knowing how to help) child with homework
  - 6.2.1. Parent notes own difficulties/limitations in helping child
  - 6.2.2. Parent notes own positive abilities/successes in helping child

7.0. Parent offers observations on general homework-related topics
- 7.1. Parent discusses beliefs about parents' homework involvement
- 7.2. Parent offers suggestions for school homework policy, practice

8.0. Other parent activities or observations related to homework
- 8.1. Parent notes time spent helping child with homework
- 8.2. Parent signs papers related to homework
- 8.3. All other homework comments, not codable elsewhere

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The full coding scheme, including full definitions and examples of statements within each category, is available from the authors.

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